

Boroughbred Behavior Resources

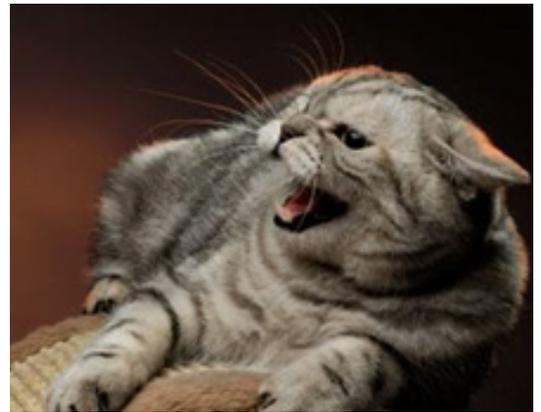


Issue: Re-directed Aggression in Cats

Re-directed aggression occurs when a cat is experiencing high-arousal from a stimulus, usually instilling fear or frustration, but is unable to direct their aggression to the stimulus and instead lashes out to the nearest human or pet around them. This type of aggression is like an impulsive reaction; it's typically distressing for cat owners because this display of violence may seem unprovoked, especially when they're unaware of the trigger.

Please keep in mind that sudden acts of aggression may be the result of an underlying medical condition. It is always a good idea to take a trip to the vet to rule out any possible medical causes.

A common example of re-directed aggression is when a cat is looking out a window at home, and suddenly sees an unfamiliar cat outside. The indoor cat becomes distressed and becomes increasingly more frustrated when he's unable to reach the intruding cat; his body posture tenses up and may start to hiss and growl. At this moment the owner walks by, perhaps walking a little too close to their cat in this heightened state of arousal, and then the cat turns around and lashes out on them. Although the owner wasn't the intended target of aggression, they're often left shocked, confused, and frightened; they didn't do anything to upset their cat, wondering why he is suddenly attacking? It's usually difficult to identify the trigger of re-directed aggression unless someone has observed the events that led up to the incident, but it's not uncommon for owners to believe the aggression happened out of the blue.



The source of stimuli can vary, but here are some common triggers for Re-directed Aggression:

- Seeing another animal (birds, squirrels and cats are common) through a door or window.
- Smelling another cat's scent on a family member, a visitor, or on clothing.
- Coming indoors after getting outside if the cat usually lives indoors only.
- Hearing sudden high-pitched or loud noises.
- Being frightened or harassed by another human or pet.
- Having a person intervene in a cat fight.
- Being in an animal shelter, surrounded by the sight, smell and sounds of strangers and other animals.

Creating a Peace Treaty

The best thing to do when a cat is in a heightened state of arousal is to give the cat space to calm down. Don't pick the cat up or try to calm them down with petting because this may further solidify the cat's perception of your involvement with the trigger, creating a negative association and potentially making you a casualty of war. If avoiding your agitated cat isn't possible, safely move them to a darkened room by herding them with a towel, large blanket, or a big piece of cardboard to protect yourself. Give them some time and check in on them, offering treats and toys each time you go in. Pay attention to your cat's behavior to see if they are calm enough to come out. If they need more time to decompress, make sure they have some food, litter, and water. Removing extra stimuli by turning the lights off and covering windows can help them to recover their composure sooner.

Do your best to identify the trigger and remove it. If the trigger was another cat or animal outside the home, take steps to try and keep animals off your property or change your cat's view through the window. If you believe the trigger is a scent on your clothing, use an enzymatic cleaner like Nature's Miracle to remove the scent and clean it thoroughly. If removing the trigger isn't possible (like construction noise next door), you can re-condition your cat's emotional response to the trigger by giving them something pleasant (like their absolute favorite treat or food) while they experience the trigger in small doses. Doing this repeatedly over time can convince the cat that the trigger isn't so bad.

If the victim of re-directed aggression was another cat, it can change the relationship between the two cats – even if they were best friends in the past. The aggressing cat might remember their prior experience in their heightened state of arousal when seeing the victim cat, which may cause them to attack again. Do not allow them to just “figure it out” on their own, because it may cause the victim cat to suffer if they are unable to access food, water, or litter. They may even develop litter box issues or start to lose weight as a result.

Separate both cats by carefully maneuvering the upset cat into a darkened room using the same technique mentioned above. Make sure they have their essentials (food, litter box and water). The cat may need a few hours to calm down if the fight wasn't serious, but in some cases it could take days, especially if the victim fought back. During their time apart, you can give them both individual attention as long as they aren't still reactive. After both cats have settled down, you can start the process of a slow re-introduction using positive reinforcement to give them a reason to like each other again. Perform a “scent exchange” by rubbing a piece of fabric on one of the cat's cheeks, and vice versa, and then present the towels to the opposite cat to re-familiarize themselves to each other. Don't force the scent on the other cat by rubbing them with the cloth. Just offer it as a gift. Leaving treats on the cloth might encourage them to sniff it. Have short meeting sessions where you open the door slightly and offer high value food/treats on opposite ends, at least a few feet away. They should be able to eat comfortably; you should move the food bowls further away from each other if they're too tense and anxious to eat. After they are done eating, close the door to separate them again. You will need to repeat these steps until you feel confident there won't be another fight. The biggest mistake an owner can make is trying to rush this process. The goal is to help each cat learn that they receive positive things in the presence of the other cat in order to rebuild their relationship. Please see our “Reintroducing Cats” flyer for more information.

With careful observation of triggers, taking steps to eliminate triggers, and a careful re-introduction process if two cats were involved, a peace treaty can be signed by all parties!

Resources:

<https://iaabc.org/cat/redirected-aggression-in-cats>

<https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/cat-behavior-problems-aggression-redirected>

<https://www.catster.com/lifestyle/cat-behavior-tips-redirected-aggression-in-cats>

<https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/cat-care/common-cat-behavior-issues/aggression-cats>

For more information:

International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants: <https://m.iaabc.org/>

Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists: <http://corecaab.org/>