



## Freeport Veterinary Hospital

### Counter-Conditioning and Desensitization

Dogs can develop a variety of fears, anxieties and phobias to many different things. Living with a dog who is fearful or phobic can be extremely difficult. Owners often feel at a loss to help their pets, unable to find a way to soothe their dog's anxieties. Unfortunately for owners and dogs, untreated fears and anxiety get worse over time.

Thankfully for both owners and dogs there is a way to help turn even the most severe phobias around through the use of counter-conditioning and desensitization. Counter-conditioning and desensitization is an effective method that has been used to help countless dogs suffering from a wide range of phobias. All issues with behavior are easier to treat if the treatment is started early – don't wait until your dog has developed severe fear issues, implement a treatment plan at the first sign of trouble! Your dog will thank you.

So, what is counter-conditioning and desensitization? **Counter-conditioning** means reversing the negative association the dog has formed with a "scary" thing (called the stimulus), and replacing it with a positive, happy association. This positive association is reached by pairing the stimulus with something the dog enjoys, such as food or toys. **Desensitization** means exposing the dog to the "stimulus" at a very low level, low enough that it does not provoke a fear response, and gradually increasing the level of exposure until the dog is comfortable and happy with the full-force of the "scary thing." Using these two methods together, the dog begins to first feel less afraid (due to the low level of stimulus) and then slowly begins to feel happy/relaxed about the thing it previously feared (due to the treats or toys).

The CC/DS process is going to be different for each case, but here are two examples of how it would work. This first example is of a dog that is afraid of men and is highly food motivated. To start a man would stand far enough away that the dog notices him but is not afraid. The distance will depend on how afraid the dog is, it may be as close as several feet, or as long as the length of a few blocks. With the man standing still, the dog can be walked into sight, after the dog notices the man the owner can begin feeding him treats. If the dog is calm and relaxed, the man could take a few steps closer, and the process would be repeated. Slowly, the process repeats, with the man taking a few steps closer and closer, moving slowly enough that the dog stays happy and relaxed the entire time. This process would be played out over several sessions, with care taken to make sure the dog is never feeling pressured or stressed. Over time, the dog shifts his emotional response to men, instead of thinking: "Oh a man! I hate men! They are so scary! Bark! Bark! Bark!" your dog now thinks "Oh, a man! I love men, they mean I get CHICKEN!"

The second example is of a toy motivated dog that is afraid of the vacuum cleaner. First, a distance must be found at which the vacuum cleaner can be on and the dog is relaxed enough to play tug, fetch, or whatever game they prefer. As with the human fearful dog, this distance will depend on the dog, it may be on the other side of the room, or possibly several rooms away, behind a closed door. The vacuum can



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then be turned on for a few seconds. Right after the vacuum kicks on, a game of tug or fetch can begin. After a few repetitions the dog begins to associate the vacuum turning on, with the start of a great game. As long as the dog stays calm and relaxed, the owner can gradually increase the length of time the vacuum stays on. Once the dog is eagerly anticipating the vacuum kicking on, and is able to remain completely relaxed with the vacuum on, at a distance, for a long period of time, the owner can then gradually move the vacuum closer to the dog. In the end, the dogs emotional response changes to the vacuum cleaner, and the end result will be a dog that happily anticipates the vacuum cleaner turning on right next to them!

Every CC/DS program is completely unique, depending on the type of fear your dog has, how severe it is and the overall disposition of your dog. The information below will give you general information to about CC/DS, including some details that are critical for your success.

1. **Slow and Steady:** CC/DS is a very effective method, but it can be a slow process. It is critical that we never push the dog to the point of being scared or reactive. If this happens, your dog will backslide and the program will take much longer. You can only move as fast as the dog allows.
2. **Break it Down:** A CC/DS program relies on having the “scary thing” broken into pieces that are so small they cause no fear from your dog, and each subsequent progression should be equally small. If you present the “scary thing” to your dog and they become fearful or reactive, the piece is not small enough – break it down further until you get interest, but no outburst.
3. **Management:** Part of a good CC/DS program relies on you practicing good management to keep your dog from being exposed to the full force of what scares them while you are working on the issue. Since the CC/DS program revolves around exposing the dog to only minute amounts of the stimulus, if the dog is exposed to the full force of the stimulus it will set him back. This may take some creativity, it is worth the effort as your training time will be significantly shorter!
4. **Understanding Thresholds:** For a CC/DS program to work, we must always stay below a dogs “threshold.” A threshold is the level of stimulation at which a dog becomes fearful or reactive, shutting off the thinking part of his brain. Dogs that are over threshold are unable to think and learn. These dogs will be unable to eat, play, focus on their owner or perform a basic behavior such as a “sit.” A subthreshold dog will be willing to take treats or play with toys, and appear generally relaxed. When you increase to a new level of intensity in your dog’ program, you may notice a slight increase in their anxiety, however your dog should not be pushed to the point of going over their threshold. If they do, break the progressions down into smaller pieces.



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5. **Speaking Dog:** Your dog relies on you to be able to read his body language to tell when he is feeling relaxed, and when he is feeling stressed. Being able to read your dog's body language will be key in keeping him below threshold.
  - a. **Signs of relaxation:** a relaxed body posture, relaxed open mouth, slow relaxed panting, slow loose wagging tail, readily responds to petting and talking from owners, readily accepts treats or plays with toys, and able to perform basic behaviors.
  - b. **Signs of stress:** rapid panting (when not hot), drooling, trembling, yawning, "shaking off" as if wet, lifting a front paw, licking lips, sniffing at the ground, looking or leaning away from stimulus, whining, growling, barking or lunging.
  
6. **Timing is critical!** The timing of treat or toy delivery is important. You want to make sure your dog understands that the "scary thing" predicts good things. Present the food/toy to your dog either immediately after the "scary thing" starts, or simultaneously to it. If your dog is scared of people, begin to deliver the treats as soon as he notices the person, and stop giving the treats as soon as the person walks away. If your dog is nervous of having his legs handled, run a hand down his leg and then give a treat, or have someone feed treats as you are handling his leg. The important thing is to not accidentally teach your dog that the treat itself predicts the scary thing. If you feed your dog some treats, and then touch his leg, he may simply learn to dislike the treats that predict the scary thing!
  
7. **What's in a treat?** Make sure to use high-value treats (ideally that your dog doesn't get for any other reason) such as boiled chicken breast, liverwurst or cheese! The higher value the food items, the faster the positive association will be made. Moist treats are the best as this will allow you to pinch the treat between your fingers and make it so your dog has to work at it to get the food. This will make the treat last longer than just offering it out in an open hand. You can also use a longer lasting treat such as a Kong, hollow sterile bone or Dixie cup filled with peanut butter or squeeze cheese.
  
8. **One at a Time:** Always make sure to only change one thing at a time as you make your way through your CC/DS program. When faced with a fear, take time to carefully consider the different factors that might be contributing to the fear. For most fears there are four common components: *distance of the stimulus from the dog, movement of the stimulus, sound from the stimulus, and the quantity of the stimulus*. For example, if your dog is scared of men, consider the factors that may affect his fear: the closer the man is to the dog, the scarier he appears, men moving around are more scary than ones standing or sitting still, men talking or shouting are more scary than ones being quiet and multiple men are more scary than one. When moving up to the next step in your plan, only one of these things should be changed at a time



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9. **Less is More:** This process works best when done in small amounts, frequently, rather than trying to do a long session less frequently. Remember, you are trying to take it slow and make it easy on your dog. Aim for daily sessions lasting just a minute or two for the average dog.