



SYSTEMATIC DESENSITISATION & COUNTER-CONDITIONING

There are many different stimuli that can frighten your dog or lead it to exhibit a fearful or fear/aggressive response. This handout is designed to develop a program for improving or resolving fear of animate stimuli, such as people or other animals but can be adapted to include fear of inanimate objects and noises, e.g. traffic, bicycles, thunder, fireworks etc. This technique also helps to break down an existing association that an animal has with any specific stimuli (such as chase behaviour as a reaction to moving objects).

What is Desensitisation and Counterconditioning?

Desensitisation: In desensitisation (DS) training, the dog is repeatedly exposed to a **very low level** of the stimulus that is insufficient to cause the specific, behaviour to occur (usually fear and fear aggression). **VERY gradually** the intensity or proximity of the stimulus is increased as the dog becomes comfortable and unreactive at each stage of the training.

Alongside desensitisation, whilst the dog ceases to react to the stimulus in any form and is a negative emotional state, we can then start to help the animal build a new and positive association with the named stimulus – this is known as **counter-conditioning (CC)**.

Counter-conditioning involves teaching your dog to associate the thing that provokes a fearful response with something else more emotionally pleasing. So if scary thing A (a loud bang) predicted thing B (being threatened) your dog is taught to re-learn that thing B evokes a positive and pleasant emotion.

Counter-conditioning turns that emotional response to something more pleasing if it is paired with the frightening stimulus at a **VERY LOW** intensity. So, for example, if whilst playing the sound effect of a firework (at a low volume) you are playing with your dog, feeding them yummy treats or doing something else that is causing feel good emotions then, over time, this will become the over-riding emotion. This will then turn the fear provoking event into something that equals feeling good.

Steps for desensitisation and counter-conditioning

- 🐾 It will be necessary to make a list of all the stimuli that cause your dog to react.
- 🐾 Rank them in order from the one which causes the least reaction from your dog right up to the ones to which he/she will react most strongly.
- 🐾 Stimuli may be visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and even on rare occasions associated with taste, so make sure you consider all of the options.
- 🐾 Where possible avoid exposing dogs to fearful stimuli. Work on training techniques such as Watch Me, target training and teaching an end of interaction signal – the Ah Ah command first.
- 🐾 If there is a long list of triggers, work should ideally commence with the least fearful stimulus first.



- 🐾 Prevent the dog from experiencing the stimuli in real life except during training sessions when you should limit to mock ups or very safe, low level exposure
- 🐾 If aggression forms part of the dog's response to the stimulus, then he/she should be trained to wear a muzzle, so that safety during exercises can be ensured. Also control is very important, so safe, non-aversive restraining aids should be used (e.g. a 2 point contact harness and double clip lead)
- 🐾 Before work, the dog should be trained to settle and be calm on cue.
- 🐾 Only commence training the dog when he/she is calm, focused and has minimum distractions.
- 🐾 Once the dog will reliably 'settle' or 'relax' and focus on you using the Watch Me command and/ or target training and can accept rewards in a variety of situations and environments, then the training can begin.
- 🐾 Once each stimulus is identified, and starting with the one provoking the weakest response from your dog, you will need to set up situations where your dog is exposed to the stimulus in the weakest possible form. This means you start from a point where he/she fails to react at all.
- 🐾 As your dog becomes increasingly comfortable with each level of exposure, you can very gradually start to increase the intensity, aiming always to ensure your dog remains in a comfortable state.
- 🐾 For fear of specific sounds, CD's are available that include recordings of a range of different sounds. Some are available on my website or through a company called Sounds Scary: <https://www.peteducationandtraining.co.uk/articles/dog/top-tips-for-preparing-your-pets-for-the-firework-season/>
- 🐾 It is important that the sound effect is played through a high quality system with good speakers to create a realistic sound.
- 🐾 For fear of other dogs or stranger, ensure that you know how far away the fear evoking stimulus has to be before your dog starts to respond. So if your dog starts to stiffen and show stress/ fear/ aggression at a distance of 20 feet, commence training at 25 feet (or a distance where you get a neutral response).
- 🐾 Begin work in a quiet place – if you can hire a field that would be ideal. You can commence with a stooge person/ dog. Sometimes manikins of dogs can be used in the early stages.
- 🐾 Use the Watch Me command and if they react take them in a different direction (use the U turn if necessary) to avoid them going over their threshold. This gives them an alternative behaviour and prevents them from feeling flooded.
- 🐾 Shape and reward relaxed body posture. Sniffing the ground, turning the head away and licking lips are signs of calming behaviours. These show that your dog is feeling a little uncomfortable. These signals should be rewarded because they are not over-reacting and they are using appropriate calming behaviours. Using a food reward whilst moving them away from the target of fear is advisable but don't lure them – remember you are rewarding the behaviour



you want NOT reinforcing the behaviour you don't want (barking, lunging etc.)

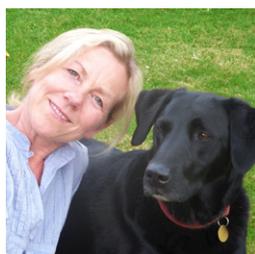
🐾 The dog's favourite treats or toys should be used as rewards for failing to respond to the stimulus and for offering a different, but more suitable response to the stimulus (for example, a dog who decides to sit down instead of chasing a jogger should be rewarded for this alternative behaviour or a dog that looks at you instead of focusing on the fearful stimulus).

🐾 It may be wise to increase the value of these favourite rewards even further by denying your dog access to them except during training sessions. For a really great response use a jackpot – a treat that is the MOST tasty.

🐾 Advance along the steps gradually increasing the stimulus level very slowly. If you attempt to proceed too quickly and your dog shows a reaction, don't worry- take a step backwards again, and relax and settle your dog. You can use the u-turn if necessary and praise your dog for the recall.

🐾 The required response from your dog is always rewarded with the favourite treat or a game with the favoured toy at each new step. Always end each session on a positive note, and start at that level or even below it in the next training session.

🐾 If aggression forms any part of the behaviour I strongly recommend that you get some help and support with a suitably qualified trainer before attempting any of the training. For a list of registered behaviourists and trainers visit the APBC and ABTC website.



CAROLINE CLARK

Registered Veterinary Nurse, Cert. Ed. ABTC Registered Clinical Animal Behaviour Counsellor, APBC FULL Member Post Graduate Diploma in (AS) Companion Animal Behaviour Counselling.

