

Desensitization and Counterconditioning

When and How?

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KEYWORDS

• Desensitization • Counterconditioning • Anxiety • Fear • Phobia

KEY POINTS

- Dogs and cats can present to a veterinary hospital because they manifest anxieties, fears, and phobias.
- These conditions can be so severe to negatively affect the patient's quality of life and the human-animal bond because some patients can become aggressive, destructive, and vocal and even hurt themselves.
- The clinician has several available tools to help the affected patient; the most implemented tools in veterinary behavioral medicine are systematic desensitization and counterconditioning.
- The goal of any desensitization and counterconditioning plan should be to make patients less or not reactive toward one or more specific triggers by learning new and more acceptable responses in their presence.

DEFINITIONS

Before proceeding with more details about the topic, it is necessary and useful to review some definitions.

Anxiety

Anxiety is a reaction of apprehension or uneasiness to an anticipated danger or threat. Signs are physiologic (autonomic arousal, increased heart and respiratory rate, trembling, salivation, gastrointestinal, and hypervigilance) and behavioral (freezing, lip licking, yawning, pacing, stress vocalizations, restlessness). Anxiety may be displayed in the absence of an identifiable stimulus. It may become generalized in some pets or may be specific to situations of perceived threat.¹

Fear

Fear is an emotional response due to the presence or proximity of a specific stimulus (eg, object, noise, individual, social situation) that the pet perceives as a threat or

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danger. It is a psychological and physiologic state characterized by somatic, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components. It can be a normal adaptive response.¹

Phobia

Phobia is a profound, excessive, abnormal fear response that occurs without the presence of a true threat or is out of proportion to the needs for dealing with an actual threat. Phobia is considered a maladaptive response and interferes with normal function.¹

Desensitization

Desensitization is a behavioral treatment of phobias that involves slowly presenting the patient with increasingly strong fear-provoking stimuli while keeping the patient in a very relaxed state.² The more accurate wording would be *systematic desensitization*.

Counterconditioning

Counterconditioning is a negative or undesirable behavior that is extinguished or controlled by teaching the animal to do another behavior (preferably favorable and fun) that competitively interferes with the execution of the undesirable behavior.³ For example, teaching a pet to lie down instead of jumping (the patient cannot perform both behaviors at the same time).

When desensitization and counterconditioning are implemented correctly, *response substitution* will be the end result.

Response Substitution

Response substitution is the development and exhibition of a positive desired/desired behavior or behavioral sequence that it is *incompatible* with the expression of the unwanted behavioral sequence.⁴

DESENSITIZATION AND COUNTERCONDITIONING: THE WHEN

Desensitization and counterconditioning are behavioral techniques implemented with patients that are affected by anxieties, fears, and phobias. Before starting to expose patients to any known fearful stimuli, multiple steps should be followed in order to achieve successful and enduring results (**Box 1**).⁵

Step One: Clients Compliance

Clients' compliance is an integral part of a successful plan, but it is the most difficult one to obtain and ensure, because working with pets with mental illnesses requires dedication, patience, and time, and owners tend to not to have a lot of any of the above-mentioned requirements. Owners must have realistic expectations about their pets' progress and achievements, which it is difficult to make them see and accept, because most of the time they believe their pets are simply unruly and not diseased. As Mr Benjamin Franklin rightly said, "Take time for all things: great haste makes great waste." These are words to keep in mind when we manage patients with behavioral problems.

Step Two: Having Patients Reliable on Verbal Cues

Dogs and cats do not speak English (or any other human language). Because we do not speak the same language, one way to establish clear communication with pets is through training. Clear communication should be seen as a way to convey a clear message to pets: to tell them exactly what we expect from them. Clear communication

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