

Systematic Desensitization – Preventing and Treating Veterinary Clinic Fears

What is systematic desensitization?

Systematic desensitization is a training method used to reduce an animal's undesirable behaviour in response to a given object or situation. It is the most effective means of treating fears and phobias and is often combined with Counter-conditioning (this is described in a separate fact sheet).

How does systematic desensitization work?

The situation that evokes the undesirable response, fear or phobia is usually capable of being broken down into separate components, which often stimulate separate senses. For example, consider a pet that is terrified at the veterinarians.

What stimulates this fear?

It may be the sight of the veterinarian in a white coat, the smell of disinfectant used at the practice, the fact that it is in proximity with other animals in an anxious or excited state, or that has had an injection. The object of systematic desensitization is to identify the separate elements of the problem, which can then be presented to the animal separately so that it can be gradually trained to relax in their presence.



How is this organised?

In the example given, if the veterinarian wears a white coat, it is useful to start by exposing your pet to people in white coats in the home. The stimulus has to be presented to the animal at a level high enough to arouse interest without causing the problem behaviour, in this case fear. Members of the family can wear a white coat and handle the animal, play with it, etc. and then try placing it on a table or worktop. Rewards can be used as soon as the animal starts to relax.

Next it may be possible to repeat the situation away from the home. Local training classes are often prepared to help in situations such as these. The process has to be repeated many times until the pet reliably shows no more than a cursory interest in the stimulus and shows no signs of anxiety. Another

component is then introduced, for example the particular disinfectant associated with the clinic.

The pet is systematically trained to each individual cue before some of them are combined together. For example, it may be possible to arrange with your veterinarian to not wear a coat during examination.

Acceptance can be improved if it is possible to distract the pet. Here food rewards are useful. The mere sight of the treat is usually sufficient distraction and provided there is no inappropriate response to it, together with lavish praise, should then be given.

The next component is then introduced, for example the presence of a number of other animals, and so on. It is important that the response is positive and can be reliably repeated before we move up a stage. It is also important to occasionally present lower level cues to which we know the animal will respond reliably, in other words give the pet a refresher.

If the fear response is elicited by the sight of a syringe, using a `toy` syringe in a similar sequence with copious food distractions often works well, but rapid progress should not be expected. These treatment techniques work provided sufficient repetition is provided and you are prepared to spend a lot of time with your pet.



For other pets, “happy visits” to the veterinary clinic which are associated with food rewards, fun, games and nothing else can help ease the anxiety associated with a veterinary visit.

DO NOT TIRE YOUR PET

Training sessions should never go on too long otherwise the pet’s attention level will drop and no progress will be made.

REPEATED SHORT TRAINING SESSIONS ARE BEST

When starting a new training session, always start several levels lower than the point at which the previous session finished.

REVIEW IS NECESSARY

Once the goal has been achieved it is important there is regularly reinforcement of the learning. This is done by regular exposure to what were the original problem elements. Injection fears in particular need attention in this respect.

OTHER TIPS

If you have a dog that has a problem that is limited to the home, then the use of pheromones, which are naturally produced chemicals may help. Dog Appeasing Pheromone® is an artificially synthesised version of the dog

pheromone that has a reassuring affect and is available from vets as a plug in diffuser. One device will last about 4 weeks and can help speed up a desensitization programme.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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