

How to Desensitize Your Dog

It's heartbreaking to see our dogs shy away from people, objects, and other animals that can enrich their lives. To put your dog at ease, you can desensitize them through gradual exposure and by creating new, positive associations with their trigger(s). Over time, your dog will learn to overcome their fear and live a fuller, happier life.

Method One: Come Up With a Treatment Plan

- **Identify your dog's triggers.** The trigger is an object, person, or place which causes the dog to panic. Dogs react in different ways to their triggers. For instance, your dog might put their tail between their legs, bark, run away, or whimper in fear. They might react aggressively to certain stimuli, for instance, by barking, lowering their head, or bristling the hair on their back.
 - Make note of situations in which your dog demonstrates signs of fear, aggression, or other unwanted behaviors. Look for patterns in their negative behavior and identify specifically what triggers your pet.
- **Rank your dog's triggers.** After discovering your dog's triggers, write each on a piece of paper, starting with the most serious and working your way down to the least serious. For instance, perhaps your dog is agitated by all visitors in the house and especially rattled by young children. You could rank adults as less scary for the dog than children. Does your dog demonstrate fear when being picked up, or being picked up in a certain way? Do all little children trigger your dog, or are crying children more traumatic for them? Use these and similar questions to figure out exactly what fears are most and least serious in the dog's mind.
- **Expose the dog to their triggers gradually.** Start with the mildest trigger. Suppose your dog is very scared of adult men, somewhat less scared by adult women, and mildly scared of little children. By exposing your dog to, for instance, young children for a short time each day, they will gradually begin to realize that the trigger is nothing to be afraid of. You could have your dog spend five minutes each day with young children.
 - After a week or so, you could increase the amount of time spent to ten minutes each day.
 - After another week, you could increase the time spent in the presence of children to fifteen minutes.
 - When your dog is comfortable with young children, move on to the next trigger level (adult women in the above example). Repeat the process until they have been desensitized to all negative triggers.
 - Exposing your dog deliberately to their triggers for a specific amount of time constitutes a training session.
- **Try not to expose your dog to their triggers outside of training.** If your dog is triggered by young children, for instance, do not bring your dog to the local playground unless you intend to have a training session there. If your dog is exposed to stimuli in an uncontrolled environment, or at rates that are greater than those you've been using during exposure training, your work could be jeopardized and your dog may revert to their old habits.
- **Choose how to modify your dog's behavior.** There are two ways to modify your dog's behavior: counter-conditioning or gradual desensitization. The two modes are virtually identical and usually used together. Used with care over a long period, either mode will reduce your dog's trigger responses gradually.
 - Gradual desensitization calls for the dog to be slowly exposed to their trigger over time, increasing the intensity or proximity of contact with the trigger until it no longer causes your dog's negative behavior.
 - Counter-conditioning calls for your dog to be slowly exposed to its trigger over time and respond in a different, more positive way than it naturally would when in the presence of the trigger. If your dog learns quickly and likes treats, counter-conditioning is probably the best choice.



Method Two: Desensitizing Your Dog Gradually Through Counter-Conditioning

- **Be patient with your dog.** Different dogs react to different stimuli in particular ways. Something like garbage trucks which cause one dog no stress at all might be a significant trigger for another dog. Do not increase the level of exposure to the trigger stimulus too quickly or your dog might become even more, not less, sensitive to the trigger and come to mistrust you.
- **Identify a reward your dog likes.** Counter-conditioning requires replacing a negative reaction like fear with a positive reaction by changing the association your dog has to a given stimulus. In order to counter-condition your dog, you'll need to know what they like. The most useful choice for a reward is a doggie treat. Alternatively, you could use small strips of chicken, beef, or liverwurst. Find a treat your dog likes and use it to counter-condition them.
- **Give your dog a reward when exposing them to their trigger.** For instance, if your dog is triggered by young children, sit with your dog while a young child is in view. When your dog is calm, either before they start panicking or after the panicking ends, give them a small, yummy snack. It's crucial to only give the dog a treat when they are calm; rewarding them while still fearful can train the dog to be scared.
- **Gradually expose your dog to more intense triggers.** For instance, in the case of a dog that fears bikers, after achieving counter-conditioning with your dog at 30 yards, you could move your dog closer at a range of 25 yards. After your dog is comfortable with a biker at this range, move your dog closer to the stimulus at 20 yards. Remember to feed your dog a steady stream of treats while the trigger is in view. Continue in this way until the trigger does not inspire a negative response.
- **Expose your dog to their trigger in ten-minute intervals.** These need not be continuous minutes. For instance, you could expose your dog to their trigger for three minutes, then rest for one minute, then repeat, and end with a short two-minute trigger exposure.
- **Combine rewards when your dog stays calm during trigger exposure.** For instance, you could both feed your dog a yummy snack and also pet them gently. Or, you could give them a snack while saying comforting things to them like, "Good dog," or "You're doing great," in a calm, reassuring tone.
 - When your dog can be exposed to their trigger without demonstrating negative behavior, you can stop giving them treats and celebrate having successfully counter-conditioned your dog.
 - Don't combine treats for good behavior with yelling or punishment when your dog reacts negatively to the trigger. Punishment or scolding will only slow the process of desensitization and counter-conditioning.
- **Maintain your dog's good behavior.** Conduct follow-up sessions at least twice a month so that your dog will not develop their fear again. Monitor your dog for signs of backsliding. Should your dog begin to show sensitivity to the trigger that you worked on before, do another round of desensitization training to prevent the recurrence of the negative response.



If your dog has serious trouble maintaining their good behavior, or if counter-conditioning seems ineffective, consult your vet about the possibility of using anxiety medications to calm them. Medication can be helpful in keeping a dog calm during desensitization and counter-conditioning training.