



Desensitisation - Handling

Before starting a desensitisation and counter-conditioning programme

There are several steps which need to be completed before starting a desensitisation and counter-conditioning programme;

- Training of necessary cues
- Management and safety tools
- Looking at the components of the trigger
- Setting expectations
- Understanding what displacement and conflict behaviours are
- Eliminating exposure between the dogs in the house



What is Handling?

Handling involves any interaction with your pet where you have to move or touch a part of their body, i.e. brushing, putting on a harness, attaching a leash to a collar or harness, wiping their feet, cleaning ears.

For this Handout we will address brushing, however, the same steps will be followed for any other form of handling.

Components of this trigger, handling - brushing, would include;

- Seeing the brush
- Brush moving toward the pet
- Brush touching the pet
- Brush moving through their coat





Desensitisation - Handling

Preparing for desensitisation and counter - conditioning session

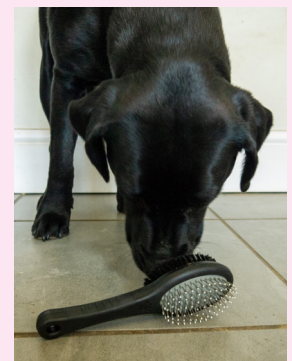
Once the steps have been completed, you can start the programme. When preparing there are a few elements which need to be done to set the session up.

- Each session should be 10-15 minutes long; the session should stop after 15 minutes, regardless of progress. It is possible to do two sessions; however, there should be a 10-15 minute break between sessions where the pet is removed from the training environment and allowed to rest away from any other dogs. The sessions should be carried out 2-3 times a week with at least one day between to allow arousal levels to reduce.
- Find a suitable calm environment where your pet can move away if they want to
- Before each session, ensure your pet has had some physical exercise and the opportunity to alleviate.
- Ensure your pet has not been fed prior to the session to increase their motivation to work for food. Prepare enough treats to last for the whole session and have them to hand in a treat pouch or pocket. Feeding toys such as lick mats with wet food, pâté or fish paste on are very usefully for this exercise.
- If working with a dog, they should be muzzle trained before you start this exercise. This is for safety reasons, not to encourage you to push your dog further with the training then they are comfortable with.

How to carry out desensitisation and counter - conditioning to being brushed

Stage 1: Seeing the brush

1. Choose a cue word to use, e.g. "Brush" which will indicate that the brush is going to be used.
2. Have some small tasty treats to hand which the pet will work for.
3. Sit with the pet and say "Brush", show them the brush and give them a treat. Do not attempt to move the brush towards them.
4. Repeat this 15-20 times within a few minutes. During this time do not expect any specific behaviour, e.g. "Sit" or "Down", just show them it, say "Brush" and give a treat.
5. After 15 - 20 repetitions the pet should start forming an association between seeing the brush and getting a treat.
6. Say "Brush", then place the brush on the floor with some treats near it. Over time move the treats closer to the brush and eventually on the brush so that the pet gets used to touching the brush. Once the pet is comfortable approaching and touching the brush, progress onto the next step.
7. Test the pet; hold the brush and say the "Brush" cue, the pet should approach and look at you for a treat. If they do not do this, go back and work through the steps until they respond to "Brush".





Desensitisation - Handling

How to carry out desensitisation and counter - conditioning to being brushed

Stage 2: Brush moving toward the pet

If you are working with a dog, they should be wearing a muzzle for this stage.

1. Gauge where to start the training exercise by seeing when your pet shows minimal displacement behaviours when they see the brush move towards them. This is done by giving the "Brush" cue, rewarding your pet then slowly moving the brush towards. Watch your pet for the first signs of displacement or conflict behaviours. If you see displacement behaviours, ask for a "Watch" or "Touch" cue;
 - a) If the pet responds to the cues reward them and stay at this distance;
 - b) If the pet cannot perform these behaviours, you will need to move the brush away and repeat the cues; you will either maintain the new distance or move further away depending on the pet's response.
2. Once you know the distance the brush can be from your pet before they show increased arousal levels, watch the pet to see if they look towards the brush.
 - a) If they look at the brush without showing displacement or conflict, behaviours use the marker cue to reinforce this calmer behaviour.
 - b) If you notice displacement behaviours, ask for a "Touch" or "Watch" to redirect the pet to you.
3. Once the pet is able to look at the brush without showing displacement behaviours, move the brush closer towards your pet. NB - you may only be able to move the brush 0.5cm closer to you pet each time. Do not rush this process
4. Repeat the steps until you can lightly touch your pet with the brush and not see any displacement behaviours.
5. Once the pet is able to do this, you can work on moving the brush while it is in contact with you pet.

The progress made in each session will depend on the behaviour for the pet, do not progress to the next stage of brushing until the pet is not showing any displacement or conflict behaviours.

NB - if your pet chooses to move away at any point during the training, allow them to; do not follow them with the brush or force them to stay near you. Use a Touch cue to encourage your pet back to you and restart the training. If they move away again, stop the training session.

