



Desensitization to Handling/Grooming Handbook

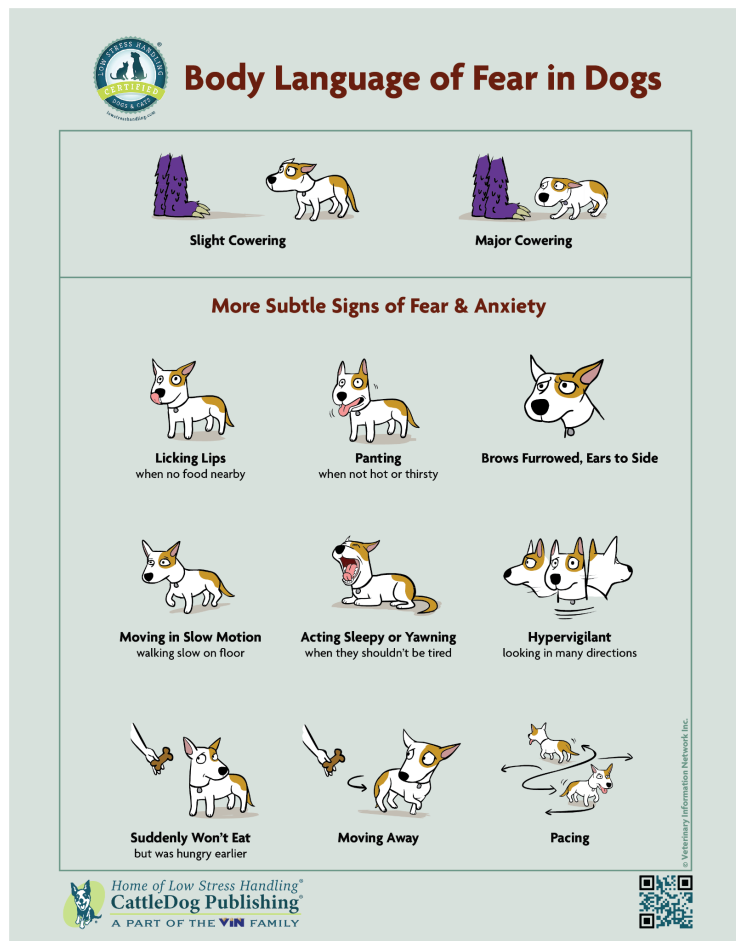
There are many different processes that we have to put dogs through that are not pleasant to them and cause stress in some form or another. Ears, feet, and undersides are very sensitive to dogs and they are very protective of them, so it may require some desensitization in order to be able to touch your dog's feet, or even worse, trim their nails! But veterinarians often need to be able to touch these areas in order to do a complete exam. Your dog will also often be held at the vet for some procedures, so it's important to make sure they can tolerate being held and/or picked up. Below is a comprehensive guide to desensitizing your dog to any physical handling that are most commonly aversive to them! And if your dog is sensitive about something that isn't included, substitute it for what is included and follow the same general pathway by **breaking steps down into smallest pieces possible and then proceeding to the next step *only* when your dog is showing *no* signs of fear, stress, or discomfort. You can only progress through these steps as quickly as your dog allows!** The most common signs of stress for dogs are:

- Out of context yawning
- Out of context scratching
- Shaking off
- Mouth closing/tightening
- Ears going back
- Eyes widening/dilating
- Tail lowering/tucking
- Lip licking/tongue flicking
- Body stiffening
- Growling

★ *Remember: never call your dog's name for something that they may not enjoy, such as tail trims, baths, or anything else they don't like. Even after working through the protocols, pairing their name with something unpleasant will teach your dog to begin to ignore their name.*

Touching Sensitive Areas

Identify the areas that your dog is most sensitive (while they're calm and relaxed, move one hand slowly and gently all over their body, and refer to the stress signals listed above—or you may already know these areas where they're sensitive!). The most common places dogs don't like to be



touched are **feet, tail, mouth, and ears**. Grabbing/holding their collars can be very aversive as well, and should not be done until the dog is desensitized to it, so use a gradual desensitization protocol for that as well!

