



Desensitization and counter conditioning to strangers

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- 1) The goal of this exercise is to teach your dog a new way to remain calm in situations, places or with people/dogs that make him nervous or anxious.
- 2) The first step is to **identify your dog's favorite treat**. This treat must be very motivating for your dog (ex: cheese, dried liver, chicken etc.). This treat will be used to teach your dog to be less reactive around strangers.
- 3) It is important to determine what your goal will be from the start. Some dogs do not enjoy the company of strangers either because they have had a bad experience with them or because they were not well socialised as puppies. You must accept this. However you can teach your dog to be calm when he sees strangers and even to get used to being around certain people.
- 4) Start by practicing basic commands at home with your dog. Practice sit, lie down and stay. You can also teach him to look at you in the eyes by using the word "LOOK". To teach this command hold a treat near your eyes and as soon as the dog looks you in the eyes say "good dog" and give him the treat. Repeat this a few times. After try placing the treat further and further from your eyes but keep rewarding him when he looks you in the eyes.
- 5) The use of a head harness like a *Halti* or a *Gentle Leader* can help with the process.
- 6) Another technique that can help you is to teach your dog to sit before every interaction with you. The dog has to sit before being petted, getting food, playing, going outside etc. In the beginning you can give him a treat each time he sits.
- 7) Certain dogs react to strangers only when they are outside whereas others react only to strangers inside the house. Many dogs react to strangers both outside and inside.
- 8) What to do with dogs that react to strangers outside?
 - a. When you are out walking with your dog never force him to interact with people. For example, if you know your dog is uncomfortable with strangers and someone asks you if they can pet him, kindly tell the person that unfortunately your dog is afraid of people therefore they cannot pet him. Respect your dog. Try and get his attention and then reward him for good behaviour. We want him to learn that interactions with people are fun.
 - b. If your dog is afraid of strangers while he is out walking with you, try to determine the distance at which your dog reacts to other people. Is it when the person is visible 10 feet away or 1 km away? Start the desensitization program at a distance right before the dog reacts. For example if the dog reacts when someone passes right by him then start the desensitization when the person is on the other side of the street.



9) How to do the desensitization :

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- ✓ Let your dog see the person but then call his name right away or ask him to “LOOK” and offer him a treat if he listens. Afterwards start giving him commands that he knows such as sit or lie down and reward him with treats. He might have difficulty concentrating, this can be normal. You can try and run backwards a little bit and call your dog towards you to get his attention. If he follows you, offer him treats.
 - ✓ If your dog pays no attention to you and reacts to the presence of the other person by barking or jumping your too close to the other person. You must start the desensitization at a distance before your dog reacts. This distance is different for every dog.
 - ✓ Repeat this exercise a few times over a few days. It is easier to do the desensitization if you can get someone you know to play the part of the stranger.
 - ✓ Once your dog listens to you well and doesn't react to the stranger at that distance anymore, you can get closer and repeat the exercises a few times.
- a. If the dog is nervous or non-cooperative during the desensitization (ex : tries to get away, pants, licks his lips, cries or doesn't listen to you), go back one step and practice that step a few more times before proceeding. Avoid long practice sessions because the dog can become distracted, agitated or nervous. Sessions should always end on a positive note.
 - b. Continue getting closer and closer to the stranger until you are about 6 feet away. Ideally at this distance your dog should focus his attention on you and remain calm even in the presence of a stranger.
 - c. For most dogs, the desensitization can be completed within a few weeks. Sometimes it can even take less time (a few days).
 - d. Treats are very important during the desensitization because they teach the dog to associate the presence of people, with positive things. Therefore instead of becoming fearful and/or aggressive when he sees them he will think that the presence of a stranger means he's getting a treat.

10) What to do with dogs that react to strangers in the house?

- a. When people arrive, ask them to ignore the dog completely. They must not look at the dog or talk to him. Once the dog is calm, the guests can throw him some of his favorite treats without looking at him. If the dog eats the treats quickly, they can call the dog towards them and offer him some treats from their hand.



- b. At the beginning it is best to start the exercises with only one guest at a time. Once the dog is comfortable with one person you can progressively increase the number of guests that are present at a time.
- c. If the dog is really too nervous when there are people in the house, it is recommended to place him in another room while you have company over. He can be left alone in the room with a Kong stuffed with treats or a pressed rawhide bone.
- d. It's a good idea to always leave your dog an area/room where he can escape to if he is nervous/ uncomfortable in certain situations. The dog should always have access to this area/room. If he does decide to go hide in his room/ area, it is important not to follow him. He is trying to let us know that he is uncomfortable.
- e. Never go towards a dog that is trying to run away or hide. If the dog is cornered he could become aggressive. It is therefore important to never force an interaction if the dog is trying to get away from the situation.
- f. It is important to remember that when a dog growls he is trying to tell us that he uncomfortable. You must never punish him for growling because then you would essentially be punishing him for warning you that he might bite. Instead take a step back and try to figure out why he is growling. If the dog is punished for growling, next time he is uncomfortable he might just bite without giving a warning.

🎥 We recommend that you view this video. Watch how Dr. Yin captures the dog's attention during the desensitization.

http://drsophiayin.com/resources/video_full/podees_aggressive_to_other_dogs

