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Creating a Positive Conditioned Emotional Response (CER) To Unfamiliar Dogs

Dogs that “react” to the presence of unfamiliar dogs are usually reacting from underlying anxiety or fear due to the uncertainty of meeting unknown dogs. This problem is especially common in dogs that missed having opportunities for positive social interactions during the critical learning period before 12 weeks of age but can happen in any dog.

It is important to understand that punishment techniques must never be used for the treatment of behaviors that result from anxiety or fear. This is why training methods or tools that cause pain such as choke chains, prong collars, or shock collars will worsen reactivity problems and may escalate aggressive behaviors.

The reactive response leads to both physiologic and emotional states of over arousal and excitement. In addition, reactive dogs become even more frustrated because they are not able to appropriately or effectively communicate. Because we need to hold reactive dogs back with restraint for courtesy and safety reasons; we do not allow them to express themselves well with normal dog body language. Tension in our leash will lead to tension in the dog. So, a vicious cycle ensues until the dog is absolutely over the top! The more this cycle is allowed to play out, the more practiced and automatic this behavior becomes!

Until we can change or condition the emotional response of anxiety to something more desirable, we must absolutely avoid putting the reactive dog in situations where these outbursts will occur. Do not let a reactive dog continue to practice and perfect the arousal sequence. Management strategies need to be in place to prevent these situations. For instance, do not leave a reactive dog outside unsupervised to run the fence line when unfamiliar dogs appear.

Once over arousal occurs, dogs are no longer able to learn and training will fail. In the aroused state, dogs are using the more primitive areas of their brains in the amygdala which work on a more autonomic level. They are in “Fight or Flight” mode and substances like adrenaline are racing through their bodies. They are not able to utilize their cognitive “thinking” brains located in their frontal cortex. There is no point in yelling or screaming at them to stop; they will only see us as being over aroused and reactive too. Our yelling and screaming will only look as though we are giving an endorsement to their behavior.

To be successful in changing this behavior, we need to begin our training at a distance that is under the reactive dog’s arousal “threshold”. Our goal is to change the dog’s emotional response to the sight of an unfamiliar dog. This is called Classical Conditioning. If we can first change the dog’s emotional response to a stimulus to one that is more compatible with calmness and focus, it will make subsequent training steps much easier!

Think of a conditioned emotional response or CER as an automatic response to a stimulus that has been learned from past exposures and experiences. It is not a choice or actively thought about, it is an emotional and automatic reaction. This is similar to what happens to soldiers who suffer from PTSD. They often have CERs to sounds that mimic explosions or gun fire. If they hear fireworks, even out of the context of warfare; they may have flashbacks which may cause violent responses to the noise.

We all have CERs in our daily life, for instance, how do you feel if you hear a police siren and see flashing lights in your rear-view mirror? You may tap your breaks and slow down but your adrenaline flows and your heart rate races because you are anticipating something bad, a speeding ticket. We also have happier CERs, such as hearing the music from an ice cream truck. The truck's song may signal a happy CER from within us from our childhood memories of eating ice cream treats.

Most dog owners have demonstrated their ability to be quite successful in creating a positive CER in their dogs. Consider how most dogs react when an owner shows their dog a leash! Most dogs get very happy upon seeing the leash as owners almost always pair it with favorite activity, a walk or car ride together!

It is important to realize that reactive dogs are not choosing to behave the way they do. They have been conditioned (often unintentionally) to automatically respond to a stimulus with a high arousal reaction or an aggressive display.

To achieve a new CER we must pair the scary or exciting thing (the unfamiliar dog) with something extremely pleasant. So instead of the automatic response being to react and put on a massive barking and lunging display, the new CER will now be anticipation of something "WONDERFUL"! There is no longer need to bark and lunge!

The easiest way to create a new CER is by using super delicious food treats to signal that something "WONDERFUL" is about to happen. This is a bit different than using a food treat to lure a behavior or reward a behavior. We are simply using the food to classically condition by association, a new emotional response. To create the new CER, we provide highly delectable food treats that magically appear to the dog whenever an unfamiliar dog is seen off in the distance. Our goal is to convert the reactive dog's automatic response from fear, anxiety, and frustration (which require defensive and aggressive behaviors to create safety) to an "Oh-boy, chicken is coming" moment!

