

# Reactive Dog Desensitization and Counter-Conditioning



When a 'scary' or 'exciting' thing (a "stimulus" or "trigger") occurs, first of all make sure that your dog is "safe". This means that he should be safe from his fear/reaction, i.e. far enough away - or in another room, if indoors - that he is not reacting (such as for example by trying to hide, pull away or run away, barking, growling, lunging etc.), or that the stimulus is at a low enough level that he does not react. Feed him yummy treats whenever your dog is aware of the scary thing. If he will not take treats, he is still 'over threshold' and needs to be further removed from the trigger. Be his safe haven in a storm. Keep giving him food (counter-conditioning) until the scary thing goes away. Then stop. Scary thing => good stuff happens. No scary thing => boring.

If executed correctly, this simple (although not always easy) counter-conditioning protocol serves to change your dog's emotional response to the presence of the scary or exciting stimulus.

## Counter-conditioning to Dogs

When your dog sees another dog, feed him delectable treats. Let every dog he sees make treats happen. If your dog is barking, run away and then do a 'food spill' (see below). If the strange dog is so close that your dog won't take the food, this tells you that your dog is panicking (even if he is not acting out), so you need to get away as quickly as you possibly can. The same goes for when the strange dog is getting closer to you - just get out of there! Then, have a treat party!

You need to protect your dog from fearful events.

## Counter-conditioning to "Scary" People on Walks

When a 'scary' stranger turns up, first of all make sure that your dog is "safe", i.e. far enough away that he is not reacting. Feed him yummy treats as soon as your dog is aware of the scary person. Keep feeding him yummy treats until the scary person goes away. Then stop. Scary person => treats. No scary person => no treats.

**NOTE: NEVER use a child for counter-conditioning exercises unless there is a safe barrier in between the child and the dog.**

Even if your dog warms up to the stranger and wants to go up and sniff, the person should still ignore him, because of the risk of a scare and subsequent bite. NO petting!

## Barking or scared dog? COUNTERCONDITIONING & DESENSITIZATION = Pairing Monsters with Very Good Things



1. Monsters ALWAYS cause Very Good Things
2. ONLY Monsters cause Very Good Things
3. Monsters must keep their DISTANCE, then, over many repetitions GRADUALLY get closer so that the dog is comfortable all the way through.

**It is important to have the LOVE of the Very Good Things be stronger than the FEAR of the Monsters.**

After many repetitions of...



You get...



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## Counter-conditioning to Visiting Strangers

When you expect visitors, put your dog in a different room, away from the front door, with a stuffed, yummy Kong or similar delectable entertainment. When everything has settled down, let the dog out, and counter-condition your dog (give treats) for being in the presence of the visitors. If your dog is barking, this means he is having trouble coping with the visitors' presence, so put him away again with the yummy entertainment.

Ask your visitors to not pay any attention to your dog. Ask them to sit quietly and to ignore him. You can have a couple of training sessions where you play the "Look At That"-game (see below). This serves to change his emotional response to the presence of visitors. Only click & treat him when he looks at the visitor. Mark each look with the clicker or with a verbal marker (mouth click, "Yes!", "Good Boy!", etc.) before you give him the treat.

Make sure that the visitor ignores your dog, absolutely does not reach for him or stare at him. Your dog must be allowed to decide for himself if and when he wants to visit with the person. NO petting!

**NOTE: NEVER use a child for counter-conditioning exercises unless there is a safe barrier in between the child and the dog.**

Even when your dog warms up to the stranger and wants to go up and sniff, the person should still ignore him, because of the risk of a scare and subsequent bite, which will then undo the training you have just done. NO petting!

## Food Spills

Because we cannot always prevent scary incidents from surprising us and our dogs, we must have a back-up tactic ready, which can also serve our purpose to change our dog's perception from "that's scary!" to something positive that predicts food.

One of our most effective emergency protocols is the Food Spill. Take a handful of treats and scatter them around your dog, once you have removed him from the scary thing (e.g. a dog barking behind a fence you are walking past).

This action may:

- a. Interrupt the barking and distract the dog from what is happening;
- b. Change the dogs' mental association with strangers approaching the home from one of fear/arousal to one of positive association and anticipation of food;
- c. You also give the dog something to do – foraging for food – rather than worrying about the scary incident.

**NOTE:**  
**IN CLASSICAL CONDITIONING,**  
**THE FOOD IS CONTINGENT UPON THE APPEARANCE OF THE TRIGGER,**  
**NOT THE DOG'S BEHAVIOUR.**  
**Because the dog is in reactive mode (not in learning mode), the food will NOT reward the**  
**barking/reactive behaviour.**  
**When done correctly, it will instead change the dog's emotional response.**

## The "Look At That!" - Game

Once your dog is happily looking to you for treats whenever a "trigger" appears, he is now ready to learn what we want him to do in the presence of triggers. We start with the very easiest behaviour: Looking at the trigger.

Carefully expose your dog to the trigger from a great enough distance that he is **aware, but not afraid**. Click & Treat for looking at the trigger. As the look becomes predictable, you can label it: "Look at that!", you can say as he looks at the strange dog/person/other trigger, and then Click & Treat. He will soon start to associate what used to be a scary thing with good things, and you now have a tool to tell him when a trigger is in the area, and he can start relaxing on walks!

