

Treating a noise fear using desensitization and counter-conditioning

Emily D. Levine



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Recordings of a fear-inducing noise can be used as part of a desensitization and counter-conditioning (DSCC) programme. It is suggested that such training should begin at least 2 months prior to the noise season and that short training sessions should take place up to eight times a week.

1 Create a location that the dog will associate with calm relaxing events

- Create a 'safe haven'. This can simply be a towel, blanket or dog bed that the dog only associates with positive calming activities, such as massage or calm obedience exercises.
- This 'safe haven' should be created well before actually starting to use it as part of the DSCC programme.
- If desired, the area may be sprayed with dog appeasing pheromone.

2 Expose the dog to the sound to which it is sensitive at a very low level

- Use a CD player, with the speakers elevated and spread apart, to mimic a more natural event.
- Play the sound at the lowest volume level that elicits:
 - No sustained response (may not be possible)
 - A very transient orienting response (the dog turns toward the source of the noise)
 - A transient anxiety response that lasts only 10–30 seconds.
- Ideally, the dog will be in its 'safe haven' when the noise starts, to help to keep his/her anxiety or fear levels low.

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3 Try to change the dog's perception by associating the low-level noise with something positive

- As the noise recording is playing, start to give the dog high-value treats. If it is a rain or wind sound, give treats consistently. If it is fireworks or thunder, it may be desirable to wait to give a treat until after the loud bang.
- Other methods of counter-conditioning include the use of games as a reward, such as playing ball or tug-of-war if the dog is motivated by this.
- If the dog likes to work, he/she can be asked to perform 'sit', 'down', etc. during the noise recordings.

4 Strengthen the resilience and response of the dog

- Once the dog no longer shows any signs of anxiety or fear at a low level of noise, is willing to engage in another activity (food, games, commands) and has body postures that indicate he/she is not anxious or fearful, increase the volume on the recording.
- Allow the dog 10–30 seconds to habituate to that increase in noise before making efforts to engage the dog by giving treats, doing calm sit/down/stay exercises, etc.
- Once the dog does well, an attempt to escalate to playing a game can be made.
- As the training proceeds, the volume of the recording should be increased, based on the individual's behavioural progress, until loud sounds can be played without causing a fear response.

5 Make the event more realistic

- Once the dog is used to loud sounds, other stimuli associated with that noise event can be associated with it at low levels.
- For example, to mimic a storm, spray water on a window to sound like rain hitting the glass.