1. Start by putting your hand **near** the area that's sensitive, and gradually moving it to the sensitive area. Hold your hand there for **one second** only.
 - a. Example: If your dog is fearful of his feet being touched, start petting their shoulder and slowly move your hand down towards their feet. Stop as soon as you see signs of stress.
2. Remove your hand **immediately** and offer a high value reward (treats are usually easiest—pick something they don't ever get otherwise, like fresh meat or cheese!).
3. Repeat **until they show no signs of stress at this point**, then move your hand a little bit closer to the sensitive area, or hold your hand in place for **two** seconds instead of one.
4. Repeat until the dog shows no signs of stress.
5. Touch the area for **three** seconds.
6. Repeat until the dog shows no signs of stress, etc.
7. At about ten seconds, you can begin wrapping your hand around the area (if it's something like feet or tail) or gently making small, soothing rubbing motions, again for just one second at first, stop, treat, repeat, and then two, stop, treat, repeat, then three, etc.
 - a. You can begin **gently** tugging on the tail/feet after step 7 as well, again for just a second at first, then treat, repeat, then two seconds, treat, repeat, etc.

★ *Teaching “shake” is a great way to help dogs who are sensitive about their feet touched (see next section), as it allows them to **offer** you their feet instead of waiting for them to be touched unexpectedly!*

Nail Trimming

→ *First of all, make sure your dog is tolerant of their **feet** being touched (see previous section)!*

If your dog is neutral towards nail trimming, or hasn't had their nails trimmed yet, you will likely be able to skip many of these steps. Just remember the goal is always to keep your dog **UNDER** their stress threshold, meaning **only progress to the next step if your dog is showing no signs of stress on the current step**. Skip through steps **only** if your dog is **already** comfortable with it. This is the most lengthy and extensive process, but it is a complex process, and all the extra time will pay off **when you can trim your dog's nails easily for the rest of their life!**

1. Teach your dog to **offer** you their foot by teaching them “shake”:
 - a. With your dog in a sitting position, put a treat in your hand and close your fist over it, then hold it out in front of your dog. Wait and don't say or do anything until your dog paws at your hand (this could take a few minutes). The second they do, mark (click or “yes!”) and reward with the treat.
 - b. Repeat until your dog reliably paws your hand as soon as you show it to them. Now, add the cue “shake” when you show them your hand.

- c. Repeat (**multiple** different sessions!).
2. Now you should be able to begin showing your dog your hand open with your palm up (without a treat) and say “shake.” Continue to reward with a treat from your other hand.
3. Begin extending the duration of “shake”:
 - a. Ask for “shake,” and instead of rewarding immediately, pause for a second, and then reward.
 - b. Repeat this 5-10 times, then begin pausing for two seconds before rewarding. If your dog seems uncomfortable or jerks their paw away, go back to step one and repeat it again.
 - c. Repeat 5-10 times, then begin pausing for three seconds before rewarding.
 - d. Repeat this process until you get up to 10 or 15 seconds or so.
4. After your dog is resting their foot on your hand for an extended time comfortably, you can begin to try closing your hand around their paw. If they panic, jerk their paw away, or show any signs of stress go back to step 2 and practice more. **The first time you close your hand on their paw, make sure it's only for a second, then immediately release, praise, and treat.**
5. Begin adding duration **one second at a time** (as in step 2), until you can hold their paw for several seconds and they remain comfortable the entire time (they should be getting treats the entire time as well!).

If your dog **does** have a stressful/fearful reaction even to nail clippers being picked up:

1. Start leaving the nail clippers out in a socially significant area (such as the coffee table or end table—not too close to a bed or favorite resting spot though) and just don't touch them—just pretend they aren't there (unless your dog interacts with them!). If the dog ever attempts to investigate them at all, **immediately** mark and reward with high value treats (pick something they don't ever get otherwise, like fresh meat or cheese!) and act very excited. Just leave the clippers in this spot for a week or two first and reward any attempts at interaction. Leave some treats for your dog to find and eat off the clippers a few times a day as well.
2. After a few days, randomly in the middle of a play session (or whatever other activity your dog really enjoys), pick up the clippers from where they've been sitting, and as soon as your dog notices you picked them up, set them back down and then reward your dog with high value treats. Repeat this several times, until they have no reaction to the clippers being picked up.
3. Once they are not reacting to the clippers being picked up, begin to move them towards your dog, just a few inches at first, then sit them back down (if the dog ever reacts negatively, just move them less so that they're further away from them). Repeat this until they are not reacting again (remember to **always begin this exercise during a play session when your dog is in a good mood**, and reward with high value treats).

