

DESENSITIZATION AND COUNTERCONDITIONING

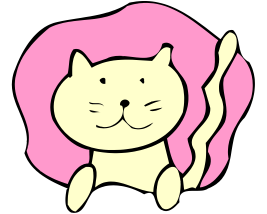


Does your dog hate getting his teeth brushed? Is your cat deathly afraid of her carrier or car rides? These techniques can turn things around!

What are counter-conditioning, response substitution, and desensitization?

Counter-conditioning and desensitization are powerful ways to change behavior. They are usually used in combination.

- **Desensitization** exposes the pet to a stimulus that frightens them at a low level - below the point when fear kicks in.
- **Counter-conditioning** is used to change the pet's emotional response to a situation, turning something scary into something enjoyable.
- **Response substitution** is a technique in which the pet is taught to replace an undesirable behavior with one that is desirable, such as sitting next to you instead of charging at the door when the doorbell rings.



Why punishment backfires

For most behavior problems, especially those associated with fear or anxiety, the use of punishment makes things worse. Even if it suppresses the undesirable behavior, it worsens the pet's fear and anxiety, without teaching the pet what to do instead. Positive training focuses on getting a new, better behavior to replace the old one, rather than trying to stop the undesirable response.

What is counter-conditioning?

Counter-conditioning means changing the pet's emotions, feelings or attitude toward a stimulus. For example, the dog that bites or tries to escape from a nail trim is usually having an emotional response of fear or anxiety. Counter-conditioning would be accomplished by pairing the sight of the clippers with one of the dog's favorite treats or rewards, making what was scary into something fun and good.

For a cat that is anxious or fearful when exposed to her carrier, we would want to pair the cat's favorite reward, such as pieces of chicken or playtime, with its presence.

Teaching your cat to love its carrier:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5pcEDKiFQ>

What is desensitization?

Desensitization is the gradual exposure to situations or objects that would bring on fear or anxiety, but at a level so low that there is no negative reaction. As the pet repeatedly experiences the situation paired with a reward, the animal becomes "less reactive" and can tolerate more without becoming frightened. Sessions should be short and fun.

For the cat example above, at first the carrier is just barely visible when the chicken is given. For nail trims, you might first start by touching a foot while also giving a treat.

The key to effective desensitization is to first find the threshold at which the pet starts to react, so she can be exposed to progressively more intense levels of the stimulus without triggering fear.

Go slowly! Don't exceed the threshold unless the pet can be effectively distracted, calmed or settled. Try to maintain a tail wag, happy face or

Nail trimming is one of the most triggering situation for dogs. Here's the plan – go slowly, this may take several weeks!

- Without a clipper, manipulate your dog's paw for 5 seconds and reward with really, really good treats. Repeat ten times, several times a day.
- Next, squeeze the paw instead of touching it, ten reps, several times a day, treats each time.
- Next, isolate a single toe, as you would if you were going to trim that nail – still without a clippers.
- At last, now you touch the toe with the clippers while squeezing the toe.
- Then squeeze the clipper but don't cut.
- Finally, take a sliver off a nail.

calm behavior. If you go too far and your pet gets anxious, go back to the previous level that was tolerated and work your way back more slowly.

What is response substitution?

Response substitution occurs when an undesirable behavior is changed to one that is desirable. The challenge is to get the desired behavior when exposing the pet to the anxiety-producing situation, while keeping your pet relaxed and happy. If the pet can focus on the owner in response to commands (e.g. "settle" or "watch") in the absence of any distraction, the training then progresses through desensitization to gradually more intense levels of the stimulus that previously caused anxiety.

We first teach an alternative behavior, before introducing the thing that sets off an unwanted behavior. For example, work on teaching your dog to sit and focus on you near the front door before expecting him to sit and focus on you when the doorbell is ringing.

Behavioral tools such as lure, clicker or target training can be used to help achieve the desired outcome more quickly. For most dogs, a head halter such as the Gentle Leader™, with a leash, is the safest, most effective and most immediate method to obtain the desired response (e.g., sit, focus, or heel). For cats, a leash and body harness can improve control. Thundershirts and pheromone products can be useful for both dogs and cats.

Easier said than done?

Counter-conditioning, response substitution, and desensitization are basic training tools but ones that take knowledge and practice to do well. The more severe the unwanted behavior or the more complex the problem, the more likely we will recommend that you work with an experienced trainer or behaviorist, rather than trying to handle it on your own. It's easy to get frustrated or impatient, which can make the situation worse. If you feel overwhelmed or stuck, we can refer you to an expert.

Be open to using behavior-modification medication and/or supplements

Your pet cannot learn if it is frightened or agitated. The more severe the unwanted behavior or the more complex the problem, the more likely we will recommend antianxiety medication as part of your pet's treatment protocol, as well as consultation with a trainer or behaviorist. Our goal is not to "drug" your pet. It's to increase the brain's serotonin level, and decrease adrenaline and cortisol, to the point your pet can relax enough to be successful.

Be open to changing your own behavior

We often have beliefs that hinder our ability to solve behavior problems, beliefs about why pets do what they do or what works, or doesn't work, to make it better. If what you've been doing hasn't made the situation better, but you reject the information or advice you receive from people who have been studying animal behavior and the science behind it for years, you will not be successful. If one member of the household is willing to make changes but the other isn't, that also leads to poorer outcomes. The best way to approach behavior problems is with an open mind and an open heart.



Nail trim videos from Fact Academy we recommend:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4e6Yo56oRI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXX9w7yHZk8>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKDb_MOYktI

Head halters are one of the most effective behavioral tools for dogs. We recommend the Gentle Leader, sold by PetSafe™. There are some great videos on YouTube that can guide you through their use, or schedule an appointment with us for a demonstration and fitting.

Car anxiety desensitization by Dog Gone Problems:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqPuGQipMjs>

Tooth brushing desensitization by Emily Larlham (Kikopup):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6G9IBQRsiW0>