

TIER 2: PROTOCOL FOR DESENSITIZING DOGS AFFECTED WITH IMPULSE CONTROL AGGRESSION

Prior to desensitizing your dog to gestures or actions that may accidentally encourage him to exhibit aggression, you should have been working with the **Protocol for Deference**, the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**, and the **Protocol for Relaxation: Behavior Modification Tier 1**. In addition, you should have been complying with the **Protocol for Impulse Control Aggression**. The purpose of this program is to begin to shape your dog's undesirable and reactive behaviors into behaviors that are less reactive, less risky, and more desirable.

At the outset of these tasks one person should be able to successfully request that your dog sit and stay, both on- and off-lead, in the same format as recommended in Tier 1. The dog should be calm and relaxed. If you cannot accomplish these two behaviors on- and off-lead with a calm dog, you are not yet ready for Tier 2.

The person giving the dog his cues/signals (the handler) will be the one responsible for rewarding appropriate behaviors with treats. Because your dog has already been through Tier 1 of the program with this person, the dog should not view this situation as confrontational—the dog should be fully relaxed and happy to work with the programs. This is important because—please remember—these dogs can be dangerous. You cannot have anyone struggle for control with a dog who has an anxiety disorder because you will make your dog worse, not better. *Please go back and practice Tier 1 until you are sure that your dog is happily able to engage in the tasks involved.*

This protocol will help you to desensitize and counter-condition your dog to gestures that he may consider to be threats or challenges associated with control. For you to work successfully with this program, you have to accept that your dog's reactions, while odd, are not normal and are a function of his impairment/pathology. You cannot focus on the idea that this "should not be happening." It is happening and for this program to be successful you need to be able to recognize what will trigger an aggressive or concerned response by your dog. You will either avoid or desensitize your dog to these gestures or to their component parts.

This protocol requires the cooperation of a second person, the helper. It is *best* if your dog *does not react* to your first helper. It's *ideal* if your dog *likes* your first helper. We can add progressively more reactive helpers later.

The helper is to stand, or sit if the dog is less reactive when the helper sits, approximately 3 meters (10 feet) away from your dog, off to the dog's side. This means that your dog knows that the person is there and can see the person using peripheral vision, but that he can still attend to and focus directly on you or anyone else giving the cues. This distance was chosen because dogs who have successfully completed Tier 1 should be able to see the helpers from this distance, but not react to them. Being able to see the helper without reacting is the key in choosing distances at which you should work.

With one arm held at waist height, bent at the elbow, and with the palm of that hand facing the floor, the helper should start to make small circles in the air. As the dog learns to ignore this activity and relax while receiving treats as a

reward for the relaxation, the helper will gradually make larger circles, move the circles from waist to shoulder height, approach the dog, make the gestures quicker, form the movements closer to the dog, and, eventually, reach down, press on the dog, and possibly very gently massage the dog, stretched out onto his side *with* (and only with) his cooperation. Some dogs will never allow you to manipulate their bodies, but may be able to offer all postures you would manipulate, if asked. That's absolutely fine. The entire point is to teach the dog that these pretty normal human behaviors are not threats.

Under no circumstance should anyone think that they have to force any dog onto his back. Forcing a dog onto his back is an unambiguous threat, and it is a foolish, dangerous exercise that can be damaging to most dogs. If you are never able to move your dog onto his side or back but he is no longer anxious and aggressive, do not be concerned—this is a success. You have to realize that dogs are in a vulnerable and invasive position when they are on their backs.

Please remember that punishment, restraint, and physical corrections all make these dogs worse because you have removed any uncertainty regarding their anxiety: If you exhibit force or punishment, you have proved to the dog that you are a threat!

This Tier 2 program starts with the helper forming small circles close to his own body. While the dog sits quietly and attentively, and looks as happy as possible (**remember that unhappy or anxious dogs do not learn well and cannot change their behavior**), the size of the circles can be increased. If the dog remains relaxed, the helper can step closer to the dog, again decreasing the circle size. After the dog relaxes, the circle size is increased. Remember that larger gestures, closer to, or over the dog are potentially big threats to these dogs. By repeating the pattern of small circles—relaxation—larger circles—relaxation—approach—small circles—relaxation—larger circles—relaxation, the helper should be able to continue to approach the dog with the dog remaining calm.

You should all work to the point where your dog is able to sit quietly and remain attentive to the handler, while large circles are made over his head. Gradually, the helper will approach the dog and attempt to touch him and then push on him.

