

Systematic Desensitization and Counterconditioning Acclimating to a Leash

Systematic Desensitization involves slowly exposing the animal to the fearful stimulus, increasing the intensity of the stimulus over time, until he/she no longer reacts fearfully when exposed to it.

Counterconditioning is a procedure whereby you work to change the animal's emotional response to the scary stimulus - from one of fear to one of acceptance - by pairing the scary thing with special food treats.

The best way to help your dog overcome his/her fear of the leash is to combine desensitization with counterconditioning.

Make sure you use extra special treats like cheese or some kind of meat.

NOTE: Start this process with a lightweight leash so that when the dog gets to the point of dragging it around it isn't too heavy.

Step 1 – put the leash on the floor and surround it with small pieces of meat so that the dog will be enticed to go near the leash to eat the meat. The leash will just be lying there and should not elicit fear – it will just be something that is associated with the meat. Do this several sessions until you see the dog perfectly comfortable eating around the leash.

Step 2 – Start to have the leash around your neck while you hand feed the dog pieces of the meat. This will now connect the leash to you and the meat. Do this several sessions until the dog looks perfectly comfortable taking the meat from you with the leash around your neck.

Step 3 – Hold the leash in one hand (in a ball at first) while you feed the dog the meat with the other hand. After several sessions he/she should be comfortable with the balled-up leash in your other hand. Then repeat the process with the leash not in a ball but draped over your hand like it was when it was around your neck. Do this several sessions until the dog is comfortable taking the meat with the leash in your other hand.

Step 4 – Hold out the leash to the dog and when the dog sniffs it – say “good” and give him/her the meat. Do this several sessions until the dog actively touches the leash with his/her nose to get the meat.

Step 5 – Now that the dog is comfortable with the sight of the leash and will actually sniff it and touch it with his/her nose, you can start to desensitize him/her to you clipping it on the collar or harness. While the dog is eating the meat from one hand – the other hand can slowly clip the leash onto the harness or collar. Then give more meat. Do this several sessions just so the dog gets used to you clipping the leash on. You will be taking it off once the meat is gone.

Step 6 – Clip the leash onto the dog's collar or harness while he/she is eating the meat from your hand but leave it on him/her even after the meat in your hand is gone. Toss pieces of meat on the floor so that he/she has to move to get the meat – with the leash still on. Do this for several sessions making the dog move farther and farther each session to get the meat while dragging the leash.

Step 7 – At this point you can clip on the leash as before and leave it on the dog for a while so that he/she is walking around dragging it. If the dog will go outside to the yard while dragging the leash that's good too.

Step 8 – Once the dog is used to the feel of the leash dragging you can start to pick up the leash as you feed the dog the meat. Then toss the meat on the floor ahead of him/her and walk with him/her to the meat holding the leash. Walk around like this – tossing the meat and walking with the dog while holding the leash. This way the dog is getting used to the feel of you holding the leash and with you walking near him/her while doing so.

Step 9 – Do the above but then walk outside while holding the leash.

At this point you should be able to take the dog for a walk with the leash on.

IMPORTANT NOTES:

A harness is always better to use on a walk for dogs who are just getting used to leash walks so that if he/she panics at any point on the walk and starts to pull and try to get away from the pressure, you won't be choking him/her.

Go slowly with this process. You might find that you only have to do each step a couple times or that you have to do each step many many times. Every dog is different.