

Disruptive Stimulus : Definition And Application In Behaviour Therapy

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Resorting to behavioural therapies is now widespread in veterinary practice. Punishment is often prescribed in order to eliminate unwanted behaviours. Beyond the ethical limits involved, the short retention of learning based upon punishment and the absolute necessity to apply sanction within a very short time after the undesirable act, are amongst the many reasons to try to discover alternative methods.

The concept of "disruptive stimulus" results from behavioural patterns. It can be defined as a jarring stimulus that interrupts the course of the sequence, which produces an expectation stage enabling enticement of the pet to another (desired) activity.

The present study starts from this definition to show the usefulness of using a citronella spray (device called ABOISTOPref, by DYNAVET, France) as such a stimulus in dogs showing territorial barking. 52 dogs spending at least 4 hours a day in a garden adjacent to a busy street were studied. The trial compares the effects of a punitive stimulus consisting of a garden-hose spraying water, to the ABOISTOP® collar. Treatment was allocated at random. Once a week, each owner noted the frequency of barking towards 10 pedestrians. A first control was done on day 0 (which provides the reference figure), then every seventh day till day 35 when therapy was stopped. Relapses were assessed on day 90. It should be noted that every bark interruption by the device was immediately followed by a play session initiated by the owner (redirection of behaviour).

In the "punishment group" we noted a sudden cessation of barking, as early as on day 7, which was subsequently steady until day 28. In the "disruptive group" the decrease of barking was more gradual (48.6% barking on day 7 — 16.9% on day 14) and a total disappearance could be heard by day 21. In addition, the relapse rate on day 90 was 86% in the "punishment group" versus 3.8% in the "disruptive group".

It appears that this method based upon an original ethological concept is more effective than punishment with a water hose by the mere fact of its long-lasting results.