



Muzzle Desensitization / Counter-Conditioning

by
Laura Garber, CPDT-KA, CC, FFCP

The process of desensitization and counter-conditioning is a powerful 1-2 punch that helps treat a dog's fear or discomfort about a particular stimulus. Desensitizing entails presenting the stimulus in very low levels so as not to trigger the usual, fearful response. This is called "below threshold". Counter-conditioning means to change the dog's feelings about that stimulus from fear or anxiety to one of anticipation and pleasure. In the case of sensitivity to such equipment as a muzzle, start with gradual introductions of Fido to the muzzle. Encourage Fido to put his nose into the muzzle by luring him with a little treat inside the muzzle. Start with just the duration of a single treat until it seems that Fido is quite happy putting his nose into the muzzle because it means something tasty. At this point, don't even attempt to close or snap the strap; just concentrate on getting the nose in the muzzle. Then start increasing duration, so that he keeps his nose in the muzzle for the time it takes to eat 3 little morsels. As you gradually build in duration, also start bringing the straps behind the neck, first just holding them, then them loosely, then a little tighter, etc. Slow and steady wins this race!

Note: Use either an Italian basket muzzle (<http://www.dogmuzzle.com/itbaspoldogm1.html>) or a slightly large nylon muzzle so that you can feed treats more easily during these exercises.

- "**GET DRESSED**": After you've done muzzle DS/CC, help Fido get more comfortable putting the muzzle on for himself. Start by saying "Get dressed!" and luring his head or nose through the equipment with a little treat. Remember that you're luring him into the equipment and *not* moving the equipment itself. Initially, don't clip anything; just practice luring him in, then slipping it off. Only do a few repetitions at a time so Fido doesn't get frustrated. Gradually he'll learn to push his head (or nose) through the equipment when he hears "Get dressed!" and sees the equipment held in front of him. To build his tolerance for having the equipment fully clipped, feed him periodic treats while wearing it.

BUILDING A CER (Conditioned Emotional Response) to Equipment:

Equipment such as a muzzle may have negative associations attached to them (or, at best, no association at all yet). We want to change Fido's feeling about them to one of happy anticipation rather than dread. So, with the item hidden to start, introduce it to Fido and feed little treats constantly during its presence. When you return it to the hiding place, treats stop. Continue this time after time, leaving unrewarded time in between so that it's clear to Fido that things are pretty boring without the piece of equipment around. What you're looking for is a look of happy anticipation and a tail wag when the item comes into view. That means you've built a CER!

- ✓ Look for the video called "Conditioning an Emotional Response" with Jean Donaldson, dated 6/23/2009: <http://abrionline.org/videos.php>