



Whether your dog fears garbage cans, barks at men with beards, or growls and lunges when someone blows in his face, counterconditioning is a good way to change your dog's behavior.

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Suppose your dog tries to drag you across the street to get away from that scary garbage can your neighbor left out for pickup. Or suppose she barks every time she sees a man with a beard. Or (wild card) suppose he snarls and lunges when someone blows in his face. A competent behavior specialist will tailor the details of her program to your dog, but it's a good bet that with all these problems she'll use the technique called "counterconditioning."

What Is "Conditioning?"

When Thing A reliably predicts a wonderful Thing B, your dog learns to see Thing A as wonderful, too.

First, some painless science. In learning-theory-speak, when you "condition" Thing A, you're teaching an animal or a person to associate it with something else. Thing A predicts Thing B. Your dog gets excited when he hears your car pull into the driveway (Thing A) because he's learned that the engine's sound reliably predicts your showing up (Thing B). He wags his tail wildly when you pick up his leash, because the leash (Thing A) predicts a walk (Thing B). If you clicker train your dog, she learns that the sound of the click predicts a treat is coming. And so on.

In all those cases, Thing A started out emotionally neutral. Car engine – meh. Six-foot strip of cotton or leather – yawn-o-rama. Weird clicking sound – who cares? But because the car engine, the leash, and the clicker reliably predict wonderful things for your dog, the car engine, the leash, and the clicker become wonderful to her, too.

When Your Dog Already Dislikes or Fears Something

Suppose your dog already dislikes or fears Thing A. That bad feeling might be learned – maybe a garbage can blew over on Dogalini when she was young. It might arise because your dog wasn't appropriately socialized in puppyhood and now defaults to being afraid of new things or hostile to them.

The cause doesn't really matter. What does matter is that Thing A upsets your dog, and you want to help. In this case, counterconditioning is your strategy of choice. It enables your dog to change a bad association to a good one.

The principle is the same as with plain old conditioning: You make sure that Thing A predicts Thing B, and that Thing B is something wonderful. As simple as this sounds, though, you have to follow 7 rules for it to work well. Here they are.

Rule #1: Scary Thing A Must Predict Wonderful Thing B, Not the Other Way Around

Your dog learns one lesson if every time a man with a beard shows up, she gets some pieces of roast chicken to eat. She learns something different if every time you get out the roast chicken, men with beards show up. If your dog is afraid enough of men with beards, and if roast chicken reliably predicts the appearance of men with beards, you can teach her to be afraid of roast chicken. No joke.

To avoid this problem, have the roast chicken hanging around well before the beard shows up. The roast chicken becomes part of the backdrop – until Mr. Natural walks by, and then the chicken appears in front of your dog's face.

Rule #2: "Predict" Means "In the Next Instant," Not "Two Minutes Later."

Watch for your dog to spot that garbage can. Get the chicken to her mouth within a second or two. The longer the delay, the harder it is for your dog to connect the sight of a garbage can with the arrival of chicken.

Rule #3: "Roast Chicken" Means "Something Your Dog is Crazy About and Rarely or Never Gets Otherwise."

The more unusual your Wonderful Thing B is, the easier it will be for Zippy to learn that Scary Thing A is special and therefore not to be feared, but rather welcomed.

Rule #4: Don't Ask Your Dog to Do Anything When Scary Thing A Shows Up

He doesn't have to sit, look at you, or lie down. All he has to do is notice Thing A. The point in counterconditioning isn't to teach your dog any particular behavior; it's to teach him that Thing A is wonderful.

Rule #5: Manage Situations

Make sure that when your dog notices Thing A, she isn't close enough or stressed enough to panic or blow up. She should be at a point where she is just aware of Thing A – looking at it, maybe pointing her ears at it, but not growling, barking, backing away, or otherwise acting distressed.

One reason to present Thing A in a very mild form at first is that it makes the process smoother. Get Dogalini butt-wiggling at the sight of garbage cans at 30 feet, and you can work your way closer and closer gradually with less stress on both of you. The second and more critical reason is that if your dog is overwhelmed with fear or the urge to lash out, he simply can't learn.

Suppose he's growling softly, though, or shrinking back a bit in anxiety, keep that chicken coming. You will not be rewarding aggression or fear. Many people, trainers included, find the following hard to believe, but it's true: Even if your dog aggresses or cowers when he sees Thing A, proper counterconditioning will change his emotions and thereby change his behavior for the better.

For proof, watch this video of Dr. Sophia Yin working with Homer, a terrier who aggressed when people blew in his face. In the video, Dr. Yin blows in Homer's face and then immediately rains treats on him, even though Homer is growling. As you'll see, Homer soon loses the aggression in favor of getting happy about how face-blowing predicts treats.

Rule #6: As Soon as Thing A Disappears, So Should Thing B.

The second that bearded guy turns a corner out of sight, no more chicken for Dogalini. This helps make the connection between them crystal clear for her.

Rule #7: Don't Overdo It

Do no more than a dozen reps per session, and give your dog a breather between reps. Avoid falling into a rhythm. You want your dog to learn that Thing A predicts Thing B any old time, not that Thing A and Thing B show up at specific intervals.

Should You Try Counterconditioning On Your Own?

As you can see, counterconditioning is simple, except for how it's not! If your dog is very afraid of something, or if his aggressive behavior frightens you or others, it's best to start your work with a behavior counselor in person. The same goes if you have no way to control your dog's exposure to whatever he has problems with.

But to take the example of men with beards, suppose your dog is just a little timid around them, and one of your good friends has a beard. Try this: First, pick a sound or an object that your dog has no feelings about whatever, and condition it positively using the rules above. See how the process works and hone your skills. If you follow the rules carefully, you'll soon see a "conditioned emotional response": When your formerly neutral Thing A appears, Dogalini will perk up happily and look for her treat. Trainers call this the "Where's my chicken?" look.

With that practice under your belt, go ahead and work on some counterconditioning with your bearded friend. When Dogalini turns to you at the sight of him and says "Where's my chicken?" it will gladden your heart.