

## **FELINE NON-RECOGNITION AGGRESSION**

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### **Clinical History:**

This behavior case involved two cats, one 20-month-old spayed female domestic shorthair and one 9-month-old spayed female domestic shorthair. On two occasions, the older cat displayed explosive aggression toward the younger cat under specific circumstances then redirected the aggression toward her owners if they tried to intervene.

Both cats had been rescued from an animal shelter at around 6 months of age. The older of the two cats was described as loving and sociable toward both the owners and their visitors and also to the younger cat, which she often groomed. The younger cat was more timid and would run away if visitors arrived at the house. It took the younger cat two months to allow her new owners to approach her.

The first incident of aggression occurred when the owners brought the younger cat back from the veterinarian's office after being spayed. As the owners went to take her out of the crate, they noticed that she was very afraid and had urinated all over herself. As soon as the older cat smelled and saw the younger cat in this state, she lunged at her with obvious malicious intent. The woman owner grabbed the younger cat, but the now-incensed older cat leaped up to dig her claws into the woman's neck and back. The woman's fiancé tried to ward the cat off, but the enraged creature scratched his arms and tore his pants. The incident concluded with the aggressor being confined to the room for several hours in order to protect the owners and the younger cat, after which she emerged as if nothing had happened.

The second incident occurred when the owners were bathing the younger cat. As they were holding her in a sink in the bathroom and shampooing her, she became very nervous and urinated on herself. At this time, the older cat lunged at her and, once again, the owner had to extricate the would-be victim with alacrity. The older cat then turned her attentions to the woman's fiancé and moved to attack him. He literally tried to kick her out of the bathroom, but she still kept coming. Eventually, the woman owner wound up locked in the bathroom with the younger cat while her fiancé locked himself in the bedroom. They could hear the older cat hissing and throwing herself at the door. The woman's fiancé finally summoned up the courage to throw a large towel over the hissing cat and threw the screaming bundle into a separate room, but not before getting scratched on the legs and thigh.

In the owners' words, this incident was like a scene from a horror movie; they were both extremely unnerved by the event. The incensed cat took around 36 hours to calm down before it could be reintegrated into the household. Following the attack, the cats were kept separate. But the owners, who were about to be married, put their honeymoon plans on hold until the issue was resolved.

### **Treatment:**

When one of the cats visits the veterinarian and is about to be subjected to some stressful procedure, such as vaccination or bathing, the owners should:

1. Separate the two cats for some time until they are both calm.
2. Attempt to reintroduce the cats only if the returning cat is completely revived from anesthetic, dry after bathing, and/or free from strange odors.
3. Reintroduce the two cats gradually following any such event, perhaps via a partly-cracked door or full panel fly screen.
4. Consider administering anti-aggressive medication (see below) if non-recognition aggression occurs again.

### **Commentary:**

The aggressor displayed classical signs of non-recognition aggression. This type of aggression often occurs when one cat returns from the veterinarian's office and either looks different, smells different, or

behaves differently, appearing strange and possibly invoking a territorial response in the other cat. A cat so riled will readily redirect its aggression onto any person or other animal that comes in its path and/or attempts to thwart its territorial objectives. A cat in this state can be highly dangerous, and isolating all parties from its furor is the only safe course to take. Cats in such a state may take a day-and-a-half to calm down, after which they may act as if nothing had happened.

The second incident that occurred was less typical, but involved basically the same situational components, namely, the victim's stressful state, altered odor, and altered behavior, as triggers for the older cat's aggression.

Prevention is the key to resolving issues related to non-recognition aggression. In the event that the owners are unsuccessful in employing such prophylactic measures and a fight ensues, they must be prepared to remove themselves and the victim from the situation as rapidly as possible. Attempts to admonish or punish the offender will often arouse further aggression.

For the long term, clicker training and a dominance control program ("Working for a Living") may be beneficial for the aggressor, and therapy with fluoxetine (Prozac®) may reduce the likelihood of future outbursts. This is a very difficult condition to prevent with certainty, and some owners may choose to find a home for one or other cat.