The program will talk you through all the necessary steps. Remember that the following six rules apply for this tier of the protocols, as for the others:

1. You are only to reward your dog when he reacts appropriately. Never bribe the dog. Reward the smallest indication of relaxation.
2. If your dog becomes distressed or anxious and cannot successfully complete some part of the program, back up and slowly work on the exercises with which the dog has problems. If your dog just cannot get past one suite of tasks, contact the veterinarian with whom you are working and ask for advice. A certified dog trainer who knows how to use these programs may also be helpful. Regardless, make sure that your dog ends on a positive note for each session.
3. Keep sessions short—a *maximum* of 15 to 20 minutes once or twice a day. If either you or your dog have trouble with

that time block, use shorter, but more frequent, sessions (5-minute sessions 6 to 8 times per day; 3-minute sessions 5 to 10 times a day; or as often as you can manage without feeling pressured). Shorter sessions may work better for some dogs.

4. If at any time you feel that your dog is becoming aggressive or you or your helper feel threatened, stop. Walk the dog around, reward small positive behaviors. Resume when everyone is calm. If your dog cannot regain his calm, that session is over.
5. If your dog appears to lose interest after a few days, make sure that you are rewarding him at the appropriate times in the response sequence. You may also need to change rewards at some point and use the natural tendency to be more interested in novel items. Video yourself to check on your timing and your dog's response to treats.
6. If you or your helper would feel safer or more comfortable with your dog on-lead, practice with him on-lead. It may be best to work with a head collar or no-pull harness because these tools allow you to gently redirect the dog. Well-fitted head collars can also help you to kindly close some dogs' mouths. If you use a halter or harness, hold the leash in one hand and reward with the other. If you choose to just use a leash attached to a collar, put it under your foot with a small amount of slack. This leaves both your hands free, but requires that you can quickly slip your other foot gently across the leash so that the dog's head is held away from you. **DO NOT slam the dog's head to the floor.** *If you have to slip your foot across the lead more than once, you are not ready for this Tier 2 program.* If you feel that you need this type of extreme control over the dog at all times, you are not ready for this Tier 2 program, and you should be using a head collar for all work with your dog.

During these tasks your dog should remain attentive to the handler, whether or not this is you, as the helper performs the potentially distracting activities. A brief glance at the helper is acceptable **if, and only if**, your dog is immediately responsive to a quick request to look back at the handler, or your dog, on his own, spontaneously returns his attention to the handler. Use his name as you see him turn toward the helper: "Sparky, look!" If you know that he will look at the helper at a certain point in the sequence, give him permission to do so: "Sparky, look at that! Good boy." Then immediately ask him to look back to you, and praise and reward. This sequence just taught the dog that he can take in information from the helper without worry and then can be rewarded for refocusing his attention. These are important and fairly advanced skills.

The helper is to form small circles close to his body. When the dog sits quietly and attentively, the circles are to be increased in size and speed. If the dog remains relaxed, the helper can step toward the dog, again returning to the smaller circle size that is less threatening. As your dog relaxes, the circle size should again be increased. It is sometimes helpful if the handler anticipates the next phase of the helper's actions and gets the dog's attention before he has time to become concerned. For example, as the helper steps forward, the handler could say "Sparky!" (use an upbeat tone) and reward the dog (if he behaves appropriately) as the helper makes her move. Go slowly. Large or quick gestures can be threats to these dogs. By going slowly, the helper will be able to

continue to approach the dog with progressively more complicated desensitization gestures.

Clients are often frustrated by this s-l-o-w approach. Don't be. Just remember that wherever you are in this tier of the program, there are tasks that came earlier that you would not have been able to execute without your commitment to desensitization and counter-conditioning. These desensitization programs are hard work for everyone. These programs will help your dog to get as well as he can get. They offer you an alternative to forever banishing the dog and protecting him from people, gestures, and environments that he finds provocative. Please remember that your job is to keep the dog as safe and happy as possible.

The helper will eventually be standing next to the dog. The circling hand should gradually be lowered until it just touches your dog's fur. If your dog permits this, the helper can gradually begin to apply more pressure to the dog with each pass of his hand. *Watch your dog carefully as the touching begins.* Many of these dogs who cope with their anxiety by controlling the behavior of others will tolerate gestures that do not involve physical contact, but will become aggressive at the least intimate contact. The handler is responsible for monitoring your dog's facial and eye gestures for any sign of concern. If anyone is concerned for any reason, back off. It is far wiser to not take any chances. You can always return to working at a less reactive level and gradually build to a more intimate level. *Remember to do no harm.*

The objective of this program is to gradually work up to the point where the helper can greet, pass, bump, and pet the dog without problems. Once this is possible, the entire program should be repeated in different rooms, indoors and out, and from different positions relative to the dog (behind the dog and, the more threatening position, in front of the dog). Everyone in the household should practice by acting as both the helper and the handler.