FROM-----Strange Dog = Potential Threat-----TO-----Strange Dog = Yummy Food!

What if you had a phobia of spiders and someone sat you down in a room and at the end of the room they showed you spiders? But every time a spider appeared and you didn't scream, a \$100 bill landed in your lap. If you are like most people, you would soon be willing to look at a lot of spiders without screaming!! In the dog's view, a delectable treat is much like a \$100 bill!

To start the process, we need to determine a distance that will not cause a reaction when an unfamiliar dog appears. This is known as the "Threshold Distance". This might need to be 40-60 feet, or even several blocks away. The distance will vary with the individual dog and the severity of the problem. As soon as the reactive dog barely notices the new dog at a distance and before the dog has a chance to react; the handler should instantly begin feeding one delectable treat after another in rapid succession. Another method is to throw a handful of treats to the ground for the dog to search out and gobble up while the other dog walks out of view.

For as long as the unfamiliar dog is in sight, the reactive dog should be getting great food and attention. After a moment (start at just a few seconds and gradually move up to 30-60 seconds or so) the unfamiliar dog should leave or walk out of view. As soon as the unfamiliar dog is out of sight, no more food is given!

To ensure success it is important to make sure that the reactive dog is being kept well under threshold. The handler's "radar" needs to be up and more alert than the dogs so that the handler spots a new dog in the distance first and is prepared. We want the reactive dog to just barely notice the strange dog off in the distance and then quickly discover that treats are going to rain down on him just because of that vision! The reactive dog should not even have the opportunity to react before the treats appear. And remember at this stage of learning, the reactive dog doesn't have to

do anything for the treats.... treats simply appear when the other dog is in view. When the other dog goes out of sight, the treats go away. Again, this is classical conditioning.

Setting up a controlled situation using unfamiliar dogs that belong to friends and family can be a good way to develop this conditioning. But if that is not possible, this type of situation can still happen on a regular walk or at a park.

Another method is to go to a parking area, such as outside of a pet store, and sit in the car with the dog. When a new dog appears in the parking lot, the special treats should start flowing until the new dog disappears.

If this is practiced over and over consistently, if every time the reactive dog sees a new dog he gets a jackpot; the dog will soon happily look forward to seeing new dogs and will no longer feel the need to put on his old defensive display.

But it is also important to be prepared in case the unexpected arises. When there is no stimulus present and the environment is quiet, practice getting the dog's attention. Say the dog's name happily then use a marker sound such as a clicker for turning and looking, and then reward! Follow that with a run backwards or a quick 180 degrees turn and run a short distance. Practice this behavior so the dog knows it well in calm situations so it will be ready for emergencies.

Then if a new dog unexpectedly appears or if the reactive dog is unable to stay under threshold during a walk, happily call the dog into an emergency "U-Turn" or "run-away" to increase distance and direction away from the stimulus. Continue to treat the dog as distance is achieved. However, this is sign that the threshold distance needs to be increased for the next trial.

With continued and consistent practice, the new conditioned association (strange dog=food) will solidify and there will now be a new and more positive conditioned emotional response in place. And with just a bit more practice, instead of having a fearful, anxious or impulsive melt down at the sight of another dog, the reactive dog will begin to actually LOOK BACK to the handler for the treats when the stimulus appears! This is a huge EUREKA moment!!

We now are getting more than a simple conditioned emotional response; the dog is now choosing to initiate a new voluntary behavior, to look back at the handler!! Reward liberally when this happens! Now we have not only created a new CER but we have also changed behavior of the reactive dog from an escalating series of emotional outbursts to a much nicer choice of looking to his handler for reward, guidance and support.

This new response and behavior will now allow training to move forward because we will no longer be fighting a losing battle against a dog whose automatic response to seeing another dog in the distance is having a meltdown. Now, the dog will be in a happy emotional state and should be able to think and look to us for guidance when an unfamiliar dog is in the distance. This achievement will be important for the next step in the process, desensitization. During this next step in training we will gradually desensitize the dog to decreasing threshold distances.