

# How desensitisation can make life easier for pet, practice and owner

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**Francesca Riccomini** BSc(Hons), BVetMed, CCAB, MRCVS, DAS(CABC), looks at how desensitisation can prevent negative associations building up towards veterinary procedures and visits to the surgery

**IN a previous article (*VN Times*; Vol 9 No 4, April 2009) I outlined the issues that can underlie fear, anxiety and phobia, and the principles behind desensitisation and counter-conditioning techniques. In this article I look at their practical application to situations we encounter every day, both in the surgery and when at home dealing with our own pets.**

## **Familiarity breeds content – or significant resistance**

Apart from the negative associations that many pets gradually – or, following a really awful visit, dramatically and suddenly – develop towards the whole process of attending the veterinary surgery, much of the equipment and paraphernalia used to control and convey them there can quickly signal something they would much rather avoid. These include:

- cat baskets/carriers;
- muzzles for dogs;
- head collars – when used insensitively; and

- cars – dogs that always travel by vehicle to the vet/kennels can develop negative associations.

It's no surprise, then, that by the time such pets arrive at our doors they are not in a fit state to take anything in their stride, and we are already at a significant disadvantage in trying to deal with them. Similarly, the cat carrier is so rarely associated with positive experiences that the pre-capture routine alone can be enough to sabotage any efforts at keeping a cat calm.

When it comes to preventive health care, such as the application of spot-on flea preparations, and diligent attention to issues like grooming or nail clipping, the way owners handle these processes almost inevitably means that some animals will become increasingly difficult to manage and may well become almost impossible to deal with.

As a result, preventive care at home may cease, and owners are forced to seek the help of their vet or nursing staff. Therefore, remedial efforts take longer and the situation becomes more stressful for the pet. A downward spiral, which is often irreversible, is soon established.

## Thinking ahead

Sensitivity and planning can make all the difference. Once problems occur, tremendous efforts will probably be needed just to halt the negative trend, let alone to start conditioning positive associations with now-compromised situations, procedures and individuals. Even if they have the motivation and commitment, many owners simply don't have the time to undertake a desensitisation and counter-conditioning programme to the surgery and everything the pet will encounter there. Additional problems include:

- distance to the surgery means regular short, positive outings are impossible to arrange;
- not everyone can get their timings right; and
- pushing things too quickly is easy to do and can undermine the whole exercise.

The trends of using food treats in consulting rooms, running in-house puppy parties, and offering acclimatisation visits for new clients and those with recently acquired mature dogs are good ideas. If a dog has come to associate a place and the people it meets there with pleasurable activities, it is much harder to completely reverse those associations.

A similar approach for cats is, however, questionable due to the species' coping strategies and natural behaviour, although some authorities do advocate the routine use of kitten kindergartens.

## Offering advice

Whether we first encounter patients as participants in socialisation and habituation groups or when

they are presented for treatment or vaccination, it is in our – and especially their – interests to offer practical suggestions about familiarising pets with equipment they will routinely encounter. It is also worth suggesting that owners sensitively introduce “veterinary style” examinations, including:

- ears;
- eyes;
- feet;
- skin; and
- perineal area.

The procedure should be associated with something good from the pet's perspective, so that when the vet or nurse does the same thing in the surgery it will not be seen as novel and intrusive. It may not be wholeheartedly “enjoyed” by the animal, but it is unlikely to be as stressful as it will be if an uncomfortable pet's first experience is in intimidating circumstances with an unfamiliar person.

Extending this to involve items that we might need to use in future is even better. This was brought home to me long before I became involved in companion animal behaviour by a client who brought her delightful terrier into my consulting room. We had never met and there were no warnings on her record about the pet's behaviour so I was a little surprised to see her with a basket muzzle. It didn't take long for this lady to explain that her last dog of the same breed had been “a nightmare at the vets” with his fear, meaning that even getting a muzzle on him had been “ghastly for everyone”.

Understandably, she had vowed never to be in that position again, and from day one she had ensured that a muzzle was associated with everything her current canine did outdoors that he enjoyed. Consequently, they took it outside with them (attached to his lead) whenever they went for a walk or visited anyone for fun. As a result, this dog was reported to like the sight of his muzzle, because for him all it meant was joy. As it happened, it had never been needed and, from my experience of handling him, was never likely to be, but what a wonderful contrast this dog's view of muzzles was from the usual “something that puts fear” into many of our patients and pets.

An alternative method that can yield the same results is to have the muzzle or head collar around all the time when good things are happening; for example, beside the food bowl, in the toy box or in the same drawer as the treats. This is also often the first step to reversing negative associations with a dog's lead when it has come to symbolise a scary trip outdoors for those pets who fear the car, other canines or traffic.

## **Food, fuss and fun**

When such pre-emptive action is not possible or it's simply too late, using something the animal views as “high value” can give us the advantage. Employing the same technique but adding cream cheese or peanut butter to the inside of the muzzle can make a significant difference. Treats are similarly useful and can later be pushed through the muzzle to reward calm behaviour while the pet is wearing it.

Once this stage is reached, the secret is to ensure each session is very short and ends before the dog gets upset. Otherwise, it may view the positive outcome of release to have resulted from its efforts aimed at removal, which emphasises the value of planning ahead and owners undertaking the process in advance at home. However, if this is the situation, using the technique of smearing something tasty into it (so long as medical imperatives allow) can make it a less stressful experience.

When introducing head collars, combining short and sweet sessions with others where a pet spends brief periods wearing something like a dressing gown cord lightly tied around its face while being fed treats can also be helpful.

## **Feline patients**

Desensitising our cats to their carriers by making these not only part of the furniture, but taking steps to condition positive associations with treats and play is the ideal. The aim is to start from day one to achieve a situation where a carrier is viewed positively as a comfortable place to hang out and have fun. This has several advantages, including good welfare, making the owner's task of catching his or her pet a lot easier, and ensures greater patient cooperation in the surgery.

It may be too late and, as the client approaches the cupboard where the carrier is stored, the cat may rush outside or under the most inaccessible piece of furniture. In this case, the same method can be used, but it will require more time and effort to achieve the same end. Changing the carrier style and using Feliway may also help.

## **Other strategies**

As is so often the way, trying to get owners to see everything from their pet's point of view can help them to identify the steps they can take in relation to routine activities associated with potentially upsetting situations. Then they can swiftly start to reverse the negatives by mixing up the various stages in a procedure.

Changing the storage place can seem too simplistic, but it is always worthwhile. Other changes to consider include:

- the time of day that the application is carried out;

- the person who does it;
- the location;
- removing the packaging while the pet is out of earshot; and
- getting the vial ready in advance.

These measures mean that prediction is more difficult, no matter how astute the pet is, which makes the owner's job a lot easier.

Combining these measures with sensitivity and the appropriate use of reinforcers can also help. Once established, the range of situations in which such an approach can be beneficial is almost limitless. Likewise, any pet species can be included – transporting rabbits in their carriers and using grooming implements, handling small furies, and even the way clients inject their diabetic animals can all be made easier and less stressful by taking this valuable and often under-used approach.