

Counter conditioning and desensitization

These two techniques are often used to change unwanted behavior in dogs and cats. Just as the term implies, counter conditioning means conditioning (training) an animal to display a behavior that is counter to (mutually exclusive of) an unacceptable behavior in response to a particular stimulus. For example, a dog cannot be trying to bite the letter carrier and at the same time greeting them in a friendly, excited manner.

Desensitization involves gradually exposing a pet to the situation, without provoking the unwanted reaction. If an animal is highly motivated to perform an undesirable behavior, and if that behavior is easily and quickly displayed, competing behaviors may be difficult to elicit. That's where the desensitization part of the process comes into play. Desensitization is the process of exposing an animal to a stimulus beginning at a very low intensity. So low that it does not result in the undesired behavior. For example, if a cat becomes fearful and hisses at visitors, then the first step would be to find a distance at which the cat does not hiss, growl, attempt to flee, or show other signs of fear. The stimulus intensity is then increased gradually (bringing the cat closer to people in the example), without eliciting the unwanted behavior.

Performed simultaneously, these techniques provide a way in which an animal can be gradually taught to show acceptable behavior in the face of a stimulus that used to elicit problem behavior. They are often used when working with different types of fearful and aggressive behaviors.

Counter conditioning and desensitization must be implemented very systematically. If the incremental increases are too large, or occur too quickly, the techniques will either not be effective, or may even make the problem worse. Implementing a counter conditioning and desensitization program requires some thought and planning.

1. Define the starting point. Ideally, a behavior modification program of this sort should be designed and carried out in such small steps that the problem behavior never occurs. This means all the stimuli that elicit the behavior must be identified and ways found to lower their intensity until your pet doesn't react to them. For example, if a cat becomes afraid if someone approaches closer than 6 feet, then the starting point would be a distance significantly greater than 6 feet. In order for these techniques to be most successful, your pet should not be put in any situation that triggers the problem behavior.

2. Define the dimensions or characteristics of the stimulus that influence your pet's response. For example, if we are working with a cat that is afraid of being picked up, we need to know which aspects of that process influence the cat's fear:

- Is she more afraid of adults than children?
- Is she more afraid of men than women?
- Is she more afraid of a family member or someone she doesn't know?
- Is she more afraid when someone moves fast or slow?
- Is she more afraid in a particular room?
- Is she more afraid if the person speaks to her or is silent?
- Is she more afraid if someone is sitting or standing?

Some common factors to consider include location, loudness, distance, speed of movement, length of time near the other animal or person, response of the other animal or person or body postures of an animal who induces fear or aggression.

3. Arrange these characteristics in order from least to most likely to produce a negative response. A counter conditioning and desensitization program needs to begin by using combinations of stimuli that are least likely to cause a fearful reaction. In our cat example above, perhaps the cat is least afraid of being handled by a familiar adult female who approaches slowly and speaks softly to her, while she's lying on the bed in the bedroom. She is most afraid of a nephew who runs up to her yelling while she's in the kitchen.

4. Always begin with the characteristics or dimensions that are least likely to elicit the problem behavior. We would begin with the easiest combination of characteristics of the situation, and gradually work up to the most difficult. If we find that this cat will be less afraid of a male child approaching slowly than an adult female approaching fast, then we know speed of approach is more critical than type of person. Thus, the working order on these two characteristics, from easiest to hardest, would be:

- Adult female, slow approach
- Male child, slow approach
- Adult female, fast approach
- Male child, fast approach

5. If necessary, devise ways to make each dimension less intense. If a dog is afraid of the sound of the hair dryer, the sound must be presented to the dog at a low (sub-threshold) intensity, one that does not provoke the fearful behavior. This could be done by turning the dryer on and off quickly before the dog showed fear, turning the hair dryer on in another room, covering the dryer with towels, etc.

6. Pair each level of each characteristic with a positive consequence, as long as the problem behavior is not displayed. At these sub-threshold intensities, the stimulus must be paired with something positive for your pet. In this way, the animal comes to associate good things happening in the situation rather than bad things. Alternative behaviors such as calmness and friendliness are then reinforced instead of fear, aggression, etc. being elicited. The reinforcement must be powerful. Good choices are food, especially favored treats, toys, or social reinforcements such as petting, attention, or praise. If food is used (and it's almost invariably helpful), it should be in very small pieces and be highly desired by your pet (cheese, hot dogs, or canned tuna often work well). You may need to experiment a little to see what food is the best motivator for your pet.

7. Do not progress to the next level until your pet is clearly anticipating the reinforcement.

People commonly want to know how long they need to repeat each intensity level. This will depend entirely on your pet, who should be demonstrating that he is indeed expecting good things to happen. Perhaps he looks to you for a tidbit, or looks around for his toy. This should be in contrast to his previous reactions such as trembling, tensing up, or other fearful or aggressive responses.

8. Don't make all dimensions more intense at the same time. In our cat example above, notice that we increased the intensity with type of person, and subsequently increased the speed of approach. We did not try to do both at once by shifting from a slowly moving adult to a fast child.

9. Progress slowly. It is common for people to tell me, "I tried some of those ideas and they didn't work." Usually what has happened is that they tried to progress too fast, didn't take small incremental steps, or didn't use highly motivating rewards. Counter conditioning and desensitization take time and must be done very gradually. You will need to think through the steps you need to take. Rather than expecting progress in terms of leaps and bounds, look for small, incremental change. It can be very helpful to keep a log or record of your results, since day to day changes will not be very big.

An example of a somewhat simplified counter conditioning and desensitization program for a dog who displays fear-motivated aggression toward men could be:

1. Identify the point at which fearful or aggressive behavior is first elicited (e.g., when the man is 6 feet away and is approaching to pet the dog).
2. Begin the program with a situation the dog will tolerate without becoming aggressive or fearful (e.g., the man walks by at a distance of 7 feet, with non-threatening body postures, paying no attention to the dog).
3. Encourage the dog to assume a confident posture on a leash such as standing, walking, or sitting.
4. Offer a small food reward and/or toy to generate expectant, excited, non-fearful behavior.
5. Respond in an up-beat manner, petting, praising, and talking "happy talk" to the dog.
6. Conduct several sessions of a few minutes before making it any more difficult for the dog.
7. Instruct the man to stand 7 feet away and make a small arm motion as though he was beginning to reach out and pet the dog.
8. Give the dog food and praise for non-aggressive, non-fearful behavior while this happens, also conducting a set of short sessions.
9. Practice this scenario until the dog is anticipating the food reward or the toy.
10. Slowly decrease the distance between the man and the dog, adding to the arm motion on such a gradual basis that fear or aggression is never elicited. Many repetitions with more than one individual may be required. A new step should not be taken until the dog is clearly anticipating the reward.

You may need to supplement the behavior modification program with other approaches, such as avoiding situations that provoke the problem, using a headcollar like the Gentle Leader collar, or treating your pet with anti-anxiety medication. Your veterinarian or an animal behaviorist can give you more information on these options.

