

Threat from an outsider can lead to aggressive behaviour in household cats

Christa Barberis has two sibling Tonkinese cats, Zeus and Ukko, that used to sleep, eat, play and do everything together. Earlier this month, a disturbing incident broke that loving bond. The pair were sitting inside their house looking at the back garden when another cat entered their territory and approached the screen of the backdoor.

"That cat frightened Zeus and Ukko and they became aggressive, hissing and howling at each other," Barberis says. "Ukko looked like he was about to attack, so I grabbed him and separated them. This has never happened before ... Zeus was terrified and shaking. Ukko kept growling and hissing."

While the curious cat outside had long gone, hours later both Tonkinese cats were still visibly upset and, unlike most nights, remained in different areas of the home until morning. The next day, Ukko again tried to attack his brother Zeus. So, Barberis separated them once more, confining Ukko to a room.

"I was totally stressed out because they are such companion animals," she says. "From what I found out on the internet, I was worried their social bond could have been destroyed and, in a worst case scenario, one of them would have to be re-homed."

According to Cynthia Smillie, veterinarian and animal behaviourist who recently set up Animal Behaviour Veterinary Practice, the condition is called redirection aggression behaviour.

"Because cats are solitary hunters, there are only a few things that will cause them to be aggressive, and territory is one of them since it's important for survival," explains Smillie, who has a post-graduate diploma in companion animal behaviour from the University of Southampton, and was formerly the deputy director at the Hong Kong Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Most cats have their own territorial space or core area, and no other cats are allowed in since they require a certain range for hunting. She adds: "That core area is sacrosanct, and any other cat that would go into this area would be seen as very, very threatening. If the cat [that is being invaded] is prevented from making any response to what they see as a threat, they will become frustrated and redirect their aggression towards a house mate."

However, Smillie points out that it's possible on rare occasions for a cat to lash out at a person or child who tries to pick it up, or is in the vicinity.

"It would depend on the level of arousal, especially if there was a repeated threat and the cat was not able to make a response," she says.

This behaviour may also develop for no apparent

reason between two or more friendly cats. "If you've had a repeated threat [from a foreign cat], then resources within the home, food or litter tray become more valuable. So, two cats that never seemed to have a problem before may then start to feel threatened, and this may trigger aggression," Smillie says. "Very often cats will start spraying inside the house because there is a threat from outside cats."

To alleviate any aggression, the animal behaviourist advises owners to strengthen the cat's core territory. One solution is Feliway – a diffuser or spray product that is a synthetic version of the feline facial pheromone, which cats use to mark their territory. "It gives the feeling of security in stressful situations," Smillie says.

For indoor cats, Smillie suggests owners provide enough resources, such as ample food and space. "Give them separate resting areas, so access to resources are plentiful and they don't feel like they have to compete within the household."

If your cats have access to a backyard or garden, felines usually like to scratch and urinate to mark their territory. Smillie says providing extra scratching posts around the garden or allowing for more places to urinate around the border of the property will let your pet mark its territory as a warning to other cats.

For the situation between Zeus and Ukko, animal behaviourist Natalia Krawetz, based in Edmonton, Canada, recommends it's best to separate them until they fully calm down, and place one of them in a quiet room with food, water and a litter tray.

"Usually, within 24 hours, they will have calmed down and act as if nothing has happened," she says. "The real problem happens when some humans let them fight it out. Well, they won't sort it out and what happens is they will become more and more separate, and the bond will be broken. There's nothing in their genetic makeup that will help them get over it."

She says cats aren't pack animals like dogs, which have a hierarchical structure and will work hard to maintain order when a misunderstanding occurs. Alternatively, cats in the wild tend to be solitary hunters, and the two-year-old brothers are at an age when they would naturally assert themselves and go their separate ways.

Krawetz says some owners don't realise the seriousness of a foreign cat. "It's so traumatic for the cat. For the cat inside, it wants to fight or flee, but there's a screen door ... so [the two cats indoors] will take it out on each other instead," she says.

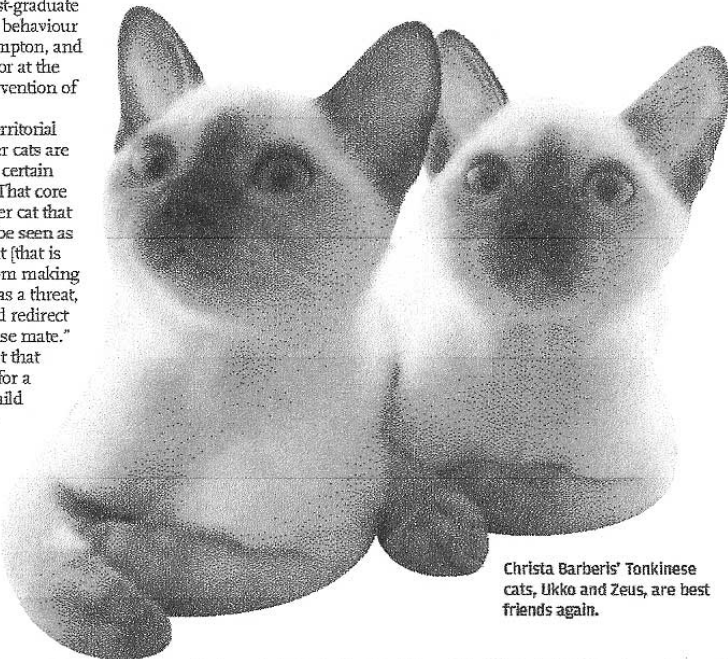
As Zeus and Ukko still hadn't gone back to normal after 24 hours, Krawetz suggests changing the visual, sensory and audio clues of the trigger area. In this instance, the windows could be temporarily blocked by cardboard; a small scatter rug could be placed by the door; and relaxing music of flowing water could be played. She says: "Changing all of those cues so they are in a different space might help them react in a different way."

If the cats continue to be aggressive towards each other, Krawetz advises owners to only keep them in a room together when they are supervised. Keep the cats on a harness or leash, so that neither of them can harm each other, she says, possibly about 15 feet apart to start.

To reintroduce the cats to the trigger area, Krawetz also recommends building positive joint experiences by playing games near the door, such as cat and mouse with a toy, and giving snacks on both sides of the door.

Barberis followed much of Krawetz's advice and after one week Zeus and Ukko were back to normal. *Jade Lee-Duffy*

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Christa Barberis' Tonkinese cats, Ukko and Zeus, are best friends again.