

BEHAVIORAL TREATMENT OF CANINE COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR

1. Identify the Conflict

Environmental and Social Conflict

- Any conditions that increase arousal or conflict (owner departures and returns, food preparation, changes in social or physical environment)
- Lack of opportunity to express species-typical behavior (lack of mental and physical stimulation appropriate for the breed and age of the dog)
- Temporary or permanent move to an unfamiliar environment (change in residence or boarding at kennel)
- An unpredictable environment
- Change in social group (introduction or departure of people or pets; change in social interaction with owners or conspecifics)
- Confinement to small areas (crates, small rooms, kennel)
- Sensitivity to particular sounds (storms, vacuums, yard machinery, telephones, microwave bells, running water)

Physical Discomfort

- Estrus
- Parturition
- Routine surgery
- Fleas, allergies, impacted anal sacs, and any physical trauma.

2. Environmental Enrichment

As a form of occupational therapy, give the dog distracting toys to keep it busy during times it is prone to engaging in compulsive behavior. Dogs that are motivated by food often like hollow bones or Kong toys filled with peanut butter, liverwurst, or cream cheese. The food may take longer to extract if the food-filled toy is frozen first. If the dog enjoys chasing objects, a large Boomer Ball can be made more interesting with rabbit scent (available to train hunting dogs) and the dog can push it around the yard or house.

There are also a variety of "food puzzle" toys available in pet stores and through pet catalogues. A "Buster Cube" (a hard plastic cube that can be filled with dry kibble) is such a device. It must be rolled a few times for food to be released. Buster Cubes are appropriate for dogs that are not prone to destroying or ingesting objects. Boomer Balls are also available as food puzzles and are virtually indestructible. To keep the dog mentally stimulated, the owner can provide daily meals in one of these food puzzles. After all, our dog's ancestors spent a good portion of their active time "chasing down meals." Why shouldn't our domestic dogs have the opportunity to express this "natural" approach to feeding?

It is very important to remember that dogs are pack animals and, as such, are inherently social. Like people, dogs suffer emotionally, and sometimes physically, when they do not receive sufficient and appropriate social interaction. The optimum treatment strategy is to spend as much quality time with the dog as it needs though the hustle and bustle of modern life does not always permit this luxury. If this is not a possibility, you should consider engaging the services of others who have more time on their hands. You might hire a professional dog walker or a neighbor to visit their dog when they are away for long hours. Also, doggie daycare can provide an otherwise lonely dog with company and entertainment. The take home message is that dogs are living creatures and need something to occupy their time, just as we do. Many of the modern-day canine psychoses seem to stem from or be aggravated by an inappropriate lifestyle that is under-stimulating. It benefits dogs to be gainfully employed in something, to have a job to do. In the process of designing a job for the dog, make sure the owner incorporates breed-specific needs, such as herding-type activities for herding breeds, lure coursing for terriers and sight hounds, and retrieving games for sporting dogs.

3. Exercise

Just like in people, regular, brisk, daily exercise is an effective means to reduce a dog's anxiety. Twenty to thirty minutes of sustained, aerobic exercise once or preferably twice per day is recommended. A brisk walk or games of fetch are good forms of exercise. It is aerobic (running) exercise that is really indicated, not just a twice-daily saunter around the block. The owners will need to promote and supervise their dog's exercise program. Simply turning the dog out in the backyard is usually insufficient, as most dogs do not tire themselves out this way. They may run a bit, rest a bit, and so on, not really pushing themselves to the maximum. They need the owner, their personal trainer, to make it all come together.

4. Diet

Theoretically, low protein diets might offer advantages over higher protein equivalents, in terms of mood stabilization and the minimization of anxiety, because low protein diets promote the endogenous formation of serotonin. If appropriate for the dog's age and activity level, we recommend feeding an all-natural (no artificial preservatives) low protein diet (16-22% protein) for a trial period of 4 weeks to see if there is any improvement in the dog's condition.

5. Daily Structure

Dogs feel more secure, and consequently less anxious, when they have a predictable routine. The owner should try to maintain a consistent daily schedule for feeding, exercise, training, and play, so the dog can anticipate the activities and attention.

6. Attention Withdrawal

It is particularly important to ignore the dog, unless it is in danger of injuring itself, when it is engaged in compulsive behavior, since any attention given at this time will reinforce the unwanted behavior. The dog may consider any form of attention, even punishment, as a reward. In addition, punishment may actually increase the dog's anxiety and intensify the behavior. This step is essential in the initial stage of treatment, but may be relaxed, once the obedience training has had some effect. Ignoring the dog, in conjunction with obedience training, will help reduce the incidence of compulsive behavior.

