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Desensitization and counterconditioning.

WebMD Veterinary Reference from ASPCA Virtual Pet Behaviorist



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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 feels about a particular thing, it isn't enough to just teach them 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 dog'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 or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist.

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 they fears, in such a way that their 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, and shorter lasting, farther away, less noisy, or still rather than moving.

Over time, as the dog 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 dog is afraid of male visitors to your home. You might first expose your dog to a man who's far away and standing still—exposure that your dog 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 dog and not to reach out toward the dog—something that, again, your dog can notice without fear.

The final goal is to have your dog comfortable around men who are moving around normally in your house, close up and greeting, petting or playing with the dog.