Desensitization & Counter Conditioning Training Guide

Helping a Scared Dog Feel Safe

Desensitization and counter-conditioning (DSCC) changes how a dog *feels* about the things that scare them, so the fearful behavior fades on its own instead of just being held back.

It combines two ideas. **Desensitization** means showing your dog the scary thing in doses small enough that they stay relaxed, so it slowly loses its power. **Counter-conditioning** means pairing that scary thing with something wonderful, so it becomes neutral, and eventually even a good thing.

The lesson for your dog is simple: *when the scary thing shows up, good stuff happens.*

🐾 Before You Start

Step 1: Get your treats and gear ready

Use something your dog loves, like real chicken, cut into small pieces. Keep them in a treat pouch you wear so your hands stay free. Set up out of your dog's sight when you can, so grabbing the gear doesn't become a warning sign.

Step 2: Practice the timing without the trigger

Have a friend or family member pretend to be the trigger and practice the order: **trigger appears, then you reach for treats.** Never reach before the trigger shows up. Film yourself if you can, to catch any habit of reaching early.

Step 3: Find your starting point

Work out how far away, or how mild, the trigger needs to be for your dog to notice it but stay relaxed. The test: your dog takes treats as gently as they do at home in the kitchen. If they refuse treats or snatch hard, the trigger is too close or too intense. Expect some trial and error, and don't move on until you've found this spot.

🐾 Each Training Session

Step 4: Trigger appears, start treats

As soon as the trigger comes into view, feed a steady stream of treats, about **one small piece every 1–2 seconds.** Don't ask your dog to sit, look at you, or do anything. The treats come because the trigger is there, not as a reward for behavior.

Step 5: Trigger leaves, treats stop

After about **10 seconds**, remove the trigger or walk your dog out of view, and stop feeding. For a very mild trigger, like simply being in the front yard, about a minute is fine.

Step 6: Repeat

Repeat Steps 4 and 5 many times, over many sessions, at the same level. Watch for warning signs: a fixed stare at the trigger, raised hackles, growling, trembling, or frantic movement. If you see these, you're too close. Move farther away and make it easier next time.

🐾 Moving Forward

Step 7: Check that your dog is ready to level up

Your dog is ready when they see the trigger and **happily turn to you expecting a treat**, with soft, loose body language. Simply not reacting isn't enough. If your dog is still tense or wary, stay at this level longer.

Step 8: Make it a little harder

Turn up **one** of these dials at a time:

Dial	How to turn it up
Distance	Bring your dog and the trigger closer together
Duration	Stay near the trigger longer
Sound	Vacuum switched on, trigger dog barks, trigger person talks
Movement	Vacuum moves, trigger dog walks around, person swings their arms

When you turn one dial up, **turn the others down for a while.** For example, the first time the vacuum is switched on, put it behind a closed door. When a scary person moves closer, have them sit down or face away.

Step 9: Go back to Step 4

Repeat the session routine at the new level until your dog shows that happy "where's my treat?" response again, then level up again.

🐾 Example Starting Points

Dog	Starting setup
Afraid of the vacuum	Vacuum off, in the next room, visible through a doorway
Dog-reactive	Other dog a full block away
Mildly dog-reactive	Calm helper dog across the street, standing still and facing away
Very dog-reactive	No dogs visible at all; just being in the front yard where dogs *might* appear. Later, try a life-size stuffed dog before a real one far away.

🐾 Common Mistakes to Check

- ☐ **Treats come before the trigger.** The trigger must always come first, then food.
- ☐ **Treats aren't good enough.** Ordinary biscuits often won't change how your dog feels. Use something special.
- ☐ **Too few treats.** Keep a steady stream going the whole time the trigger is visible.
- ☐ **Working too close.** If it feels like nothing is happening because your dog doesn't care, you're in the right spot.
- ☐ **Leveling up too soon.** The most common mistake. Wait for the happy response, not just the absence of a reaction.
- ☐ **Letting the scary person hand out treats.** Your dog may approach for food, then realize how close they are and panic. Feed treats yourself. Later, the person can toss treats so your dog never has to approach.
- ☐ **Asking for behaviors.** No sits or eye contact required. Treats depend on the trigger only.

— *The Jack Jack's Pack Team*