What should the owner do if they cannot distract the dog from the unwanted behavior? Once the dog begins to show the compulsive behavior, the owner should make a novel sound (blow a whistle or duck call, shake a can of pennies) and leave the room. Hopefully, the sound will distract the dog and it will stop the unwanted behavior and follow the owner from the room. Ideally, the dog should learn to associate the performance of a particular behavior with the sound and the owner's subsequent departure. The owner's departure functions as a form of punishment for the dog and will help decrease the frequency of the behavior. If there is an attention-seeking component to the dog's compulsive behavior, the owner may notice an increase in the frequency and/or intensity of the behavior when the owner begins this portion of the program, then it should decrease. It is very important that the owner is consistent and does not reward the dog's compulsion with attention or the dog will become more persistent.

To be effective, this technique must be used every time the dog shows an intention to perform the compulsive behavior. When supervision is impossible, the dog should be put in a situation where it cannot or likely will not engage in the compulsive behavior.

7. No Discipline

Once compulsive behavior is engrained, it becomes an activity over which the dog no longer has any form of self-control. At this stage, any form of punishment could be construed as being inhumane. Discipline is very complex, and if not used properly, may increase the dog's anxiety by increasing the unpredictability of the owner's interactions with the dog. Dogs that are punished for compulsive behavior may learn to engage in the behavior only in the owner's absence (they may go to a remote location in the house) or they may engage in a different form of compulsive behavior that is more "acceptable" to the owner. For example, a tail chaser may begin to pace in large circles or may engage in repetitive behavior with toys. While this behavior may be less disturbing for the owner, the underlying anxiety still has not been addressed and the compulsion has merely been transferred, not eliminated. Therefore, we strongly recommend that discipline should not be used in dogs suffering from compulsive disorders.

8. Obedience Training

Formal obedience training, at home, is an invaluable aid to the treatment of compulsive dogs. Two short 5-minute sessions daily of obedience exercises are usually sufficient. Be

sure to use treats and praise for motivation. Obedience training will make the interaction between the owner and the dog more consistent, and make the dog's environment more predictable which will help decrease the dog's anxiety. Regular obedience training will also stimulate the dog mentally, much like having a job. The owner will also need to use obedience commands for the counterconditioning techniques that may be recommended later in treatment. If the owner is inexperienced at dog training, we recommend you direct the owner to the assistance of a trainer well versed in positive training techniques.

9. Counterconditioning

Counterconditioning interrupts unwanted behavior by training the dog to respond to a command that is incompatible with continuing performance of the compulsive behavior. This technique is most effective when you can identify and predict the situations that trigger the dog's compulsive behavior. Counterconditioning is most successfully implemented later in the treatment program after the dog's anxiety level is reduced (via management changes and pharmacological treatment) and response to obedience commands is well established.

The first step to counterconditioning is to teach the dog to relax on command by responding to verbal and visual cues from the owner. Under non-stressful conditions, teach the dog to sit and watch the owner in order to receive praise or a food treat. Have the owner say "sit" and as they move their finger to their face, as a visual cue, say "watch me." If the dog responds by paying attention to the owner in a relaxed and focused manner, reward the dog with a small food treat or praise lavishly. Perform this relaxation exercise daily for the first 5 days. Each day increase the amount of time that the dog must pay attention to the owner in a relaxed pose before they give a reward. By the end of the fifth day, the dog should be able to sit while focused on the owner for 25-30 seconds no matter what the distraction. At this stage, when the owner senses the dog is about to engage in compulsive behavior, they can use this counterconditioning technique to interrupt the behavior before it is initiated. It is important to practice this exercise on a periodic basis to ensure its effectiveness when the owner needs it.

As an alternative strategy, once the dog can perform a long "down-stay", the owner can train the dog to lie on a special dog bed or mat that is used for counterconditioning. Train the dog to lie on the mat when it is relaxed and not likely to engage in compulsive behavior. Initially, reward the dog every 10 seconds it lies still, then every 20, then 30, and so on. Later on in training, the owner will want to institute intermittent rewards. If the dog leaves the mat, attach a no-reward mark, such as "AH! AH!" on the misbehavior, then escort the dog back to the mat. The dog will soon learn that if the "stay" command is broken, it is going to be put back anyway, but if it holds the stay on its own, it has a fair chance of being rewarded with a treat. Gradually train the dog to relax and lie on the mat when the owner is no longer in the room. Now the owner is ready to intervene before the dog engages in compulsive activity by commanding it to lie on the training mat or bed that should, by the way, be located in a safe and quiet area.