

Best Cat Buddies Acting Like Strangers

CatChannel behavior expert Marilyn Krieger, CCBC, offers advice in case of cat who was lost and found, and at-home cat who won't accept her.

By Marilyn Krieger

Posted: November 13, 2009, 3 a.m. EST

Q: I have two cats, Stella and Quincy, who were best buddies. They would cuddle and lick each other a lot. Stella went missing for 11 days, and when I got her back, Quincy started acting like he didn't even know her. He keeps hissing at her.

Is it possible that he's forgotten who she is after 11 days? She was stuck 50 feet up in a Ponderosa pine tree for five days, and the person that rescued her from the tree kept her for another six days while trying to locate the rightful owner ...me. Stella did lose a lot a weight and the vet shaved her neck and chest because it was matted with tree sap. Do you think Quincy doesn't recognize her now? She doesn't look different.

A: Quincy doesn't recognize Stella because in addition to looking different with her new stylish haircut, she doesn't smell like her old self. She not only smells like tree sap, but she also smells like the vet clinic. Stella may seem familiar to Quincy, but her smell and new look are confusing and strange.

The type of aggression that Quincy is displaying toward Stella most commonly occurs when a cat in a multicat home comes back after an appointment with the veterinarian, smelling like the vet clinic. The stay-at-home companion kitty doesn't recognize his buddy. She may be visually recognizable, but she smells funny. Smell is a very important way that cats define and relate to their world.

There are a couple of ways you can help Quincy recognize his buddy again. If the aggression is mild, gently massage and pet Quincy with a soft towel. Then take the towel and pet Stella with the same towel, transferring Quincy's scent on her. Stella will then smell familiar to Quincy.

I recommend this same course of action whenever a cat comes home from the vet. Before letting the two cats be together, massage the stay-at-home cat with a towel and then pet the cat who went to the vet with the other cat's scent laden towel.

If Quincy is displaying severe aggression toward Stella, then consider reintroducing the cats to each other, starting with pheromone exchanges twice a day. The goal is to encourage good feelings between the cats by having them share activities they enjoy, while they are separated from each other. Pheromone exchanges, feeding them on both sides of the closed door and encouraging them to play with each other under the door are samples of activities that will help Quincy relate to Stella as his buddy again.