



Desensitization and Counterconditioning

*Adapted from original article posted on
ASPCA Virtual Pet Behaviorist*

Systematic desensitization and counterconditioning are two common treatments for fears, anxiety, phobias and aggression—basically any behavior problem that involves arousal or emotional reaction. When the problem is rooted in how a dog or cat *feels* about a particular thing, it isn't enough to just teach him a different behavior—like sit instead of lunge and growl. What's most effective is treatment that will change the way he feels about something. This treatment will eliminate the underlying reason for the behavior problem in the first place.

Desensitization and counterconditioning are treatments that were developed by psychologists. Usually done at the same time, these treatments are used to help both people and animals with fears and phobias. They're effective but somewhat complex. For animals, they involve patient training several times a day, progressing in small, carefully planned increments. It usually takes several months before results are seen. Because treatment must progress and change according to the pet's reactions, and because these reactions can be difficult to read and interpret, systematic desensitization and counterconditioning are most effective under the guidance of a trained professional, such as a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB). If you choose to hire a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) because you can't find a behaviorist in your area, be sure that the trainer is qualified to help you. Determine whether she or he has education and experience using these treatments, since this expertise is not required for CPDT certification.

Desensitization

Desensitization means to make less sensitive. Its goal is to eliminate or reduce the exaggerated, emotion-based reaction that an animal has to a specific thing—be it other animals, kinds of people (like children or men in uniform), certain places or events, or certain noises. *Systematic* desensitization is a structured plan. It involves a gradual process of exposing an animal to a less intense version of the thing or event he fears, in such a way that his fear isn't triggered.

Desensitization starts with showing or exposing an animal to a weak, less threatening version of the thing he fears or dislikes. We weaken the thing or event by making it smaller, slower, shorter lasting, farther away, less noisy, or still rather than moving. Over time, as the pet habituates at that low exposure, we gradually make the thing (person, animal, place, object, noise, event, etc.) stronger again by, for example, bringing it closer, increasing its volume or having it move. So a systematic desensitization plan starts with exposure to the least scary

version of the feared thing and gradually moves to stronger versions until full or normal exposure is reached.

For example, let's say your cat is afraid of male visitors to your home. You might first expose your cat to a man who's far away and standing still—exposure that your cat notices but without feeling scared. Over time, you would gradually bring the man closer but still make him less threatening by asking him not to look directly at your cat and not to reach out toward her—something that, again, your cat can notice without fear. The final goal is to have your cat comfortable around men who are moving around normally in your house, close up and greeting, petting or playing with her.

Counterconditioning

To “condition” means to teach, and to “counter” means to change. So counterconditioning just means to re-teach the pet to have a pleasant feeling and reaction toward something that he once feared or disliked. We do this by associating the feared thing with something good so that it predicts good things for the animal. As soon as the dog or cat sees the thing, we give him a delicious treat to create a pleasant emotional reaction. Over many repetitions, the animal learns that whenever that thing appears, good things happen! Eventually, the process produces a neutral or positive emotional reaction to the sight of the previously feared or disliked person, animal, event, place or object.

Systematic Desensitization and Counterconditioning

Desensitization is often combined with counterconditioning because it's almost impossible to teach a positive association to something if the dog is actively experiencing fear or showing aggression. So we expose the animal to a weak version of the feared or disliked thing (desensitization), and give him delicious treats (counterconditioning). Over many exposures, the thing is gradually made stronger (for example, closer, louder or faster) and always followed immediately with treats.

Steps for Your DSCC Plan

- Write down a description of the thing or event that your dog or cat fears. Include all its major relevant attributes, such as the way it moves, sounds, looks and smells, and how far it's away and how long it lasts. Relevant means only those attributes that seem to trigger your pet's fear or aggression. For example, if your dog fears children on skateboards, their smell may not be relevant, but their age, noises and distance could be.
- Now look at these attributes and identify when they're least and most threatening to your dog. For example, your dog may be slightly tense with skateboarding children at a distance, but once they're within 10 yards and the noise is louder, he reacts with defensively threatening behaviors like barking, lunging and snarling. Furthermore, if the

child is also yelling, your dog is at his worst. Since your dog can't tell you how much he fears something, judge by your dog's past reactions, his body language and behavior. Now make a list of these attributes, ordered from least to most threatening. For example:

- Child on skateboard in the distance, sound muffled
- Child on skateboard at 20 yards, wheels getting loud
- Child on skateboard within 10 yards, wheels louder
- Child on skateboard, close up, wheels loudest
- Child on skateboard, yelling, close up, wheels loudest
- Start your DSCC treatment with number 1, the least-threatening level of exposure for your dog. Other examples are if your pet fears a sound, you can expose him to controlled versions of the sound by playing tape recordings of it. Or you can expose your pet to the sight of something he fears without sound or movement. For instance, if the dog is afraid of men, keep the men far away and ask them to stand quiet and still.

Guidelines for Your DSCC Plan

- Use treats that your pet values highly—treats that smell and taste wonderful. Ideally, this high-value treat should be something your pet has never tasted before. It could be croutons, cheese or chicken. Reserve this special treat for use *only* in your DSCC treatment plan.
- In brief, your sessions involve: 1) bringing the feared thing into sight, 2) treating your pet in a steady stream of pea-sized morsels as long as it's in sight, 3) then moving it out of sight (or moving you and your pet away), and 4) stopping the treats as soon as the feared thing is out of sight. Repeat this pattern of approaching and treating, then withdrawing and stopping treats at least 10 times each session.
- Try to end each session on success—when you notice that your pet is more relaxed, isn't at all worried, and has stopped even noticing the feared thing.
- Start each session at the same level of exposure that you ended on in your last session. You might find that he's back to being alert and a little worried about the feared thing. That's okay. Just keep repeating the gentle exposures with treats. Stay at that level as long as it takes for your pet to handle that level well—meaning he's unworried and relaxed. This may take many sessions across several days or weeks.
- Move on to the next exposure level on your list only when *at the start of a session* your pet or dog shows no worry and is relaxed and enjoying getting treats and playing with you in the presence of the thing. In a nutshell, don't *start* a new session at an exposure level that's higher than the last session.
- AVOID frightening your pet. Expose him to a tolerable version of the feared thing, *without evoking any fear*. If he shows fear, quickly increase the distance from the feared thing or otherwise reduce its intensity by reducing some part of it, such as its sound or movement.
- AVOID exposure to the scary thing between your treatment sessions. Ideally, your pet should not experience the thing at all except during treatment, when the exposure is controlled and you're actively counterconditioning with treats.

- Try to have longer rather than shorter sessions, like 10 minutes or longer.
- Vary the time of day of your sessions, the location of your sessions if possible, and the kind of treats you use. Avoid carrying your treats in a special bag, or, if you need to use a treat bag, carry that bag with you around the house sometimes, even when you aren't in a treatment session, and don't give any treats. This will help your pet learn the right association: that the feared thing predicts treats *not* that the appearance of the treat bag predicts treats.
- Once your dog or cat has overcome his fear and is comfortable with the normal version of the once-feared thing, do maintenance sessions at least twice a month to prevent the fear from returning.