

## DESENSITIZATION

*Or how to change a dog's bad feeling about something.*

### What is it?

Desensitization is the process of changing a dog's association with an object, animal, or person from something scary to something safe. It works by exposing the dog to the scary thing a little at a time and always at a level with which she is comfortable.

(From your perspective a stroller or a man with sunglasses may not seem scary at all, but to your dog anything strange and unfamiliar can be frightening. Fear is not necessarily logical.)

### What's with all the barking?

Sometimes undesirable behaviors (barking, growling, lunging, snarling, snapping) are caused by fear or discomfort—this happens when the dog learns that growling or barking will make something move farther away from her.

In such cases, the dog is expressing her fear, but many people react by punishing the dog. While this sometimes stops the behavior, it doesn't change the way the dog feels, which means we now have a potentially dangerous situation: A dog that no longer shows she is upset. Push such a dog beyond her comfort level and her only option is to bite. If you have ever heard anyone say, "I don't understand what happened. She seemed fine. Then she bit," these stories are often about dogs that have been punished for making their discomfort known.

Dogs don't growl or bark to be naughty. It is how they express fear, discomfort, or a desire for distance between themselves and another object, animal, or person. The best way to stop the behavior is to change the underlying emotion. A dog that loves something doesn't growl at it.

### The 3 Ds: Distance, Duration, Distraction

When you work to change your dog's bad feeling about something, there are three factors you can adjust to make sure you stay within her comfort zone. We call those factors the 3 Ds.

**Distance:** Put more distance between your dog and whatever is scaring her.

**Duration:** Keep interactions between your dog and whatever is scaring her short. A few seconds is a good place to start.

**Distraction:** Distract your dog with a cheerful voice and treats.

If your dog shows any sign of discomfort (pulling away, ducking, barking), adjust one or more of the Ds: Get further away, dish out more treats, or shorten the time your dog spends in the situation.

## DESENSITIZATION (CONTINUED)

### **Dogs often need to be desensitized to...**

Teens and toddlers, seniors, unfamiliar adults.

People wearing uniforms, hats, sunglasses, beards.

People with strollers, shopping carts/bags, umbrellas, crutches, canes, or walkers.

Other dogs, horses.

Joggers, bicycles, skate boards.

Cars, trucks, buses.

Vacuum cleaners, blenders, doorbells, back-up warning alerts on trucks, and garage doors.