

## USING CLASSICAL COUNTERCONDITIONING TO CHANGE EMOTIONAL STATE

When a pet is showing an undesirable response to a stimulus, that response is usually associated with an underlying emotional state that is also undesirable. Anxiety, fear, and aggression are common motivational emotions for unwanted pet responses. To help the pet respond in a different way, it is useful to change the association with the stimulus and hence, the underlying emotional state. The goal is to change the meaning of the stimulus from one that predicts something unpleasant to one that predicts something desirable. Although some animals will respond to play, for most animals, the best way to do so is using food.

- A first step in changing a response to a stimulus is to attempt to grade the response across varying characteristics of the stimulus. In other words, how does the pet respond to the stimulus as that stimulus changes either in its proximity, speed of approach, location, or other characteristics such as sound or size.

- The next step is to find a reward that the animal finds especially enticing (an “A” treat), usually food and especially table food. It is important to have a gradient of reinforcers, from those that are extremely desirable to those that are less so. Extremely desirable rewards are saved for training and conditioning sessions.

- Finally, two simple tasks must be taught to the pet.

- The first is a task to get the pet’s attention. This can be as simple as teaching the pet to look at you using a phrase such as “watch me” or “focus.” The goal is for the animal to have eye contact for several minutes but remain neutral and relaxed. A leash and possibly a head collar should be used for additional control.

- The second is a following command that allows you to leave the situation. The dog should learn to associate a phrase such as “let’s go” with turning 180 degrees and briskly walking the other way. This should be performed quickly, but without anxiety or tension.

- Once the gradient of response to the stimuli and the gradient of rewards have been established and the pet can focus and then leave on command, it is time to begin the conditioning. Begin with the stimulus at the predetermined distance at which little or no response is noted. Have the “A” treat ready. Ask the pet to “focus” and begin feeding the treat regardless of what the pet does as long as they are not lunging or barking. They can look at the stimulus. As the stimulus gets closer to the predetermined spot where undesirable behavior is going to begin, quickly but calmly exit the situation using the “let’s go” command. Do several repetitions at the same distance.

### **Avoid the following pitfalls, which will make progress more difficult.**

- All situations known to elicit undesirable responses must be avoided. This may mean curtailing walks, confining the dog when visitors come over, not allowing the dog outside in the yard unattended and off leash, not allowing aggressive displays at windows, doors, and fences.

■ Do not attempt to remain longer than the dog can behave. If the dog becomes very reactive, the stimulus was too close or too intense, and future sessions must have better control of the stimulus intensity. You may need to be quite a distance away for the dog to be calm and controlled. Remember, the dog learns best when calm.

■ Limit the number of exposures within a training session. You want the dog to be successful and end each session on a positive response. The goal is for the dog to learn to associate the sight of the stimulus with something pleasant. This treatment can often help decrease the arousal level so that the dog can be controlled during the situation.