

## Desensitization vs Counter Conditioning vs Flooding

### How to help a fearful or reactive dog become calm and confident

Many dogs are fearful or reactive in specific situations. Some are sound reactive (fear of fireworks or barks when someone knocks on the door), some become fixated on things that move (bicycles or squirrels), some are anxious when people leave, and some are fearful when people come close.

It is important to remember that every dog is unique. Many have bad experiences that provoke these responses, while many others naturally have fearful or anxious personalities. Knowing the dog's history is important but ideally, the focus should be on moving forward.

Always remember that reactive dogs need POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT to overcome fears, phobias, and anxieties. Punishing a reactive dog will create a more negative association with the stimulus and be counterproductive to your end goal: a calm AND confident dog.

## Desensitization

The process of desensitizing a dog to stimulus is time consuming and requires a lot of patience from the handler. However, I have found this to be the most effective way to build a dog's confidence naturally to any particular stimulus.

The idea behind desensitizing is exposing a dog to low levels of the problem stimulus and slowly increasing the intensity of the stimulus as the dog is able to calmly accept it. Additionally, it is extremely important to always do desensitizing exercises in baby steps, moving forward too fast may cause the dog to become even more stressed.

For example, the dog barks when they hear a knock on the door. Start by knocking very softly just once. If the dog is calm, knock slightly louder just once. Continue to escalate in tiny increments until you can loudly bang on the door repeatedly. Make sure not to escalate the level of the distraction if your dog is showing ANY signs of stress. Refer to Stress Signals handout for more info.

Again, do not move forward too fast when trying to desensitize your dog. If they are repeatedly passing their threshold for a distraction, then not only are you creating a more intense negative association, but also teaching your dog not to trust you. Training is about building trust with our dogs, so it is important to set them up for success.

*The key to everything is patience. You get the chicken by hatching the egg, not by smashing it.*

~~[Arnold H. Glasgow]



These materials are provided for you as a way to review behaviors previously discussed in training sessions. It is important for the success of both you and your dog, that these materials are used for reviewing, not for teaching. Do not skip ahead, even if you think your dog is ready. Every dog, every owner, and every situation is specific and requires a training program catered to fit; because these handouts are very general, please talk to Kelsey before attempting any of these training techniques on your own.



## Counter Conditioning

Desensitizing is immensely more effective when paired with counter conditioning. Counter conditioning is pairing a positive association with something your dog had previously believed to be negative. Training treats, toys, affection, and playtime are all excellent reinforcers for creating that positive association.

To use this technique, we first must figure out what we would like our replacement behavior to be. Many people simply want their dog to “not bark” but we still need to follow through by giving the dog a different task. Maybe a “watch me” behavior, a “look at that” behavior, or a “sit stay” behavior would be a good replacement for the reactivity. Talk to Kelsey about which replacement behavior would work best in your situation.

In the beginning, make the replacement tasks very simple and reward often. When paired with desensitizing, we can use counter conditioning to teach our dog the replacement behavior with the low level stimuli first. Make sure not to reward a dog that is overly stressed, or behaving badly. If your dog is not able to successfully complete the replacement task, the stimulus level may be too high. Add some distance between you and the stimulus or otherwise lower the level before attempting the task again.

## Flooding

Flooding can also be used to help a dog with fear and anxiety issues. However, this technique is significantly more stressful for the dog and can be dangerous. Flooding is not a technique that I would recommend in a majority of cases, and should be used cautiously.

The difference between flooding and desensitizing is, flooding exposes a dog to high levels of the problem stimulus right away, whereas desensitizing is the slow, methodical exposure mentioned earlier. The idea is that if a dog’s senses are flooded with the stimulus, they will eventually get over the fear and anxiety when the adrenaline runs out. Now, depending on the personality of the dog, you may have a dog that reacts aggressively in this scenario or a dog that completely shuts down. Either option is not conducive to learning.

When attempting desensitizing exercises, make sure to avoid accidentally flooding your dog’s senses.

*Flooding is a psychotherapeutic method for overcoming phobias. This is a faster, **yet less efficient and more traumatic**, method of ridding fears when compared with systematic desensitization.*

~~[Wikipedia]

