

Using Behavior Modification to Help Your Cat

By Karen Sueda, DVM

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 cat to be happier and more well-adjusted. These terms may sound technical, but the techniques are actually quite simple.

What are desensitization and counter-conditioning?

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

Systematic desensitization is the process of gradually reintroducing your cat to a stimulus. Counter-conditioning is the process of reinforcing a substitute emotional response. When these two techniques are combined, the unwanted behavior is replaced with a positive behavior through a gradual process of reintroducing the stimulus and rewarding your cat for remaining calm.

How do I start the DS/CC 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 problem behavior never happens. If you attempt DS/CC when your cat is already anxious or aroused, you will likely be ignored. You need to start in a quiet, neutral setting and only gradually build up to the situation where the problem occurs. If the steps are too large, or you proceed too quickly, these techniques will not be effective.

Initially, you will have to avoid any situations in which your cat has displayed the unwanted behavior. Every time your cat displays this behavior, the behavior is being practiced and reinforced. Therefore, to support the overall success of the behavior modification, your cat should not be exposed to the triggers that cause the unwanted or unacceptable behaviors. For example, if your cat reacts badly to petting, don't pet your cat for a period of time. Avoidance may also be a necessary safety precaution for your situation.



Do I need to change the way I interact with my cat?

Yes, that may be necessary. Cats who are physically corrected (e.g., scolded, scruffed, yelled at, hit on the nose) or rewarded for undesirable behaviors (e.g., given food when they meow incessantly) may become more anxious or aggressive in association with the stimulus. You should also avoid reassuring your cat if you see signs of anxiety or aggression, since you will only reinforce these behaviors. Finally, keep in mind that whenever your cat successfully threatens the stimulus and the stimulus retreats, the behavior is further reinforced.

What else can I do to prepare?

Before beginning the DS/CC, you will need to consider how to reward your cat – some examples are his/her favorite tasty treats (small bits of tuna or chicken, commercial cat treats, or canned food), a highly coveted toy, and/or attention from you (e.g., praise or petting). Make sure the reward you choose is truly enticing to your cat, something she will really anticipate.

For the DS/CC to be successful, you will need to reward every positive behavior that occurs during the sessions. You'll also need to plan each session carefully and systematically. Before starting each session, think through the steps you will need to take.

What is the basic technique?

The stimulus that causes your cat's unwanted emotional reaction and subsequent problem 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 by altering the duration, the loudness, the location, the speed of movement, or the components and response of the stimulus.

Start the DS/CC at the lowest intensity and/or at the furthest 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. Present the stimulus to the cat, and reward him for his relaxed attitude and behavior. Repeat the stimulus over multiple sessions, and reward your cat for positive behavior.

Once your cat is consistently "good" 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 at the same time; 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 should be performed at your cat's pace – not yours. If your cat does react negatively, lower the intensity or increase the distance until your cat doesn't react badly.

The positive emotional response and behaviors that you are reinforcing and rewarding should be incompatible with the unwanted behavior. For example, sitting and eating quietly are positive behaviors that are incompatible with hissing or even sitting but appearing anxious. Thus, your cat associates the low level of negative stimulus with the positive reward for a relaxed state. Your cat will gradually learn to associate good things with the stimulus and have a positive response.

Should I watch for signs of anxiety, arousal, or aggression?

It is vital that you watch your cat for signs of anxiety, arousal, or aggression. Early signs of anxiety or arousal include dilated pupils, tense body posture, sniffing the ground, scratching at a body part, vocalizing, shifting eyes, and/or 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 a treat and then dropping it), staring at the stimulus, hair standing up, a “bottlebrush” tail, and/or backing away. Signs of aggression include growling, hissing, swatting, scratching, lunging and biting.

Should your cat display any early signs of anxiety, aggression or the problem behavior during a session, you should move your cat away from the stimulus. The stimulus should not be moved except when the stimulus is a person or animal who is in danger of being harmed. The main reason for this is that you do not want your cat’s behavior to dictate the behavior of the stimulus, since this reinforces the negative behavior. Your cat should be moved to a distance at which the problem behavior is not displayed and then rewarded for the display of calm behavior. At this point, end this session. You should always try to end the sessions by rewarding a display of positive behavior.

How long will DS/CC take?

DS/CC takes time, and the process must be gradual for it to be successful. Since progress is often slow, it helps to maintain a journal of the behavior so that you can track your cat’s progress. In the journal, record the stimulus, intensity/distance, situation, and your cat’s response.

Problems usually arise from progressing too quickly and not taking small, incremental steps. Don’t progress faster than what your cat can accept and remember to end the session by rewarding a positive behavior before your cat becomes anxious or aggressive. Since the problem behavior took time to develop, look for small, incremental improvements rather than instant results.

If you are not successful with implementing DS/CC, or you don’t know how to apply behavior modification to your situation, please consult with your veterinarian or a behaviorist. The reasons for your cat’s negative behavior can be very complex and oftentimes an experienced behaviorist can offer detailed, specific recommendations for you and your cat.

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See also: [Cat Aggression Toward People](#)
[Fear of Strangers in Cats](#)
[Aggression Toward Other Cats](#)