



Behavior and Training Department Behavior Resources

Desensitization Methods

Many animal behavior problems benefit from the process of Desensitization; that is, allowing the animal to slowly learn to tolerate that which he was afraid of or was aggressive to. Some of the problem behaviors include:

- Aggression towards other dogs
- Aggression towards people
- Fear of other dogs (sometimes manifests as aggression)
- Fear of certain types of people (odd clothing/man or woman)
- Fear of thunderstorms or other loud noises
- Fear of cars/trucks/bicycles

The Desensitization process itself is very simple, though time consuming. For example, if an animal lunges at other dogs, you would slowly *desensitize* the animal to the presence of other dogs by the following method:

1. Have the subject dog (let's call him Buster) in a safe location, tied by a very slack leash to an immovable object. The dog should feel comfortable in the location, with his owner close by, but not actively soothing him. A little play or obedience work before the session is advisable.
2. Introduce a calm, tolerant dog into Buster's area, close enough for Buster to see him, but far enough away that Buster doesn't go into a fit of barking. This can be difficult, since some dogs' "tolerance area" is quite large.
3. Slowly walk the control dog closer to Buster, until Buster begins to get aroused (barks, thrusts forward, tense). Stop the control dog. Do not allow prolonged eye contact. If necessary, the owner should depart from Buster's immediate area, so he can't use the owner as an emotional crutch.
4. When Buster calms down (breaks off eye contact, sniffs at the wall or elsewhere within his area, sits or, better yet, lies down), the control dog leaves, and the owner returns to Buster's side.
5. Begin the process again. You should be able to bring the control dog closer to Buster...then closer and closer. Eventually the two dogs should be able to touch noses.
6. Get another control dog, and begin the process again.

The most important part of this process involves calming. Resume bringing the control dog closer to Buster only if there are signs that Buster isn't afraid or feeling aggressive. This often takes longer than we wish.

After success with that procedure, you would then take the next steps. This assumes a dog-aggressive dog. If the fear object is a type of person - man, woman, someone in a uniform - modify the steps accordingly.

1. Walk the dog when he is hungry, and take along some delicious treats. He should be on a slack, not tight leash.
2. When you see another dog, stop, get attention from your dog, signal him to do a behavior he knows well, and give him treats – several small pieces in a row is probably best.
3. Leave the area. If you must walk by the other dog, move as far away as possible from the other dog, praise and cajole your dog, and keep offering him treats. When you get past the other dog, heap praise and food on your dog and go home.
4. Repeat this sequence several times, each time allowing your dog closer to the strange dog. He gets a delicious treat when he sees the other dog *and* when he gets past the other dog.
5. Your goal is to keep your dog's attention predominantly on you while walking past another dog. He is rewarded before, during and after the process. If he begins to aggress, move rapidly away, but don't yell at him - he was pushed past his threshold.
6. Always carry treats with you, but begin to vary the number and times you give him his reward for good behavior. He should look upon you as a godlike creature who dispenses various types of praise and goodies at different rates.



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If the problem involves an environmental stimulation, like noises, you would record some of the noises that the dog is afraid of, then begin to establish a pleasant connection with the sounds, rather than unpleasant. This technique only occasionally works for thunderstorm phobia, but it's quite successful with other sensitivities. However, it's important to realize that very sensitive dogs are born, not made, and that your dog will always be more sensitive to sound than others.

For example, if the dog is afraid of sudden noises - a truck backfiring, thunder (but not the storm itself), guns firing, etc.:

1. Find or make a recording of the noises, and put them relatively close together on the tape.
2. Put the dog in a room that she finds very comfortable, and ignore her for a few minutes.
3. Play the tape at a VERY low level, while feeding, playing with or otherwise distracting the dog.
4. Do this for about five minutes, then take her from the room and ignore her again for a few minutes. We want her to look forward to these "sessions".
5. After a few hours, repeat the process, upping the level of the sound a bit.
6. Continue this pattern, using different noises, and putting your speakers in different places if possible. Move rooms, do it at a friends house, anything you can to generalize her response.

Research has shown that punishment directed towards an animal with aggression towards other dogs or destructiveness caused by anxiety only makes matters worse. It's far more effective to work on eliminating the problem step-by-step.

Trish King
Director, Behavior and Training