

IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVITY IN ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR TRAINING

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Stuart Greenfield HND Animal Welfare, BSc student in Applied Animal Behaviour, discusses the importance of pairing positive and negative

POSITIVE reinforcement and positive associations can have a powerful effect on an animal's emotional response to a stimulus. However, simply using that positivity is not adequate or the most effective method. It is also important food is not the only option. The positive you pair with the aversive may not even be food – it may be a toy or petting, whatever the dog finds most pleasurable.

Simply using food is not enough; timing is important. In this case study, giving the dog biscuits before and after an interaction is insufficient. By pairing the positive with the negative we can reduce the dog's stress levels via use of the item the dog finds pleasurable, as well as distracting the dog from the aversive interaction. The beagle was offered something (food) very pleasurable to it during those interactions. If the dog's leg was being manipulated food was offered throughout the interaction. This works to counter-condition the dog's associations with the interaction and, in turn, reduce the fear/anxiety response. In subsequent interactions the dog's response was reduced in intensity. So remember, positivity is powerful, but be aware of how to use that power effectively.

Case study

The case study is of a very handsome male beagle, still quite young. With its owner it was

adorable. However, when anybody else went near it the dog delivered the most horrific throaty bark and displayed a multitude of high-level stress response behaviours. This was not a happy dog.

The dog came to the practice to have a re-fracture of the hindleg corrected. It had a history of fear-based aggression towards strangers, in particular within the veterinary practice, due to an aversive experience before coming to the practice I worked in. The dog was undergoing a behaviour programme outside the practice so my objective was to ensure the time spent within the practice did not send it spiralling backwards in its training via a variety of unpleasant and aversive interactions. This was also difficult as the dog had to spend a number of weeks within the practice to heal as it could not be left unattended and the owner had to work.

My approach was to use counter-conditioning during staff-patient interactions. This process works towards creating a new conditioned emotional response (CER).

I began by reducing the predictability of potential triggers. Triggers are things the dog may begin to associate with an outcome, for example, staff approaching the kennel to give an injection. This can turn into what is known as trigger stacking ([Figure 1](#)), where a number of triggers predict an outcome, be it aversive or pleasurable, which cause the dog to react. I aimed to turn these triggers into something associated with good things, rather than pain or fear. This meant the dog's emotional stress response was reduced. By changing the triggers to predict something the dog finds pleasurable, you can work towards ensuring the emotional response is positive rather than anxiety or fear. The dog's anxiety levels are then reduced when you begin the interaction because its associations with those triggers are now pleasurable, so the anxiety level is not building.

During specific interactions, such as giving medication and manipulation of the injured leg, the dog was given the option of leaving the confining kennel area. It was offered positive associations during the interaction by pairing the interaction with something pleasurable. If a vet needed to manipulate the dog's leg I would be present at the same time. I would offer cooked chicken as the vet manipulated the leg. By doing this it was possible to offer positive associations with the interaction, which meant everything was calmer both for the patient and the staff. There was also no need for restraint, further reducing the dog's emotional stress.

By offering these positive associations it was possible to reduce the dog's negative emotional response. It could begin to predict positive outcomes, which reduced its emotional stress.

With this particular dog the technique also reduced the likelihood his response to strangers would worsen as a result of aversive interaction with strangers during his time in the veterinary practice.

The owner's feedback highlights how important understanding the dog's mental state was: "He wasn't judged for his aggression – it was interpreted as fear and he was treated with understanding. His aggression was created by an inexperienced person or couple of people who were scared and unsure of how to handle a dog that was worried and in pain, and the consequent

management and attitude was that he was 'difficult' and a 'mean' dog. Dogs like humans sense this. I wish all health professionals were educated in handling cases like D."

It is important to remember how important the mental well-being of our patients is, and use the power of positivity to improve the patient's experience of the practice and reduce its emotional stress response. This will improve subsequent interactions and improve welfare as well as safety for the patient and staff. As is evident from the owner feedback, it also improves our clients' trust in the practice.



Trigger stacking ladder