If your dog does **not** have a stressful/fearful reaction to nail clippers being picked up:

1. When your dog is not reacting to the clippers moving towards them, then begin to gradually move the clippers a bit closer to them, by a margin of a few inches at a time, or whatever they are comfortable with. Just remember that the point is that your dog is **always under their stress threshold**. If they ever show signs of stress, go back to the last step and repeat several more

times before attempting to progress again. Mark and reward with high value treats each time you move the clippers closer to them.

2. When you finally are able to touch your dog with the clippers, for the first time, touch them for **just a second** (not on their paw yet—somewhere they are less sensitive), then put the clippers down, praise and reward them with treats.
3. Repeat 5-10 times, then touch them an inch or two closer to the paw, repeat 5-10 times, and continue this, working your way down their body to their paw. There is **no duration** here—just touching your dog for **one** second at a time then immediately setting the clippers down and rewarding! (Remember again—if your dog ever shows any signs of stress, go back to the last step where they were not stressed and repeat until you can progress without stress!)
4. Once you can touch your dog's paw with the clippers, you're almost there! Begin adding duration onto touching their paw with the clippers, again, one second at a time, until you can touch their paw for about ten seconds—about how long it should take to cut their nails (you can gradually and slowly move your fingers around and touch their nails, as you would when you trim them, while you do this).
5. Once you can hold the clippers against the dog's paw for several seconds with the dog relaxed, touch your dog's paw with the clippers while clipping a piece of dry pasta (to imitate the sound of the nails), then immediately mark and reward. Repeat this 5-10 times.
 - a. If your dog panics, do this step 5-10 times without touching their paw first.
6. Now time to actually trim a nail! It should be a piece of cake if you've followed every step and can lift your dog's paw and hold it for several seconds with the nail clippers touching it without them being nervous. Just clip one nail first, then sit their paw down and mark and reward. Wait a few minutes (you can even play your dog's favorite game or let them enjoy their favorite interactive toy during this time) and then do the second nail. Repeat until all nails are clipped. Over time, you can gradually begin clipping the entire foot at once, instead of one nail at a time—or you can just continue to trim one nail at a time! Some people just do one nail a day if their dog is particularly stressed by the process.
 - a. Make sure you're doing this in a place where your dog is **relaxed** and **calm**.
 - b. You can give the dog a lickimat (lickimat.com—or even just a flat surface like a plate or frisbee—freeze it ahead of time so it lasts longer!) with peanut butter spread on it to enjoy, keeping their mind off what you're doing!
 - c. You can also play some calming music (classical or reggae both have been shown to have a calming effect on dogs) and spray some DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) on the area ahead of time.

- ★ *If all of this seems too stressful or daunting, consider filing (using a nail file or dremel) as a permanent management solution to nail trimming (though you will also need to judge your dog's reaction to a file, and may need to desensitize them to that as well).*
- ★ *Lastly, you can use (and easily make) a sturdy wooden board with a sheet of sandpaper glued to it as a file as well. Though it comes with a little bit of training, **this is the usually most stress-free method for the dog, and probably the easiest and least time consuming training for both of you.** Place it on the floor or lean it*



against a step or sturdy surface like a couch (where it won't move) and hold a treat on it so that your dog paws at the board. Give the treat as soon as your dog paws at the board one time. Then begin gradually increasing the amount of times your dog paws at the filing board before you give the treat, so that they will file their nails down on their own, like cats with a scratcher.

Brushing

→ *First of all, make sure your dog is tolerant of being touched in the area you're brushing (see first section)!*

This process is very similar to desensitization to nail trimming but should be a bit shorter and easier! Again, if your dog is neutral towards being brushed, or hasn't been brushed yet, you will likely be able to skip many of these steps (skip steps **only** if your dog is **already** comfortable with that step). In fact, most dogs love being brushed. This process however is for dogs who **don't** enjoy it—meaning they have already formed negative associations with it for whatever reason (whether from bad experience or just lack of experience). Just remember the goal is always to keep the dog **UNDER** their stress threshold, meaning **only** progress to the next step if your dog is showing **no** signs of stress on the current step.