The ultimate hope is that people will be able to rush up and hug the dog. *Not all dogs will attain this level of behavioral change.* Caution is urged and some dogs may never be able to be hugged and surrounded by strangers. That's okay. Remember, your main obligation is to the dog's welfare, not to whatever others may think that they "should" be able to do to your dog. **One of the benefits of these programs is that you will become aware of gestures that signal the dog's limits and can decide whether you wish to attempt to modify these, or whether the dog will be happier with some protected limitations.**

Protocol Task Sheets

These tasks are meant to give you guidance only. They are designed to use very, very, very gradual changes. Such tiny steps allow you to reward aspects of the behaviors that are good, without accidentally rewarding aspects of behavior that are not so good.

Built into these programs are the concepts of desensitization (DS), where you teach the dog not to react to some situation by exposing him to the situation at a level below that needed to have him react and become distressed, and counter-conditioning (CC), where you reward behaviors that are in direct opposition or contrast to those that are undesirable.

If you open any applied psychology text or article on learning, you will see similar programs. There is nothing

magic or novel or original here; these tasks are those that are common to most dog and cat training and behavior modification programs, and you will see similar task sheets in a number of books, articles, and online sources.

Please remember that what *is different here* is that you are rewarding the physical signs that the dog is less distressed or worried. You are rewarding *only* relaxed behaviors (review the **Protocol for Teaching Your Dog to Take a Deep Breath and Use Other Biofeedback Methods as Part of Relaxation**).

The tasks involve only common situations in which your dog may respond inappropriately or undesirably. Some of these situations may not be relevant to you, and others that are relevant may be missing. Please feel free to customize or alter this program, but please do so using the pattern of approach used here (i.e., gradually work up to the task, frequent returns to something easier, always ending on a good note, et cetera).

The task is listed on the left. There is space for you to make comments about how easy or hard the task was for the dog, how many times it had to be repeated, or other questionable behaviors that appeared during the task. You should discuss these with your veterinarian at your re-exam appointment.

Try grouping these tasks into segments that you work through in *no more* than 15 minutes.

Tasks

The dog sits, stays, and relaxes. The helper should:

- Make small circles at 3 meters (10 feet)
- Make large circles at 3 meters (10 feet)
- Make small circles at 2.5 meters (8 feet)
- Make large circles at 2.5 meters (8 feet)
- Make small circles at 2 meters (6.5 feet)
- Make large circles at 2 meters (6.5 feet)
- Make small circles at 1.5 meters (5 feet)
- Make large circles at 1.5 meters (5 feet)
- Make small circles at 1 meter (3 feet)
- Make large circles at 1 meter (3 feet)

- Make small circles at 0.5 meter (1.5 feet)
- Make large circles at 0.5 meter (1.5 feet)
- Make small circles at 0.25 meter (1 foot)
- Make large circles at 0.25 meter (1 foot)
- Bend at waist at 0.25 meter (1 foot) and make small circles above dog's head
- Bend at waist at 0.25 meter (1 foot) and make large circles above dog's head
- Make small circles immediately above dog's head
- Make large circles immediately above dog's head*
- Quickly and lightly brush dog's fur while circling above dog's back*
- Repeat the above and brush for a slightly longer time*
- Repeat, increasing pressure slightly*
- Repeat, with petting pressure*
- Press gently on the dog's shoulders*
- Press moderately on the dog's shoulders*
- Press firmly on the dog's shoulders*
- Press firmly on the dog's back*
- Keep increasing pressure on the dog until the dog is pushed to the ground*
- Massage neck, shoulders, and hips*
- Roll on to back so that belly is exposed*
- Massage belly, groin, and chest gently*

For Future Repetitions

- Repeat all tasks in different locations.
- Repeat all tasks with all family members.
- Repeat all tasks with only every second or third being rewarded with a treat. (Remember praise!)
- Repeat with only intermittent treat reinforcement. (Remember praise!)

**Caution:* These gestures can be viewed as threats by your dog. Observe the dog's signals carefully. Do not take risks. Not all dogs will succeed at the most advanced levels. This is fine. Frequent repetitions will often allow dogs to continue to improve.