



Desensitizing to Common Stimuli

Before you try to do any desensitization, determine the type of reward your dog prefers. Some prefer treats, some physical attention and some verbal praise. The type of situation may change the reward your dog prefers. When working on desensitization, it is important to use high value rewards to help create a VERY positive association with the scary stimulus.

Nails

Slow and steady wins the race with nail trimming! If you try to trim your dog's nails too quickly, you may cause irreparable damage. To do this properly, start by desensitizing your dog to you touching his/her feet. Begin this process by touching their shoulders, if they react to this, stop and touch higher (their chest/neck). If you can touch their shoulder with no reaction, try moving your hand further down their leg. Once you find the place they begin reacting, touch that spot, very gently with the tips of your fingers, remove your hand and offer a reward. Do this for as long as it takes for your dog to be comfortable with you touching his/her entire leg and foot. It may take weeks-months. If your dog reacts negatively (stress/calming signals, growling, attempting to bite) to ANY step, stop and go back to the previous step, or seek professional help. NEVER USE FORCE OR FEAR while working with your dog.

Once your dog is comfortable with you massaging and manipulating his/her legs and feet, slowly introduce the nail clippers. Begin by showing them the clippers and offering a reward. Do this until the sight of the clippers elicits joy from your dog! Then begin making a clipping sound with the clippers but WITHOUT touching your dog's feet and offer a reward. Do this until the clip sound elicits joy.

Once your dog is comfortable with the clipping sound, begin touching the dog's shoulder with the clippers with NO sound or movement from the clippers, then offer a reward. Do this until the dog is completely comfortable with the clippers touching his/her body. Move the clippers around the dog's leg until he/she is comfortable with them and offer rewards throughout this process.

When your dog is 100% comfortable – no pulling away no stress/calming signals, make one clipping sound while touching your dog's feet (not nails) with the clippers. Offer a reward.

Once you and your dog are comfortable with clipping the clippers right by the dog's feet, try clipping ONE nail and offer many, many rewards. You may need to slow down during this step since the act of clipping nails can be uncomfortable, but not painful if done properly. Try one nail per day until you can clip the nail with NO argument or discomfort from your dog. If you accidentally cut the quick of your dog's nail, you may need to start the process over.

Noises

The process to desensitize against noises is very similar to nail clippers. Start quiet, reward, and VERY slowly increase the volume. If the sound is too scary, start with a similar sound if possible. If the sound is

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accompanied by anything else, like thunderstorms with wind, rain and pressure changes, try to separate them and desensitize in stages. For some dogs, desensitization to some things, like thunderstorms, is not possible. If the dog is too worked up and unable to accept treats, praise and management become the best option.

Movement

Movement can be very triggering for some dogs. The reaction depends on what is motivating the reaction and the treatment depends on this. If the dog gets hyperexcited with movement, chasing for fun or because they are overstimulated, rewards may not work.

For hyperexcited dogs, it is important not to tell them not to react, but to give them a job instead. Begin by moving around them slowly, if this does not trigger them, move quicker. Once you find the movement that starts a reaction – no matter how mild – begin asking for a different behaviour – like a SIT – and reward that. Do this until you can move freely around the dog without triggering them. You can also teach them a ‘place’ or ‘bed/mat’ and encourage them to stay there while you move freely.

For fearful dogs, the same desensitization technique as desensitizing to noise or nail clippers may work. You can also try the hyperexcited training, but it will depend on the severity of the fear, and intensity of the reaction. You may need to seek professional help for fearful reactivity to movement.

With ALL desensitization, be very sure NOT to move too quickly, as this can lead to permanent damage. If you start with too loud of a noise, or movement that is too much, desensitizing is often no longer an option. The dog may become hypersensitive to the stimulus, leading to the inability to effectively desensitize.

Support:

Our Behaviour Support Team can help to provide resources and tips if you experience concerns in the home environment. With your adoption the GTHS will provide an over the phone consultation in order to provide you with tips and resources to set your new dog up for success. In all cases of dog adoptions, the GTHS recommends hiring a professional dog training or behavioural consultant to ensure your relationship with your new dog starts off on the right paw! A list of local trainers is enclosed in your adoption package.

Our Behaviour Support Team can be reached at behaviour@gths.ca

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