



The Science of Emotions: Desensitization and Counter Conditioning (DS/CC)

Having a dog means at some point encountering something *you* consider “normal” that your dog has **big feelings** about. Nail trimming, brushing, harnessing, doorbells, skateboards, children, people in hats, other dogs—any of these sound familiar?

Whether a big reaction is due to excitement, fear, or frustration, they can make certain scenarios difficult, embarrassing, or hard to navigate. **But what if you could CHANGE the way that your dog felt about those triggers?**

For many years training had focused on trying to suppress the SYMPTOMS of the feelings, namely behaviors such as barking, snapping, or growling. But addressing only the behaviors themselves does nothing to change the *reason* those behaviors are occurring. For example, if you simply restrain a dog to trim their nails while they growl, or punish them until they’re quiet, that will do nothing to address how uncomfortable they are with the process. But if you change the way they *feel* about the activity, they will no longer have a reason to exhibit the symptom behaviors (growling/biting).

The science: how it works

This might seem a little far-fetched at first, but the science behind this technique has been around for decades. Not only that, but you may have already accidentally trained a similar response—in reverse!

Does your dog get SO excited as soon as you pick up the leash? This is an example of what is known as “classical conditioning.” The dog has formed a strong positive association with a random object (the leash) *because it is habitually paired with something the dog LOVES*; namely, going for a walk. The leash is not inherently exciting on its own, but it BECOMES exciting once the dog understands that it predicts a desired activity.

This is what is known as a “conditioned emotional response.” It’s unconscious—it happens simply by pairing something neutral (the leash) with something rewarding for the dog (the walk). If done consistently, and IN ORDER (leash then walk, leash then walk), the dog automatically gets excited about the leash.

Changing a conditioned emotional response

So, what about a negative conditioned emotional response, like a dog’s aversion to being brushed, or the doorbell ringing? With a little work, *you can CHANGE a conditioned emotional response*, just like you can create one. And with a very similar process!

Our goal is to habitually pair something aversive (ex. The doorbell) with something rewarding (ex. Hot dog) until the dog learns that the doorbell predicts reinforcement, not a scary intruder. **But unlike the leash example, we are starting with something that ALREADY has a negative association, so there are some extra steps we must take to be successful:**

- **Audition reinforcers (rewards).** Make sure you are using something your dog REALLY wants and doesn’t usually get. Lunch meat, hot dog, mozzarella cheese, and other dog-safe goodies cut up small are usually a safe bet.
- **The dog must remain “below threshold” as you train.** Keep whatever your dog feels strongly about at a LOW INTENSITIY while you train. You need to begin at a low enough level of exposure to the uncomfortable stimulus that your dog is *still able to participate*, then gradually increase level of exposure. We call this staying “below threshold.” If your dog begins barking, showing signs of fear, won’t take food, or tries to leave the session, we’ve gone too far too fast and need to go back a step.
- **Adjust the goal.** As humans we are often very focused on the end product! But we don’t want to rush here. Our goal is not to “get it done,” and we’re not trying to “trick” our dogs into the behaviors with food. Instead, we want to make steady progress towards the dog feeling more comfortable.



Real World Examples

So, what does this look like in practice? Here are some example scenarios that can help you think about how you would set up something similar for *your* dog:

Example 1: Dog barks at doorbell

Note: If you are working on desensitization and counter conditioning to the doorbell, plan to STOP guests from using the doorbell while you are working to change your dog's reaction. We don't want them to practice the unwanted behavior while you're trying to build a new one! For now, use an alternative—such as having guests text you when they arrive.

- **Step 1: Set up scenario so that your dog can remain below threshold.** There are many ways to do this depending on your dog's needs, such as playing a doorbell recording quietly in an unrelated room (ex. bedroom)
- **Step 2: Systematically pair a reinforcer (high value food) with a LOW LEVEL of exposure,** starting wherever your dog is comfortable. An example might be:
 - Play the sound of the doorbell quietly once on your phone, then offer a few treats.
 - If your dog will not take the treat or begins to bark, the trigger is still too intense!
 - Repeat! Gradually increase the intensity of the sound
 - Repeat! Gradually decrease the distance from the goal area (the door)
 - When your dog hears the doorbell sound, they should begin looking to you expectantly – this is how you know you are creating a positive conditioned emotional response.
- **Step 3: Begin to mimic the goal behavior in context.** Once your dog is consistently looking back to you when they hear the doorbell noise, start to try the behavior in context. Add in new elements in stages, such as:
 - Ringing the real doorbell
 - A NEW human ringing the real doorbell
 - Ringing with the door OPEN (easier) vs ringing with the door CLOSED (more challenging)

Example 2: Dog runs from brush

- **Step 1: Set up scenario so that your dog can remain below threshold.** This will depend on exactly how uncomfortable the dog is with the brush! Some dogs may be fine with the brush in your hand, but for some even reaching towards where you keep it might be enough to make them run away. Start where you can be successful! You may even consider getting a new kind of brush.
- **Step 2: Systematically pair a reinforcer (high value food) with a LOW LEVEL of exposure,** starting wherever your dog is comfortable. An example might be:
 - **Show the tool to your dog.** Don't reach it towards them, simply hold it up in YOUR space. Treat for them looking at the tool. Remove the tool from line of sight before delivering the treat. Repeat.
 - **Move the tool closer into their space.** It should look similar to "offering" it to your dog. Treat for not moving away, with the tool still going away during each treat. Repeat.
 - **Touch the dog briefly with the tool,** click/treat for not moving away. Repeat.
 - NOTE! If the tool is to be used in a sensitive area (such as paws or ears) start by touching at an "easier" area of the body first, then working the tool towards the goal area.
 - **Repeat** until dog is consistently showing calm body language with the tool touching the goal area.
- **Step 3: Gradually begin to perform the goal behavior.** IMPORTANT! Training time should not be when you plan to "get it done." If your training session leads up to one shoulder being brushed because that's what your dog is comfortable with, THAT is where you should end your session. If your dog is ready and willing to participate more, great! But we want to make sure not to push them past their comfort zone. The goal is consent, not tolerance.

IMPORTANT! If at any point your dog hits threshold, PAUSE and go back a step, then spend some time working where they can be successful before progressing.