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Training Dogs – Systematic Desensitization to the Veterinary Office

What is systematic desensitization?

Systematic desensitization is a training method used to reduce an animal's undesirable behavior in response to a given object or situation. It is the most effective means of treating fears and phobias and is often combined with Counterconditioning (see handouts on 'Behavior Modification – Desensitization and Counterconditioning').

How does systematic desensitization work?

The situation that evokes the undesirable response, fear or phobia is usually capable of being broken down into separate components, which often stimulate separate senses. For example, consider a pet that is terrified at the veterinarians.



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It may be the sight of the veterinarian in a white coat, the smell of disinfectant used at the practice, the fact that it is in proximity with other animals in an anxious or excited state, or the memory of receiving a treatment such as an injection. The object of systematic desensitization is to identify the separate elements of the problem, which can then be presented to the animal separately so that the pet can be gradually trained to relax in their presence.

How is this organized?



In the example given, if the veterinarian wears a white coat, it is useful to start by exposing your pet to people in white coats in the home. The stimulus has to be presented to the animal at a level high enough to arouse interest without causing the problem behavior, in this case, fear. Members of the family can wear a white coat and handle the animal, play with it, etc. and then try placing the animal on a table or worktop. Rewards can be used as soon as the animal starts to relax. The use of a head halter for training can help insure safety as well as better control and may calm some pets; this may be extremely useful during the actual visit (see our handout on 'Training Dogs – Head Halter Training').

Next it may be possible to repeat the situation away from the home. Local trainers are often prepared to help in situations such as these. The process has to be repeated many times until the pet reliably shows no more than a cursory interest in the stimulus and shows no signs of anxiety. Another component is then introduced; for example, the particular disinfectant associated with the clinic.

The next component is then introduced, for example the presence of a number of other animals, and so on. It is important that the response is positive and can be reliably repeated before you move to the next stage. It is also important to occasionally present lower level cues to which you know the animal will respond reliably; in other words, give the pet a refresher.

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If the fear response is elicited by the sight of a syringe, using a 'toy' syringe in a similar sequence with copious food distractions often works well, but rapid progress should not be expected. These treatment techniques work provided sufficient repetition is provided and you are prepared to spend a lot of time with your pet.

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Acceptance can be improved if it is possible to distract the pet when the stimulus is presented. Here food rewards are useful. For example, when taking your pet for a veterinary visit, it can be very useful to withhold food on the day of the visit and bring along the pet's favored toys and treats. The mere sight of the toy or treat is usually sufficient distraction for the pet. If the pet shows no inappropriate response, lavish praise should also be given. At the veterinary clinic, it may be possible to arrange with your veterinarian to not wear a coat during the examination

For other pets, "happy visits" to the veterinary clinic, which are associated with food rewards, fun, games and nothing else can help ease the anxiety associated with a veterinary visit.

Are there any other tips for desensitization training?

1. DO NOT TIRE YOUR PET

Training sessions should never go on too long otherwise the pet's attention level will drop and no progress will be made.

2. REPEATED SHORT TRAINING SESSIONS ARE BEST

When starting a new training session, always start several levels lower than the point at which the previous session finished.

3. REVIEW IS NECESSARY

Once the goal has been achieved it is important there is regularly reinforcement of the learning. This is done by regular exposure to what were the original problem elements. Injection fears in particular need attention in this respect.

4. OTHER TIPS

If you have a dog that has a problem that is limited to the home, then the use of pheromones, which are naturally produced chemicals, may help. Dog Appeasing Pheromone® (DAP) is an artificially synthesized version of a pheromone produced by lactating female dogs that has a reassuring affect and is available from vets as a plug in diffuser. One device will last about 4 weeks and can help speed up a desensitization program.

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