



Counter-Conditioning and Desensitization (CC&D)

Adapted from original material by Pat Miller, updated 8/2017

Counter conditioning and desensitization (CC&D) involves changing your pup's association with a scary stimulus from unhappy and fearful to very happy indeed. The easiest way to give most pups a positive association is with very high-value, really yummy treats. (Think bacon, chicken, or cheese!)

Here's how CC&D works:

- 1.** Determine the distance at which your pup can be in the presence of the stimulus and be alert or wary but not extremely fearful. This is called the threshold distance.
- 2.** While holding your pup on leash, have a helper present the stimulus at this threshold distance. The instant your pup sees the stimulus, start feeding bits of chicken, non-stop.
- 3.** After several seconds, have the helper remove the stimulus, and stop feeding chicken.
- 4.** Keep repeating steps 1-3 until the presentation of the stimulus at that distance consistently causes your puppy to look at you with a happy smile and a "Yay! Where's my chicken?" expression. This is a conditioned emotional response (CER) – your pup's association with the stimulus at threshold distance is now positive instead of negative.
- 5.** Now increase the intensity of the stimulus. You can do that by decreasing the distance slightly; by increasing movement of the stimulus at the same distance (a child walking, skipping, or swinging her arms); by increasing the number of stimuli (two or three children, instead of one); increasing the visual "threat" (a tall man instead of a short one, or a man with a beard instead of a clean-shaven one); or by increasing volume (if it's a stimulus that makes noise, such as a vacuum cleaner). I prefer to decrease distance first, in small increments, by moving the puppy closer to the location where the stimulus will appear, achieving your CER at each new distance, until your pup is happy to be very near to the non-moving stimulus, perhaps even sniffing or targeting to it.
- 6.** Then return to your original threshold distance and increase the intensity of your stimulus (move the vacuum a little; have two children instead of one; have the man put on a hat or a backpack), gradually decreasing distance and attaining CERs along the way, until your puppy is delighted to have the moderately intense stimulus in close proximity.

7. Now, back to your original threshold distance, increase intensity again, by having your helper turn the vacuum on briefly, feed treats the instant it's on, then turn it off and stop the treats. (Or turn up the volume, or add more children, etc.)
8. Repeat until you have the CER, then gradually increase the length of time you have your pup in the presence of the increased-intensity stimulus, until he's happy (but not aroused) to have it present continuously.
9. Begin decreasing distance in small increments, moving the pup closer to the stimulus (or the stimulus closer to your puppy), obtaining your CER consistently at each new distance.
10. When your dog is happy to have the higher intensity stimulus close to him, you're ready for the final phase. Return to the original distance and obtain your CER there with a full intensity stimulus – a running, moving vacuum; multiple children laughing and playing; a tall man with a beard wearing a hat, sunglasses, and a backpack. Then gradually decrease the distance until your dog is happy to be in the presence of your full-intensity stimulus. He now thinks the stimulus is a very good thing, as a reliable predictor of very yummy treats. In the case of a human stimulus, you can gradually work up to actual interaction with the human(s) at this stage, by having the person(s) drop treats as they walk by, then letting him take treats from their fingers – without direct eye contact, and eventually working up to normal interaction.

Get Back on the Horse

The more complex the stimulus, the more intense the fear or arousal response; the longer the pup has had a fear response to the object, the more challenging the behavior is to modify. Studies show that when rats are exposed to a fear-causing stimulus, they recover from that fear much more easily and quickly if rehabilitative efforts happen sooner (within 24 hours) rather than later (days, weeks, or months down the road). For this very reason, fans of horseback riding have long heard the admonition to get back on the horse after falling off; getting back on immediately and having a good experience will diminish the likelihood of a deep-seated lifetime fear of horses.

The same is true for puppies who have fear-causing encounters. The sooner they are re-exposed to the scary thing at sub-threshold intensity, and counter-conditioning is effectively done to give them new, happy thoughts about the stimulus, the easier it is to accomplish, and the less likely the pup will suffer from a longtime – or lifetime – negative association with it.

Strenuously avoid making the mistake of flooding. Flooding is exposing your pup to the full intensity of a scary stimulus and making your pup endure it until he loses all hope of escape and gives up. Proper behavior modification strives to keep the exposure sub-threshold.

Flooding is considered to be very inhumane, and is not a recommended behavior modification technique for dogs. Although it is sometimes used in behavior modification with humans, it is always with the consent of the human subject, and the human has access to a “shut-off” signal

of some kind, so she can turn off the stimulus if it becomes unbearable. A dog forced to undergo flooding isn't asked for consent and has no relief switch to turn it off.