

## Treating a fear of car journeys using desensitization and counter-conditioning

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Fear of a specific activity, such as a car journey, can be treated using a desensitization and counter-conditioning (DSCC) programme. In simple terms, your pet must be exposed to the fearful stimulus in such a way that he/she sees there is nothing to fear, and settles down. If the association with the stimulus can be turned into one that is positive, your pet may actually develop a positive attitude to the occurrence.

#### **1** Preparation

- Prevent your pet from travelling in the car except during training sessions, unless essential for health reasons.
- Setbacks may occur if your pet is suddenly or unavoidably taken on a car journey, but you should not compromise your pet's welfare by delaying veterinary attention when necessary. If this becomes necessary contact your veterinary surgeon about the best compromise given the circumstances.
- Encourage calm and relaxed behaviours in the absence of the fear-inducing stimuli.

#### **2** Expose your pet to the activity of which it is afraid, starting at a very low level of exposure

- **Gradual desensitization** is the key. It is important to establish a *gradient* of the stimuli to be presented. During gradual exposure to these stimuli, it is important that they are only presented below the threshold at which the fearful behaviour is triggered.
- An initial point to focus on might be approach toward the car, and you should reward your pet every time he/she approaches the car spontaneously.

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### **3 Try to change your pet's perception by associating the activity with something positive**

- Make sure you know what your pet's most favoured rewards are and save these for the training sessions. For some pets, food is the strongest reinforcer, while others may be more responsive to a favoured play toy or social contact.
- The reward should be presented to your pet for non-fearful responses, such as a relaxed 'sit', along each step of the training gradient.

### **4 Strengthen the resilience of your pet**

- When the response to approaching the car has become reliable, move on to encouraging and rewarding your pet for jumping into the car, but with the door open and engine off.
- Later steps may introduce the engine sound but no motion.
- If the relaxed behaviours continue, short trips associated with pleasant outcomes should follow, until longer trips can be carried out without the pet manifesting fear responses.
- It is important to reward calm responses, such as a relaxed 'sit', along each step of the training gradient.
- **Advance along the gradient very slowly. If the pet shows even the slightest fear response he/she must be removed from the situation and the intensity of the stimuli must be reduced to below the fear threshold.**