DESENSITIZATION AND COUNTERCONDITIONING: THE DETAILS

1. The goal is to help your pet learn new tasks to help them deal with situations, people, or places that make them fearful, anxious, or exhibit undesirable behavior.
2. The first step is helping your pet to learn to relax and be calm on a verbal command. Animals cannot learn if they are emotionally aroused.
   a. See handout on Tranquility Training Exercises.
   b. This can be accomplished not only with training but with training aids such as a head collar.
3. The adult who has the most control over the pet should do these sessions.
   a. For additional safety, a leash and/or a head collar or harness is advised.
   b. For cats, a harness and leash or a crate may be necessary for control.
4. Be aware of the stimulus gradient before you start.
   a. How does the response vary across the components of the stimulus? These may be distance, size, speed of approach, personal characteristics (hats, bicycles, age).
   b. Then arrange the stimuli from the least likely to cause a problematic response to the one most likely to elicit the problem behavior.
5. Establish a reward gradient. Find rewards that are extremely valuable, some of lesser value, and finally lowest value treats. Usually high value treats will be consumable people food. These should be reserved for treatment sessions and withheld at all other times.
6. Engage in daily training sessions lasting approximately 10 minutes.
   a. Expose the pet to the stimulus at a level below that which evokes the anxious/fearful/undesirable reaction.
   b. When exposed to this low level stimulus, the animal should be rewarded for calm, relaxed, obedient behavior. Rewards may include play, praise, tasty food treats, etc.
   c. With success, gradually increase the intensity of the stimulus until it is at full strength without evoking a fearful/undesirable response.
   d. If the animal responds with anxiety, fear, aggression, or any undesirable behavior, the stimulus intensity was too strong. Do not reward or scold the pet but back away until the pet is calm.
   e. Try to end each session with a successful exposure.
7. Avoid the following pitfalls, which will make progress more difficult:
   a. All situations known to elicit undesirable responses must be avoided unless they are part of the controlled training exercise. This may mean curtailing walks, confining the pet when visitors come over, not allowing the pet outside in the yard unattended and off leash, not allowing aggressive displays at windows, doors, and fences.
   b. Avoid long training sessions where the pet becomes distracted/agitated or upset.

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c. If the pet becomes very reactive, the stimulus was too close or too intense, and future sessions must have better control of the stimulus intensity. You may need to be quite a distance away for the pet to be calm and controlled. Remember, the pet learns best when calm.

d. Progress slowly and be conservative in expectations. You want the pet to be successful and end each session on a positive response.