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# Desensitization and Counterconditioning (DS/CC)

## Please read first.

The intention of this handout is to educate you about a very complex topic: how quality trainers work dogs through fear and/or aggression. There is a lot of bad information that pops up on social media or when you Google this topic, so I wanted to provide you access to accurate facts here.

However, we **do not recommend** attempting to work your dog through fear or aggression (especially towards people and dogs) without the help of a qualified professional trainer. We simply intend to boost your knowledge around this topic so you can understand more about these powerful, but complex techniques.

## Desensitization (DS). Breaking things down into smaller (non-scary) pieces.

*Systematic desensitization* is a technique that was originally developed by behavioral psychologists to treat people with anxiety and phobias. In DS, the person is exposed to an object or situation they are scared of (AKA trigger) at a level that does not produce *any* fear.

If you were terrified of spiders, for example, the first step might involve showing you a cartoon of a cute, unrealistic spider. You wouldn't be the slightest bit afraid (hopefully). The intensity - in this case, degree of realism - is then *very gradually* increased only as the you continue to feel okay.

A hierarchy is developed at the beginning of treatment, ranging from the easiest to most difficult versions of the feared object/situation. The person is worked through that hierarchy as long as they continue to feel comfortable each step of the way. The end goal of desensitization is that the person would no longer fear real spiders.

DS is often used by reputable trainers to work a dog through fear or aggression (which is frequently motivated by fear). For example, if your dog is afraid of thunder, you'd start by playing thunder sounds from your phone or computer at a low enough volume where your dog hears it, but is not at all scared. Once they are completely comfortable and used to that level, you'd increase the volume one level.

If at *any time* your dog was worried or afraid, you'd lower the volume until they were comfortable again.

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Then you'd try working more slowly to progress to louder versions of the thunder. You'd repeat over time and across many sessions until your dog could hear thunder at full volume and not be afraid.

### **Beware of flooding.**

Flooding occurs when we skip to the end of the hierarchy (the most feared version of the trigger) and expose the dog to it all at once. The dog is then experiencing the most scary and stressful version of the thing they fear, usually without an option of getting away.

This is a problematic training technique for many reasons. Firstly, it has a high likelihood of making the dog *worse, not better*. It can increase the fear or, in many cases, cause the dog to resort to aggression to get away. Often the damage done makes any subsequent training techniques take much longer and sometimes the negative impact cannot be fully undone.

Flooding can also cause the dog to simply shut down (appearing as a lack of behavior in general). This is not success, but rather a coping mechanism indicating severe stress. Not a good thing for the dog!

Here are some real life examples of flooding: You have a dog who is afraid of children, so you bring them to a playground and hold their leash while all the children come up and pet your dog. Or your dog is afraid of getting their nails clipped, so you have a partner physically hold them in place while you clip their nails. (Again we don't recommend using flooding!)

Often flooding is done unintentionally, but it can have the same negative consequences and usually makes the fear or aggression worse over time. Planning ahead and working through the fear gradually with desensitization is the way to success!

### **Counterconditioning (CC). Scary thing = goodies!**

Desensitization (DS) is most often performed alongside another technique, *counterconditioning (CC)*. When one event becomes a reliable predictor of another event, the dog develops an anticipatory response to the first event. This is learning by association. Counterconditioning is a type of learning by association whose goal is to reverse the current emotional response (usually from a negative emotion to a positive one for our training purposes). More on this in a second.

There are important advantages for animals of learning the tip-offs to important environmental events. Dogs learn that a leash coming out of the cupboard means a walk is next. Cats learn that the sound of a can opener means food is next. This is all learning by association.

So, what if, whenever I show you the cartoon picture of the spider from the example above, I then give you a bit of your favorite Belgian chocolate? With repetition, you'll start to have a nice feeling about that spider.

It's important to maintain the distinction between learning by association and learning by consequence. In learning by association the animal is learning about events and their *predictive relationship* with other events. In learning by consequence he is learning about his own voluntary behavior and its *consequences*. And, the anticipatory response that is conditioned using learning by association is *involuntary*.

Why does this matter? Because this means you cannot reward fear (an involuntary emotional response). The goal of giving treats to a dog who is afraid of something in its presence is to change the emotion. Meaning we can actually teach dogs to *like* the things they are currently afraid of. This in turn will change the fearful or aggressive behavior to positive behavior (if done in conjunction with desensitization).

So, a dog who is uneasy getting his nails clipped learns that the nail clippers presence, proximity and eventually, contact, predict his favorite things in the world. Over time, this dog might actually get excited when you pull out the nail clippers because he knows good things are about to happen.

### Combining DS + CC.

In actual treatment of fear or aggression, the dog is exposed to the lowest intensity version of his trigger (DS), immediately followed by something the dog loves, like diced cheese (CC). This is repeated until the dog is evidently and eagerly anticipating cheese when the trigger is presented.

Then, the intensity of the trigger is gradually increased (DS) and the procedure repeated (CC). If, at any point, the dog shows any fear or negative reactions to the trigger, it means the *intensity is too high*. It is important to then back off to a lower intensity and work back up gradually again. No good comes of teaching the dog the world isn't mostly safe. In fact, it can make the dog *worse*.

### Successful Counterconditioning.

The difference between teaching your dog to love their trigger(s) and literally achieving nothing is very often due to how well the trainer pulls off the order of events. For a dog to have an anticipatory response to the trigger in a CC procedure, it must have high predictive value that the second event (in this example,

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cheese) is coming. This predictive relationship can be muddled by a couple of common errors: order of events and a 1 to 1 ratio.

*Order of events.* Pulling out the cheese *before or at the same time* as your dog's trigger appears. There is now no tip-off that the trigger means the cheese is coming. Cheese was already here!

Dogs get excited at the sight of their leash coming out of the cupboard because the walk comes *afterwards*. If the walk happened simultaneous to or before the leash came out of the cupboard, the leash's appearance would not be a very good tip-off. It wouldn't give the dog any information about when a walk is coming. The dog has to notice their trigger *first*. Then the fabulous pay-off happens: a happy owner with super yummy treats. There must be a predictive relationship to change emotion. Triggers predict goodies!

*1 to 1 ratio.* Every time the dog's trigger appears, the good stuff has to happen. Otherwise, the trigger isn't a reliable tip-off to good things. Ex. Nail clippers appear= cheese happens. Every time.

### **Please note:**

Fear and aggression are tough stuff! Be careful not to embark on a DS/CC journey without qualified help. It's very easy to make mistakes, which can increase your dog's fear or aggression. This goes doubly so if the fear or aggression is directed at people. We **do not** recommend attempting to work your dog through fear or aggression towards people (and dogs) without professional help. Don't set your dog up to get themselves (and you) in trouble.

Instead, if your dog is struggling with fear or aggression issues, [contact us for help](#). If we aren't the right fit, we'll get you a quality referral.