If your dog **does** have a stressful/fearful reaction of the brush even being picked up:

1. Start leaving the brush out in a socially significant area (such as the coffee table or end table—not too close to a bed or favorite resting spot, though) and just don't touch them—just pretend they aren't there (unless your dog interacts with them!). If your dog ever attempts to investigate them at all, **immediately** mark and reward them with high value treats (pick something they don't ever get otherwise, like fresh meat or cheese!) and act very excited. Just leave the brush in this spot for a week or two first and reward any attempts at interaction. Leave some treats for the dog to find and eat off the brush a few times a day as well.
2. After a few days, randomly in the middle of a play session (or whatever other activity your dog really enjoys), pick up the brush from where it's been sitting, and as soon as your dog notices you picked it up, sit it back down. Then mark and reward your dog with high value treats. Repeat this several times, until they have no reaction to the brush being picked up.
3. Once they are **not** reacting to the brush being picked up, begin to move it towards them, just a few inches at first, then sit it back down (if the dog ever reacts negatively, just move them less so that they're further away from them). Repeat this until they are not reacting again (**remember to always begin this exercise during a play session when your dog is in a good mood**, and reward with high value treats).

If your dog does **not** have a stressful/fearful reaction to the brush being picked up:

1. When your dog is not reacting to the brush moving towards them, then begin to **gradually** move it a bit closer to them, by a margin of a few inches at a time, or whatever they are comfortable with. Just remember that the point is that **they are always under their stress threshold**. If they ever show signs of stress, go back to the last step and repeat several more times before attempting to progress again. Mark and reward with high value treats (pick something they don't

ever get otherwise, like fresh meat or cheese!) each time you move the brush closer to them by **any** amount.

4. When you finally are able to touch them with the brush, for the first me, just touch them for **one** second, in the spot they like being petted the most, then put the brush down, mark and reward with high value treats. Repeat 5-10 times.
5. Now begin adding duration, by gradually moving the brush slowly around their body, only adding one second at a time if necessary. Mark and reward. Remember, **if they ever show any signs of stress, go back to the previous amount of me he tolerated and repeat more before adding another second.**
 - a. Brush your dog **with the direction of their fur, not against.**
 - b. Some dogs prefer certain textures/types of brushes over others, so experiment with all different types (rubber, metal, plastic, wood, glove, heavy, light, small, large, etc)! If you're not sure what type is best for your dog's fur type, ask your vet. Some types of brushes can hurt if used on the wrong type of fur.
 - c. Make sure you're doing this in a place where your dog likes to relax and be calm.
 - d. You can give your dog a lickimat (lickimat.com—or even just a flat surface like a plate or frisbee—freeze it ahead of time so it lasts longer!) with peanut butter spread on it to enjoy, keeping their mind off what you're doing!
 - e. You can also play some calming music (classical or reggae both have been shown to have a calming effect on dogs) and spray some DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) on the area ahead of time.

Bathing

→ *First of all, make sure your dog is tolerant of being touched all over (see first section)!*

Contrary to popular assumptions, dogs don't actually need to be regularly bathed! In fact, for an animal with such a sensitive nose, it can be very stressful for them to smell like soap or shampoo, instead of their natural scents, giving them another reason to hate taking baths. However, sometimes we want to protect our house and furniture if dogs get particularly messy!

This is the most variable process though, as there are many different methods to bathe a dog. If your dog enjoys pools or hoses (or already has a negative association with baths in a tub/shower), consider bathing them in a pool with a hose or even buckets of water if the hose is too scary. You may still need to gradually desensitize them to the pool or hose (by tossing treats into the pool while it's empty, so that they go in, and then filling it up only an inch or so at a time each time your dog is in it, while praising and feeding high value treats, or by turning the hose on and off while gradually moving it a few inches closer to the dog, praising and feeding high value treats).

However, if your dog has negative associations with pools/hoses, or you need to bath them in a tub/shower for another reason, this would typically be the best process:

If your dog **already has negative associations** with the bathroom (where the tub or shower is) and is afraid to come in, then you will need to desensitize them to even coming into the room:

1. Start by tossing high value treats (pick something they don't ever get otherwise, like fresh meat or cheese!) onto the floor in the bathroom. If your dog won't go into the room for treats, just set the treats on the floor right outside the threshold (or however close your dog will get to coming inside the room). Repeat every day for a week.
2. Now try setting the treats on the floor about a foot inside the door. Repeat every day again for a week.
3. Gradually increase the distance of the treats away from the door by about a foot at a time, repeating for about a week, in the same way, until your dog is able to stand next to the tub/shower.
4. You can also try feeding your dog their meals, playing your dog's favorite game, or giving them their favorite long-lasting/interactive toy/chew **in the bathroom, or right outside the bathroom** if they won't go in yet.

