



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



Is there hope after 're-directed aggression' strikes? Vicky Halls investigates...

My first contact with Sue and Gary was an email, a heartfelt plea for me to make some sense of what was happening. This was their tale...

It had been a normal Saturday morning like any other, Gary had gone out for the paper and some milk and Sue was in the kitchen washing up. Pepper and Tinker, their three-year-old brother and sister 'moggies', were idly staring out of the patio doors into their beloved garden. Sue had noticed earlier that Butch, a neighbour's cat, had been sunning himself on the shed roof. Suddenly, without any warning, Pepper and Tinker were wailing like banshees and locked in battle. Fur was flying everywhere – Sue screamed and (foolishly in retrospect) threw herself into the melee to break up the fight. Pepper retreated under the sideboard and Tinker rushed upstairs, seeking sanctuary under the bed while Sue bathed her wounds.

Gary came home to find Sue in a state of shock, both cats appeared equally disturbed. When she relayed the sequence of events to Gary they both agreed that they would separate them for the day, allow the cats to settle and then get them back together when they were calm. That evening a rather suspicious looking Tinker walked slowly into the living room and gingerly touched noses with the equally reticent Pepper. Sue noticed that Tinker sniffed intensely, followed by an expression of disgust and a loud hiss right in Pepper's face. She came back with an equivalent explosive retort and everything deteriorated from there. Once again the siblings were separated and Sue and Gary were left to watch television alone, after all, they couldn't be seen to show any favouritism. One out, all out, so separate bedrooms for Pepper and Tinker to reflect on what they had done.

With great determination Gary and Sue persisted with the meetings after periods of separation. Each encounter was a nightmare and eventually they decided to divide the house into two parts: kitchen, living room, dining room for one cat and the hallway, landing and bedrooms for the other. Occasionally the cats were swapped round to ensure they didn't get too protective about their own private space. It was at this point that Sue contacted her vet and she was referred to me.

Untangling the threads

The overwhelming feeling from Sue's email was one of shock and disbelief. How could her loving cats, such an important part of their harmonious family life, suddenly hate each other? I spoke to her that day and agreed to meet shortly afterwards. When I visited the couple it was clear how distressed they were and how devastating this had been for the past few months. As I walked through the front door I met Tinker sitting sheepishly on the stairs, if I didn't know better I would have said he looked at me as if to say, "Help me out here will you? I haven't a clue what's going on!" I was then ushered into the living room, with the usual frenzied airlock quick-get-in-and-shut-the-door system so familiar to me in these cases, and met Pepper – sitting quietly on the sofa looking very slightly tense.

I spent a couple of hours with Sue and Gary, reviewing the history, talking about how things were before the 'incident' and how they have been since. There was a definite air of tension in the home, they were very unsettled and it was ever so slightly contagious. Once we had exhaustively covered everything they thought about the situation and everything they had actually observed, I explained what I thought we were up against.

The incident on that Saturday morning was probably what is referred to as 're-directed aggression'. Cats are territorial creatures so they are constantly vigilant and sensitive to invading forces from outside; I suspect that Butch didn't stay on the shed roof and that it is likely he approached the house and came face to face with Pepper and Tinker at the patio doors. This is a direct threat and it would have triggered an acute stress response in both cats, which in turn releases adrenaline to fuel the 'fight or flight' internal mechanism that would normally result in intense aggression targeted at the

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perceived threat or a rapid escape. Unfortunately, in this type of situation, aggression can be redirected onto the nearest moving object; in this case one or other of the cats launched an attack on its sibling. Once aggression has been re-directed, the aggressor may develop a mistaken association and attack the 'innocent bystander' on sight thereafter – I guessed in this case that Pepper attacked Tinker originally although now they were equally suspicious of each other. These problems can lead to anything from a few grumpy weeks to complete relationship breakdowns; we needed to make sure that we were not dealing with the latter.

Rapprochement

One thing I knew, I had to get the cats together on that very day – it was the only way to test my theory that all was not lost. I've seen many cases of re-directed aggression, some far worse than others, so I am very wary of putting cats together just in case I misjudge the extent of their mistrust and start something I can't finish without injury. With Pepper and Tinker though I felt there was hope but didn't want to take any chances so Sue, Gary and I went to work to create an environment that would diffuse tension, block stares and prevent escalation if things got nasty.

Cats are more likely to fight actively in flat, open spaces – if multiple levels are available and the floor-space is cluttered it makes it easier to avoid conflict. Pepper and Tinker had been living in an atmosphere of tension, segregation and brief glimpses of each other. If they had accidentally met then neither Gary nor Sue were going to let them 'say' what had to be said. They never got to finish anything. My suspicion, from the history discussed, was that in the latter part of their life before 'the incident' Pepper and Tinker had started to distance themselves from each other. As they matured socially, suddenly territory and the important things within it had become something to compete over. Their lives together probably would never be the same for this reason but, with a little tweaking, they may well be able to cohabit and time-share the space without the need to fight.

Adapting the environment

Before they met that day, we went round the entire house distributing boxes, storage containers, furniture, cat scratching posts and anything we could find to give both cats every opportunity to use the space to facilitate communication without conflict. Gary and Sue took a deep breath and we opened the door. We had already agreed to talk, laugh and generally behave normally and completely disregard the cats. With the aid of my trusty consulting bag, full of glorious catnip and valerian goodies, Pepper and Tinker were presented with captivating toys that gave them a temporary enjoyable distraction. Catnip isn't always the best thing to give to cats in tense situations but, in this case, I had checked out their response and knew if anything they would be calmed by the experience.

Staring, hissing, lowered gazes and slow motion retreats ensued and when things got tough, Tinker would jump on a box or Pepper would dip her head behind a piece of furniture. Nothing very bad happened but a lot was 'said'.

I gave Sue and Gary an extensive written programme of change that included my favourite formula for all things that cats need (feeding areas, water bowls, litter trays, beds, high perches, private places and scratching posts) which is to provide one per cat plus one extra in separate locations. Giving the cats a choice of three of everything would hopefully allow them to cohabit in as stress-free a way as possible.

From that moment forward, Gary and Sue felt confident to allow the cats to mix freely and, to this day, no further overt aggression has been seen. Let's hope that Pepper and Tinker have adapted and learned to live in this new way.

[If you are experiencing a problem of this kind contact your veterinary surgeon in the first instance and, if appropriate, you will be referred to a pet behaviour counsellor.] ●

