

Desensitization and Counterconditioning (DS/CC)

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These guidelines can be used to work on anything an animal is reactive to. Desensitization refers to exposing the animal to the scary stimulus gradually in ways that do not cause her to display the unwanted behavior. Counterconditioning means providing something (e.g., treats) to help the animal associate the scary stimulus with a positive experience, and/or asking for an alternative behavior (sit, target, etc.) that is incompatible with the undesired behavior (such as hissing or running away). Combining both techniques can speed up the process. Still, DS/CC can take weeks or months to get the desired effect, depending on the situation. But it can be very effective.

KEY POINTS

1. Training sessions should be relatively short, about 2-5 minutes. The length will depend on the cat's reaction. Try to train 1-2 times per day, at least 3 times a week.
2. Remember, we want to set the cat up for success; the goal is to have the cat calm and taking treats willingly with no fearful or reactive behavior.
3. Use small, high-value treats. Consider small pieces of tuna, cheese, or meat baby food (one lick=one treat), for instance.
4. Watch for signs of stress, which may include ears back, crouching, dilated pupils, trying to run away, tail twitching and not taking treats. If this happens, go back a step in the process to where the cat was calm, and end on a good note.
5. Before starting a DS/CC session, do a minute or so of fun exercises where the cat is rewarded with treats. This will get her started in a good frame of mind and reinforce her focus on you.
6. It is very tempting to move along in this process too fast; better to go too slowly than to cause a reaction from the cat and have to back up in the process.
7. Try to end each session on a good note; it's easy to want to keep going when things are going so well, but if they're going that well then it's probably a good time to stop and come back later for another session.
8. Start each session a few steps behind where you left off the last time, so you're warming up with steps you've already been successful with.
9. These techniques use classical conditioning—think Pavlov and his dogs that salivated at the sound of a bell that predicted food was coming; initially the bell meant nothing to them, then it resulted in the salivating, which was a reflex that the dog couldn't control and indicated anticipation of a food reward. Similarly, we want your pet to “reflexively” associate the initially scary stimulus with anticipation of something good happening.

EXAMPLE DS/CC SESSION

(for a cat afraid of the vacuum cleaner)

The following steps will likely take place over several weeks, depending on the level of fear your cat has toward the vacuum cleaner.

1. Start in a quiet environment, with the vacuum cleaner unplugged and stationary at a distance far enough away so that the cat sees it but doesn't react to it.
2. If your cat knows any tricks, ask her to do one and reward her immediately. If not, simply give her a food treat. Give her a few treats in a row, one at a time, at that distance.
3. Move 6-12 inches closer to the vacuum cleaner and repeat giving the treats.
4. Very gradually move closer to the vacuum cleaner and give treats as long as the cat is staying calm and focused.
5. End on a good note and pick it up again the next day from a step or two farther away than where you left off.
6. Repeat simply giving treats near the stationary, quiet vacuum cleaner over several days, until she is able to eat treats off the vacuum cleaner itself.
7. Then, start again at a far distance but this time have a helper very slowly move the vacuum cleaner as if vacuuming (or possibly just move it a couple inches, depending on your cat's reaction; remember we're trying to avoid any fearful reactions.)
8. Repeat steps 2-5, moving slowly closer to the vacuum. However, the closer you get, the less the vacuum should be moved initially. So at each step closer, minimize the movement of the vacuum cleaner and then build it up again at that distance before moving closer.
9. Remember, always gauge your cat's reaction—with some kitties you can move through these steps much more quickly; with others you may have to move much more slowly.
10. Work up to having your cat eating treats tossed all around the moving (but quiet) vacuum cleaner.
11. Next, work on the noise of the vacuum cleaner, which can be the scariest part for most cats. Start at a very far distance with extra-special treats. You may even need to have the vacuum on but out of sight at first. During this time, the vacuum cleaner should not be moving.
12. Very gradually, following similar steps above, work up to where your cat can eat treats near the noisy vacuum cleaner (but possibly not quite as close as before).
13. Another option if the noise really freaks out your kitty, is to have her in a whole different area of the house with the door closed, and have a helper turn on and off the vacuum cleaner, a few seconds at a time. With you sitting by your cat, every time the

vacuum cleaner turns on, feed treats. The moment it turns off, take the treats away. So noise=treats; no noise=no treats. Over several days, move your cat closer to the room where the vacuum cleaner is.

- 14.** Once your cat is comfortable with this, then start again at a far distance, have the vacuum cleaner on AND have someone moving it (only slightly at first).
- 15.** Work your way back up—VERY gradually—to where your cat can eat treats near (but not super close to) the moving, noisy vacuum cleaner.
- 16.** Pat yourself on the back—you've made a very scary monster into a fun treat dispenser for your kitty!