



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Desensitization and Counterconditioning: The Correct Way to Help a Fearful, Anxious or Aggressive Dog

Many dogs exhibit fearful or aggressive behavior toward people, other dogs, loud noises or, in some case, everyday objects. Most aggression occurs because a dog is afraid. The most effective way to help a fearful or aggressive dog is to change the way the dog feels and responds to whatever he is scared of. This is done through a process called “desensitization and counterconditioning”. The same methods initially developed by psychologists for helping people overcome fear, anxiety and phobias have since been applied by behaviorists and trainers to other animals, including dogs and cats.

Desensitization and counterconditioning are very effective in changing a dog’s behavior and are recommended by veterinarians who specialize in animal behavior (animal psychiatrists), animal behaviorists (animal psychologists) and trainers who use animal behavior modification methods that are considered current best practices.

Desensitization and counterconditioning change the dog’s behavior, do not make the dog more fearful or aggressive, and keep people from getting hurt. Methods that focus solely on suppressing or stopping unwanted behavior (i.e. leash corrections, shock collars), do not change the dog’s response and perception of what it behaves aggressively towards and can actually increase aggression and anxiety. Desensitization and counterconditioning when consistently applied will permanently change the dog’s response to things that he fears or behaves aggressively towards. These methods work on all dogs, regardless of breed, age, or gender.

In cases of aggression and fear, it’s always best to seek help from a professional behaviorist or experienced trainer who uses methods such as desensitization and counterconditioning to change undesirable behavior.

When working with a dog using desensitization and counterconditioning, it’s important to set realistic goals for improvement and to be patient. The work should progress slowly and only at a pace where the

dog stays calm. If we rush the process and the dog is anxious or reactive, then the training will not be effective.

Often, once the dog starts to improve, the rate of improvement is usually faster than at the beginning of the process. Don’t be discouraged by a slow start!

Desensitization

This is the part of the process of changing a dog’s behavior where the dog slowly learns not to react emotionally—fearful or aggressively—to a specific thing (people, dogs or objects). To be effective, desensitization needs to be done slowly and needs to start at a level where the dog does not have a negative reaction (barking, growling, lunging). For example, consider an on-leash dog who barks or behaves aggressively at dogs he doesn’t know. If the dog can see another dog 100 feet away but doesn’t bark, growl or lunge, then the process of desensitization would start by exposing the reactive dog to other dogs 100 feet away. As the dog learns to remain calm at this distance, then it would be exposed to dogs it doesn’t know at a closer distance gradually and slowly only as long as the dog remains calm.

Counterconditioning

This works in combination with desensitization by teaching the dog a *new* response or reaction to what it fears or reacts aggressively to. Ideally, the dog will learn that the presence of what it fears or reacts aggressively to leads to something positive. The best way to create a new, positive association is to give the dog an extra special treat (meat, chicken, cheese, dried liver) only when whatever the dog fears or reacts aggressively to is present.

Continuing with the example of an on-leash dog who behaves aggressively towards other dogs, give a treat to the dog every time he is exposed to and looks at another dog at a distance and remains calm. Over many repetitions, the dog will learn to respond calmly or maybe even happily at the sight of other dogs!

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.