

Park Veterinary Centre



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Desensitisation Clinics

Desensitisation is a technique used to change an animal's response or reaction to someone or something of which it is afraid. It involves exposing the animal to whoever or whatever frightens it but in gradually increasing amounts and starting with sessions short enough not to instil fear.

Desensitisation can be speeded up by adding another technique known as **counter-conditioning**. This means introducing a pleasant experience at the same time as whoever or whatever would normally frighten the animal.

In the surgery the main problem for animals is restraint and handling. Fear of being handled may be the result of a painful or unpleasant experience but some animals particularly young ones may be afraid of being handled simply because they never have been and so they don't understand what is happening. They are afraid of the unknown.

It is relatively easy to accustom a very young animal to being handled by gradually increasing the amount of gentle handling and doing it on a regular basis. If you associate the handling with a food treat or a game then being handled becomes good fun.

It is harder to desensitise an animal to handling if they have already had a painful or unpleasant experience because when you begin to handle them they expect to be hurt and so will find it difficult to associate handling with good things. Their fear of pain overrides the ability to learn that handling can be fun. An animal's fear of something can also be reinforced by the physical feeling of fear i.e. raised heart rate, respiration, hair standing on end, trembling etc.

Example of the process by which a handling problem can arise:

1. Dog has had ear infection..... Touching ear = feeling of pain.
2. This leads to..... Touching ear = fear of pain.
3. This may lead to..... Touching head = fear of pain.
4. This may lead to..... Reaching hand towards head = fear of pain.

The result we want to achieve is:

5. With desensitisation..... Touching ear = no pain
6. With counter-conditioning..... Touching ear = no pain + food treat/toy/game

An animal cannot learn to enjoy pain. The best we can achieve is that if the animal has enough positive handling he will recover from small incidents of unavoidable discomfort e.g. microchipping, palpation of painful areas etc.

Desensitisation sessions.

These last for approximately 5-10 minutes and the animal is gradually introduced to the type of handling which would normally worry him/her (e.g. feet, ears general body handling) and he/she is given a favourite food treat so that the handling is associated with something nice.

During this technique the animal must not be anxious at any point.

Handling is built up gradually over a number of sessions.

These sessions can be booked between 8.30am and 4pm on weekdays and you should consider coming between 2 and 3 times a week. Each session costs £10.00.

There are no hard and fast rules about how long this process will take. Every individual is different. Some animals will improve in 6 sessions, some may take 40 sessions and some may never be totally happy about the intended final result.

Initial Assessment.

If you are interested in bringing your animal to desensitisation clinics you will need to come for an assessment appointment. This is to see whether the procedure will be of benefit to your pet. A history of the problem is taken and we then find the point at which your animal is *not* worried and this is used as the starting point for desensitisation. Some animals are fine coming into the surgery and into the consulting room but others are terrified as soon as the car turns into the car park. The assessment is important because it is imperative that we start at a point *before* the animal becomes worried. The charge for the assessment is £20.00.

The more established the fear or phobia is, the longer desensitisation will take. The more traumatic the experience which caused the fear or phobia, the longer desensitisation will take. Therefore the prognosis is better if the problem is treated early. Consequently, desensitisation clinics will be of most benefit for young animals which have not had extensive handling and therefore are just not used to it and for animals which have only recently had an unpleasant experience. It is not suitable for long-standing phobias. There may be other things you can do at home to help your pet and a full behaviour consultation can be booked if you wish. The cost of a full consultation is £75.00.

All desensitisation sessions and behaviour consultations are undertaken by a qualified behaviour counsellor and/or a nurse trained in desensitisation techniques.



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