

Desensitization and counterconditioning for cats that are afraid of people or other cats

The plan involves repeatedly exposing the pet in a controlled manner to the type of person or animal that causes fear, with the exposure minimized so that the cat will take a favored reward each time it sees the stimulus until a positive association is made.

Desensitization is used in combination with counterconditioning to change the pet's attitude or "feeling" about the stimulus from one that is negative to one that is positive. Desensitization involves exposure to people, animals, or situations that might cause fear but at levels that are minimal enough that your cat will adapt. Counterconditioning is used to change the cat's response to the person or animal by associating the cat's favored rewards with each exposure. The cat is then gradually introduced to gradually more intense stimuli (e.g., closer) paired each time with the presentation of the favored reward.

Response substitution is where the cat is trained to display an acceptable behavior (toy chase, come, fetch) for favored rewards each time it is exposed to the stimulus. This training can only be used if the cat can be successfully reward-trained to respond eagerly to one or more commands. As with counterconditioning, the training should begin with a stimulus of low enough intensity to ensure the cat responds to the command and reward.

Favored rewards (treats, play) must be saved for reward training and exposure training so that the pet can make the positive association between the stimulus and the reward. Avoid all fear-evoking situations until you are ready for exposure training as each fearful event may increase the cat's fear. If you become agitated, raise your voice, or punish the pet, you will only serve to heighten your cat's fear or anxiety.

Finally, be certain to train only with calm, controlled stimuli. The goal is to make each association with the stimulus positive and nonfearful. If you begin to expose your cat and it becomes fearful, remove the cat from the situation and begin subsequent training at a less threatening level.

Fear of people and pets – desensitization and counterconditioning – common first steps

1. Begin with safe and effective control of both your cat as well as the stimulus that causes fear. Initially the cat and the stimulus (other cat, people) can be separated by confinement behind a common solid door (until the cat adapts to the odor and sounds of the stimulus) or across a glass or screen door, which would allow for safe visual exposure. A positive association can be achieved (countercondition) by giving the pet favored rewards with each exposure.
2. The next step is gradually to increase the intensity of exposure while ensuring the cat continues to take rewards. If barriers have been used, the goal is gradually to get the cat into the same room with the stimulus (person, pet) at sufficient distance that the cat will take the food or treat.
3. If the cat exhibits fear at any step in the desensitization program, go back to the step that was successful and repeat until the pet will readily take rewards before progressing again. Always end on a positive note. It is critical that the owner and the stimulus at all times remain calm and show no fear and that the owner uses no punishment as these will increase fear and anxiety.

Fear of people and other animals

1. Identify the fear-eliciting triggers. For some cats, fear may be generalized so that all strangers or other animals cause fear. Other cats may be afraid of specific people or pets. Until prepared to move forward with conditioning exercises, avoid all fear-evoking stimuli.
2. Setting up safe exposure: because a fearful cat can quickly become aggressive, precautions must be taken before beginning treatment. Some method of safe exposure will need to be devised. Initial exposure to stimuli should be sufficiently mild and gradual that no fear is exhibited. A good starting point is to have the cat adapt to the sounds and smell of a visitor by giving the cat rewards while housed in an adjacent room. Videos or audio tapes might be useful for introducing the sound of a stimulus at low intensity. If the cat becomes anxious and cannot be called away with a command and reward, a large blanket or towel can be wrapped around the cat to move it into another room until it calms.
3. Each stimulus will need to be presented along a gradient beginning with exposures to the stimulus that do not cause fear, and moving slowly to higher intensities with each positive outcome. To develop a gradient you will need to determine how to control the stimuli that cause fear (situations, people, places, or animals) so that they can be gradually intensified for counterconditioning. If the cat is fearful of a particular person or type of person (e.g., child), the training can begin with milder stimuli, such as a calm adult or teen. The stimulus intensity is then gradually increased. The person may move slightly closer during training sessions, but should not move closer until the cat takes the reward and is calm. Next, the goal will be for the person to give or offer the reward to the cat, or to throw it near the cat so that it approaches to take the reward. Each step should end on a positive note, with the cat receiving a reward before proceeding to the next level. Withhold rewards except when the stimulus is present.

4. Control can be provided with a leash and harness, keeping the cat in a crate or carrier, or by closing doors to block escape (provided the cat does not become aggressive or more fearful). The cat should be positively conditioned to accept any new control device prior to exposure.
5. Food or treats that have the highest appeal should be identified and saved exclusively for desensitization, counterconditioning, and reward training. Favored toys, catnip, and even short periods of affection may also be effective for counterconditioning if these are important to the cat and reserved for the exposure sessions.
6. Training the cat to respond to verbal cues such as "sit," "come," or "go to a place" before every reward is given may provide a useful, predictable pattern of interaction. Cats may also be taught tricks.
7. If the cat is too reactive or anxious to learn new behaviors then medication or pheromones may reduce anxiety and promote positive learning.

Treatment – fear of other cats: desensitization and counterconditioning

1. Introduction of a new cat into the household or reintroducing a cat in the home to one that it fears must be done slowly and cautiously so that each association has a positive outcome.
2. Once the cats have been adapted to each other across a common doorway, there must be a safe means of control so that the cats can be put in a common area. It may be helpful initially to place a towel with the cat's scent in the other cat's confinement area for a week before beginning visual exposure. Another approach is to allow one cat out into the common area while the other remains housed in its own room and to alternate for a few days so that they are each familiar with the common area. Also add as much space for perching, climbing, and hiding as is practical, and maintain separate litter stations to reduce conflict. It may also be helpful to offer a collar-activated cat door so that each cat can learn to go back into its own room without the other cat following.
3. When placing the cats together maintain sufficient distance that they show no fear and will take treats, catnip, or play toys when together. A body harness on one or both cats or crates for one or both cats may be useful when first introducing them to a common area together.
4. At this point, if both cats have been in crates, the more fearful cat may be allowed out, and the food, treats, toys, or catnip should be given progressively closer to the other cat's crate. When both cats can be placed out of the crates in the same room together while eating at a sufficient distance to avoid fear, a leash and harness on one or both cats may be necessary for safe control. If one or both cats do not eat, move the food bowls farther apart. If things go well, the dishes can be moved slightly closer together during subsequent conditioning sessions.
5. Progress slowly! Allowing either cat to become fearful or aggressive sets the program back. The cats must remain separated except during counterconditioning sessions.
6. When the cats appear ready for some freedom to roam the home, it might help to place a bell on the assertive cat to help the family supervise and so the other cat knows when it is near.
7. Drugs and pheromones (e.g., Feliway) may be useful during a behavior modification program to reduce apprehension and allow the cat to learn pleasant associations.