

Working Sub-Threshold

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As many people in this group have already described, we need to work with the dog at its own comfort level. Some have used the term "sub-threshold."

We don't hide the dog away from life in a pen in the barn. We start with the dog where it is (the level where it is comfortable), and we begin to reward any possible rewardable behaviors, such as "Look at me" (the eye-contact game). We teach the dog its name, so that it will look up in response to hearing its name. We teach the dog to come in response to the verbal cue. We reward each of these behaviors step by step as we build them, incrementally. We teach the dog to walk on a loose lead with its owner. Then gradually, we start to expect the dog to respond to those verbal cues to look, to come, to walk on a loose lead when outdoors in the yard.

Miniature Wire-Haired Dachshund

We begin to take the dog a tiny distance, such as behind the garage and work it there. Then we take the dog a little farther distance, such as two houses away, and we expect it to work there. Each time we start again at a new geographical locale, we lower the criteria a little bit for those obedience skills. For instance, the dog's sit-stay may not be so solid in a new location as it was at home in the family room.

When we're ready to start introducing distractions, we begin with low-intensity distractions, perhaps only one at a time. That may mean that we heel with the dog in our own yards, but around a lawn chair, around a tipped-over umbrella. A week later, we may heel around with the dog while another person is in the yard, such as our neighbor. Then gradually, we practice heeling the dog in the yard while teens are tossing a basketball in the next yard.

Notice: we haven't yet introduced the distractions called "other dogs/scary dogs"? We're building some obedience skills first in small increments, rewarding the dog each step of the way. If we want to practice around other dogs/scary dogs, then we may do so. But it's a really good idea to increase distance from the objects of our dog's fears.

We will work with our dog at its comfort level again, while "other dogs" are way off in the distance. If our fearful dog can

ignore other dogs that are 400 feet away at a park, then super. Treat/treat reward. Turn around and walk away again. There is no need to rush up to the other dogs and just hope for the best. Far better, in my opinion, to work with the dog at its comfort level, and then give it many opportunities for such practice, say for 5 minutes a day. Gradually then begin to reduce the distance from other dogs.

Next, begin to increase the duration of the exposure from 5 minutes to eight or ten minutes or more. We'll experience success if we plan each such exposure to other dogs as a teaching lesson, rather than just "let life happen" and attempt to recover from unpleasant episodes. Of course, life does happen. Occasionally when we're walking with our dog on a loose lead, some off-lead, stray dogs will come up close and personal.

I've had some luck by changing my own emotional response to stray dogs. I look upon any distraction as a teaching opportunity, so I don't want to blow it with my own dog. I say in a happy voice, "Oh look, dogs!" As I do so, I start feeding the reactive dog little snippets of cheddar cheese, for instance, while the other dog is in view, such as down the sidewalk or across the street. I do this every single time as a response to whatever the student dog fears. Gradually, after some daily practice sessions, when the student dog first notices distractions at some distance, he begins to look at me, offering eye contact to the owner/handler, waiting for those treats. In other words, the sight of other people/other dogs has begun to predict for the student dog that "good things are going to happen." That's an illustration of counter conditioning at work.

In one example, one particular fear-reactive dog would become upset when people walking along were speaking to one another. I can't explain that, why it upset him. I used high-powered treats to help change the dog's emotional response to strange people and strange dogs. Over time, that practice of systematic desensitization reduced the student dog's reactivity when in the presence of people, and especially those people who were talking to each other. I would avert my eyes from them so they would not also speak to me while I was with my dog. The process worked, and the dog overcame its aversion to friendly strangers who like to chat in very short order.

During the next step of the progression, however, I was surprised how quickly the fear-reactive dog began to accept that I could interact verbally with friendly strangers and he wouldn't be hurt/frightened, etc. I began that part at a distance of only five feet or so. I controlled the distance so that the friendly strangers did *not* approach the student dog. I positioned the dog as best I could so that he was not forced to be face-on toward the people. After only five or six such very short practices, he relaxed sufficiently that he began to want to approach the people. In other words, friendly strangers were no longer strangers to him, so long as they greeted me first.

I think one of the distinguishing marks of that dog's improvement was directly attributable to my using very high-powered treats. That was the key to unlocking the pleasure centers in his mind so that he could enjoy life more, even when in the presence of other dogs/other people.

In other cases, a fear-reactive dog may be triggered by other stimuli, such as only by large furry black dogs, or only by dogs that make a direct frontal approach. Or any dog unaccustomed to seeing breeds of dogs that carry themselves naturally in an assertive manner, with body leaning slightly forward, up on its front toes, so to speak, with slightly furrowed brow and a direct look, such as from Akitas, or ChowChows, or Shar Pei, or Rottweilers. Most often, though, the fear-reactive dog is triggered by what the other dog does, its behavior, not its appearance.

I've described this rather lengthily because I've employed systematic desensitization to help many and various dogs overcome their fears or hyper-sensitivities to different things. For instance, some dogs are extraordinarily reactive

when around young children who make jerky motions or who shout and run. Some other dogs are reactive about people riding on bicycles. Some can't tolerate motorcycles. Others hate the sound of lawn mowers. Many seem to explode into noise at the sound of a doorbell. We're able to help them to improve step by step using this simple process I've described.

On top of that, the process is fun and very rewarding. So, when we speak here in this group about "working sub-threshold," we mean that we work with the dog within its comfort zone, at a safe enough distance from the fearful stimuli that the dog's emotions are not overwhelmed. If the dog is already reacting with an aggressive display, we've walked too close to "other dogs/other people" etc., or we've extended the time, the duration of exposure, beyond what the student dog could tolerate.

Hope this helps.

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