

It seems there is a new cat in the neighborhood. I have two indoor cats who have seen him through the glass sliding door. Several times when watching the outdoor cat, my two cats start fighting with each other. Sometimes now, they even fight when they are not looking out at the neighborhood cat. Have you ever heard of anything like this? We adopted them both three years ago and they have been fine with each before this. I don't know what to do.

What you are witnessing is a typical situation of redirected aggression. This is a common cause of aggression in cats that can result in a long-term conflict. In dogs, we occasionally see redirected aggression, for instance when previously friendly dogs snap at each other when they can't get to a third dog on the other side of the fence, but they soon make up and get over it. Not so with cats.

In cases of redirected aggression, a triggering event causes aggression directed toward an innocent bystander. The presence of the outdoor cat in their yard was the trigger resulting in the fight between your cats. In other cases, a visit to the veterinarian results in a cat coming home with a new odor on it and the resident cat attacks it.

In order to try to regain order in the household, first make sure you have prevented further exposure to the inciting stimulus, in your case the outdoor cat, by closing the curtains or prevent access to the rooms where they can see the cat. Perhaps you can find out if someone in the neighborhood owns the cat and will agree to keep him indoors.

You will need to re-introduce your cats slowly and under your close supervision. Plug in a pheromone diffuser in the room where you will work with your cats to help reduce their stress level. Place the cats in carriers at opposite ends of the room. Give each a bowl of tasty food or treats in their carriers. We want them to associate seeing each other their housemate with something good. This will help condition them to tolerate each other again. Such exercises are important for re-establishing household harmony. Over a period of days, gradually move them closer and closer, always using food or treats, so they will re-learn proper friendly responses to each other. Eventually, let one out of the carrier, and then the other. If behavior modification techniques alone don't work, anti-anxiety medication may be needed to accelerate the progress.

In the event that you witness another bout of redirected aggression, you can interrupt it by startling them by shaking a can of pennies. This sort of remote punishment keeps you from getting hurt, and if consistent, may discourage further attacks. It may take several months of supervision and behavior modification exercises until the cats can safely be kept together. Since they had such a nice relationship before, there is a good chance that with time and patience you will have a good outcome. I hope so.

Francine K. Rattner, VMD

South Arundel Veterinary Hospital