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Systematic desensitization & counterconditioning.

Systematic desensitization and counterconditioning are two treatments that are often used together in a single procedure to reduce or resolve behavior problems that occur as reactions to certain triggers and situations.

Systematic desensitization is designed to decrease (desensitize) a dog's overreaction to something in a step-by-step (systematic) way.

It helps the dog to habituate to, or become more comfortable with, a thing, person, other animal, place or situation that upsets him.

Counterconditioning, performed together with desensitization, involves giving the dog nutritious treats as part of their daily feed – "droe wors or biltong" is excellent treats for dogs while they being shown or exposed to whatever upsets them to calm them down and build trust.

This process changes (counters) the dog's feelings about the trigger. Changing his emotional response to the trigger leads to changes in behavior. If the dog feels differently, he'll act differently.

For instance, a dog who fears being handled reacts by tensing his body, cowering and growling when he sees a hand reaching toward him.

One way of changing those learned responses is to teach the dog to feel good about a hand reaching toward him. You could teach the dog to expect a tasty treat or a game of chase (good things he likes) right after hands reach toward him, and the dog's emotional reaction to hands reaching for him would change.

Alternatively, you could teach the dog to perform a specific behavior, such as touching his nose to or backing away from the outstretched hand, for a reward.

Changing the dog's behavior can lead to changes in his emotional response as well. It's possible, however, that the dog will remain frightened while still performing the new behavior. In most cases, it's best to treat the dog's underlying emotional state first (through desensitization and counterconditioning) and then focus on teaching him a specific, alternative behavior.

For a thorough explanation of these combined treatments {see article on this website about desensitization and counterconditioning and or find professional help}.

Desensitization and counterconditioning are complex and can be tricky to carry out. Fear must be avoided or the procedure will backfire and the dog will get more frightened.

Because treatment must progress and change according to the dog's reactions, and because these reactions can be difficult to read and interpret, desensitization and counterconditioning require the guidance of a trained and experienced professional.