If your dog does **not** have negative associations with the bathroom and is comfortable entering the room:

1. Begin by simply desensitizing your dog to standing in the tub/shower. It is much preferable for your dog to get into the tub/shower on their own, instead of having to be lifted. However, if your dog enjoys being lifted (or is too small and has to be lifted), you can place them into the tub/shower. If not, either refer to the protocol for picking them up, or begin by tossing high value treats (pick something they don't ever get otherwise, like fresh meat or cheese!) into the tub/shower so that your dog goes inside **on their own**.
2. If your dog is scared of going into the tub, you can begin by spraying cheese/peanut butter on the outside of the tub/shower so that your dog can lick it off. Do this on 10-20 separate occasions before proceeding to attempting to toss high value treats into the tub/shower. If they still won't go in, you can try getting into the tub/shower first or try sitting in the tub for several minutes calmly and see if they follow you in. You could also try using their favorite toy or feed the dog their meals in the tub/shower.
3. Once your dog is able to go into the tub without any signs of stress/fear, you can begin turning the water on, for just a second at a time at first. Repeat 10-20 times, while feeding your dog high value treats, then begin increasing duration by adding just a second at a time. **Don't even begin to touch your dog with the water yet.**
4. Once you can run the water for several seconds without your dog showing any signs of stress, you can begin to run the water over your dog, for (you guessed it) just a second at a time at first. Repeat 5-10 times, while feeding your dog high value treats, then begin adding duration a second at a time without moving the hose first, then begin moving the hose around your dog's body while scrubbing them.
 - a. If your dog doesn't like the scrubbing, desensitize them to this as well, by beginning with **a second at a time** (again starting with the area your dog most likes being touched), while feeding high value treats.

★ *You can also consider using grooming wipes or wet towels as a more **frequent management alternative to bathing** (though you may have to desensitize them to this as well, but it will be a much shorter process!).*

Restraint/Being Picked Up

The picking up protocol is mostly for smaller dogs, as it is unlikely larger dogs will (or can/should!) be picked up. For larger dogs, consider teaching an “up!” cue to get them to jump up on elevated surfaces if necessary, such as exam tables at the vet (which can usually be lowered). Again, skip steps that the dog is comfortable with already, but only proceed to the next step if the dog is fully comfortable (no signs of stress) on the current step.

Larger dogs will still benefit from steps 1-9 (being restrained).

1. Start by putting **one** hand on **one** side for **one second**.
2. **Immediately** remove it, and offer her a high value reward (treats are usually easiest—pick something they don’t ever get otherwise, like fresh meat or cheese!).
3. Repeat **until they show no signs of stress**.
4. Put a hand on **both** the dog’s sides for **one second**, then remove your hands and offer a high value treat.
5. Repeat again until she shows no signs of stress.
6. Place your hands on both their sides for **two** seconds, then remove your hands and offer a high value treat.
7. Repeat until they show no signs of stress.
8. Add **one second at a time**, stopping to reward and only moving on to the next step when they’re showing no signs of stress, until you can hold them like this for about 15-30 seconds.
9. Then gently position them against your body and slide one hand around so you’re holding their head/neck as well. End goal looks like this:



- a. Again, break this into the **smallest steps possible** and only move on when your dog shows **no signs of stress** at the current step!
10. Slide your hands **underneath their stomach** (as if to pick them up) for **one second**, then remove your hands **immediately** and offer a high value treat.
 11. Repeat until they show no signs of stress.
 12. **Lift them just off the ground for a half of a second**, then put them down, offer a high value treat, and repeat until they show no signs of stress.
 13. Lift them off the ground for **one second**, then **two seconds**, etc...
 14. Continue until you can hold them for up to 30 seconds (to assist with medical handling).

- ★ *It may help to put a cue to being picked up (like “going up!”) **just before** you lift them, so that your dog knows what to expect before it happens. This **predictability** can alleviate a lot of the stress of being picked up!*
- ★ *Important: When lifting dogs, it is important that we use fluid and confident motions, so that your dog does not sense any fear or discomfort on our part. If we are hesitant or nervous about picking a dog up, they will likely be fearful as well, and may think there is danger of being dropped. **We need to be a strong, stable foundation or the dog won’t trust us to pick them up!** So move **fluidly and confidently, without hesitation**, when doing this exercise (and any time you pick a dog up), and don’t make choppy or sudden movements.*