

Rescue Me Canine Training

Counter Conditioning

In this handout I discuss increasing the distance from the trigger to reduce reactivity. This would apply to triggers such as other dogs, bicycles, etc. For other triggers such as being brushed, moving further away does not reduce the trigger, it eliminates it. For triggers such as this rather than moving away, reduce the level of stimulus by introducing the trigger activity (brushing) at a very low level to minimize the stimulus.

Safety – Before you begin your counter conditioning training you must consider the safety of yourself, your dog and the other people and dogs around you. Counter conditioning involves low level exposure to a trigger in order to create a new conditioned response by the dog. The risk exists that the dog may become reactive to the trigger and could potentially attempt to bite the trigger or redirect onto the handler. For this reason you need to ensure that the dog and the trigger never come close enough to each other for the dog to make contact, and make every effort to ensure the dog always stays below his reactivity threshold. Consider the length of the leash you are using and the added distance your dog could pull you if they decided to lunge, add a healthy buffer zone of distance to that just to be safe. You must ensure that the dog is on a strong leash and collar and you are confident you can control the dog at all times. If you feel your dog is at any risk of biting I would recommend training the dog to wear a muzzle prior to commencing training. You can also counter condition with a secure chain link fence as an additional physical barricade between the dog and the trigger. Counter conditioning works best when the trigger stimulus is very low, so getting too close to the trigger can actually hinder results as well as increase the risk. Always use extreme caution and err on the side of safety.

Here is a great video on muzzle training. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BjPpXer8IE#t=540>

Many reactive dogs have become conditioned to respond in an undesirable manner to a specific stimulus or situation. For example, your dog may go crazy every time the doorbell rings; or you may have a dog that becomes reactive at the sight of another dog. Counter conditioning is the process of changing how they feel when exposed to that stimulus by introducing positive reinforcers every time the dog is exposed to the trigger. By changing how the dog feels about the trigger stimulus, you can change how the dog responds.

In order to begin counter conditioning your dog you need to find a reward that your dog absolutely loves. It can be a treat, a toy, games or play, or praise. Whatever your dog considers to be the best reward.

To start, expose the dog to the trigger stimulus at a low level or at a distance. As soon as the dog is aware of the stimulus, reward the dog. You do not need to ask the dog for a behavior, such as sit, because we don't want the dog to think they are being rewarded for sitting, they are being rewarded because of the presence of the trigger. Avoid the temptation to raise the level of the trigger stimulus too quickly, that will only push your dog over threshold and result in a reactive outburst. This technique works best with the lowest levels of stimulus that your dog considers to be a trigger.

Once your dog becomes comfortable around the trigger at a distance, gradually decrease the distance during exposure, ensuring that your dog still receives the rewards whenever the trigger stimulus is present. Carefully gauge your dogs reaction, as you do not want to get too close to the trigger and cause your dog to become reactive. If this happens you are too close. Increase your distance to the point where your dog is not longer reactive and then try again.

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Next, ensure that the rewards end when your dog is no longer in the presence of the trigger stimulus. For example, if you have a dog that loves tug-o-war, and is afraid of bicycles, you can play tug with him whenever a bike is nearby, but stop as soon as the bike is gone. This way your dog will realize that the bike and the game are connected.

Lastly, practise this exercise as much as possible. The success of counter conditioning depends on repetition. It needs to happen over and over again for your dog to make the association between the trigger stimulus and the reward. Even after the association is made it takes time for the change in belief and behavior.

Key Points

- Always stay a safe distance away from the trigger, ensure your dog cannot get close enough to make contact.
- Use the highest value rewards possible.
- The reward only happens when the trigger stimulus is present.
- The trigger stimulus is at a low enough level that the dog does not become reactive.
- Ensure you are not inadvertently giving a negative signal at the same time, such as a tight leash.
- Ensure the stimulus is close enough to the dog to cause some stress, but not so close that the dog shuts down or becomes reactive. Make sure you keep the stimulus at a distance that your dog can tolerate.
- If the dog becomes reactive simply move away to a distance where your dog doesn't feel the need to be reactive, or reduce the level of trigger stimulus. Once your dog is calm, try again, but at a lower level or increased distance. You were too close to the trigger on the previous attempt.
- Do not use corrections if your dog becomes reactive. You will only undermine the process. Move away from the trigger.
- Do not ask your dog for a behavior before rewarding them such as sit or look at me.
- Practise, practise, practise. Repetition is the key.
- Always end every exposure on a positive note whenever possible.
- Consider how your dog feels during the exposure sessions, and after the session are over. Your goal is to make it a positive experience for your dog. If your dog finishes each session overwhelmed or stressed you are progressing too quickly. Reduce the level of trigger stimulus and ensure you are using the highest rewards possible. The positive reward needs to be more influential than the negative trigger stimulus.