

Cat Behavior Modification and Counter-Conditioning



Your cat can be easily stressed or frightened by all sorts of things that happen in or around your home. The behavior modification techniques of desensitization and counter-conditioning can help your feline to be happier and more well-adjusted. These terms may sound technical, but the techniques themselves are user-friendly.

What are desensitization and counter-conditioning?

Systematic desensitization and counter-conditioning (DS/CC) are the main techniques that behavior professionals use to change a cat's response to specific triggers (stimuli) in a variety of situations. These triggers can include strangers, other cats, dogs, sounds and petting. If done properly, these techniques can have a desirable effect on your cat's behavior. The goal is to replace an unwanted emotional reaction (fear, anxiety or aggressive arousal) to a trigger with a more relaxed, comfortable reaction. More desirable, acceptable behaviors will follow the cat's calmer emotional state.

Systematic desensitization is the process of gradually reintroducing your cat to a stimulus in order to lessen the undesirable association with the stimulus. Counter-conditioning is the process of pairing a scary stimulus with something great so that the stimulus in turn becomes great through association. When these two techniques are combined successfully, the unwanted behavior usually goes away because the cat is now having a positive rather than a negative experience in response to the stimulus.

How do I use this feline behavior modification process?

You want to set your cat up to succeed, so the DS/CC process should be carried out in such small steps that the undesirable emotional reaction never happens. If you attempt DS/CC when your cat is already anxious or aroused, she will be too emotional to learn effectively. To avoid this, you need to keep her below threshold. Threshold is the point at which she becomes uncomfortable. Many things can affect her reaching threshold, including distance from the stimulus, intensity of the stimulus and the number of stimuli in a short period of time.

Be sure to always watch the body language of your cat. Through her body language, she will tell you when she is feeling comfortable, when she is approaching threshold, and when she is feeling uncomfortable or above threshold. If your cat goes above threshold, not only will the technique be ineffective, but it could also cause her to regress.

What cat body language tells me she's approaching or above threshold?

Early signs of anxiety or arousal include dilated pupils, tense body posture, sniffing the ground, scratching at a body part, vocalizing, shifting eyes and flattened ears. The less subtle signs include not accepting the reward or taking the treat in an altered manner (e.g., snapping it out of your hand or taking the treat and then dropping it), staring at the stimulus, hair standing up, a "bottlebrush" tail, and backing away. Signs of aggression include growling, hissing, swatting, scratching, lunging and biting.

If your cat displays any of the early signs of anxiety, aggression or discomfort during a DS/CC session, she is too close to threshold. You should move her away from the stimulus if it's safe or block her view of the stimulus with a piece of cardboard or something similar.

What can I do to prepare to use this cat training technique?

Initially, you will have to avoid any situations in which your cat has displayed discomfort. To support

the overall success of the behavior modification, don't expose your cat to the trigger that causes the emotional upset. For example, if your cat is uncomfortable being petted, don't pet your cat for a period of time. Avoidance may also be a necessary safety precaution for your situation.

Before beginning the DS/CC process, you will need to determine your cat's favorite treat or toy. Some examples include small bits of tuna or chicken, commercial cat treats or canned food. Make sure the treat or toy you choose is truly enticing to your cat, something she will really anticipate and only receives during the DS/CC exercises.

What is the basic desensitizing and counter-conditioning technique?

The stimulus that causes your cat's adverse emotional reaction and subsequent unwanted behavior will be reintroduced in a series of steps during which you'll gradually change either the intensity of the stimulus or the distance to the stimulus. You can change the intensity of the stimulus by altering the duration, the loudness, the location, the speed of movement, or the components and response of the stimulus. It can help to create a plan ahead of time, breaking down the intensity and/or distance to the stimulus so you always know what to work on next.

Start the DS/CC exercises at the lowest intensity and/or at the farthest distance that results in no signs of anxiety or concern from your cat. For example, if your cat is afraid of strangers, test out how far away a stranger needs to be for your cat to remain relaxed. At that distance, present the stimulus to the cat (have the stranger appear), then give her favorite treat or toy to her. The scary thing must always predict the favorite item, not the other way around. Repeating this process over multiple sessions lets the cat form a positive association with the stimulus.

Once your cat is consistently comfortable at that low intensity and is anticipating the reward, you can move up to the next level by increasing the intensity of the stimulus or by decreasing the distance to the stimulus. Do not decrease the distance and increase the intensity of the stimulus at once; make only one change at a time. To ensure success, it is important to make very small changes. Keep in mind that the DS/CC process should be performed at your cat's pace — not yours. If your cat does go over threshold, lower the intensity or increase the distance until your cat is comfortable again.

How long will it take to change a cat's problem behavior?

Using desensitization and counter-conditioning to change a behavior issue in a cat can take time, and the process must be gradual for it to work. Since change can take place slowly, it helps to maintain a journal of the behavior so that you can track your cat's progress. In the journal, record the situation,

the stimulus, the intensity or distance, and your cat's response. Videos are another great way to measure and track success.

Problems usually arise from progressing too quickly and not taking small enough steps, so take care to always be aware of your cat's comfort level. Since the fear or other unpleasant emotion took time to develop, look for small, incremental improvements rather than instant results.

If you are not successful with implementing DS/CC, or if you feel unsure how to apply behavior modification to your situation, please consult with your veterinarian or a behavior professional. The reasons for your cat's emotional distress can be complex and often an experienced behavior professional can offer detailed, specific recommendations for you and your cat.