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Environmental Challenges:

Basic Systematic Desensitization for Police Dogs

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Photos by Derek Cain

For many police dog handlers going through a class with a new green dog, environmental exposure training and how to do it correctly can be a mystery. Green dogs imported into the US have had limited exposure to many of the things we take for granted - traffic, vehicles, buildings, slick floors, stairs, and elevators to name a few. Many of the dogs coming from Europe now are younger and less experienced about modern urban society than those that were imported 10-15 years ago.



Expectations of trainers often haven't changed along with the dogs, and we still expect fluid responses to all environmental stressors. Younger dogs have had less time to be exposed to varying environments before they come here and as a result, handlers and trainers need to take care to do this exposure properly. Many really nice dogs get washed from classes because "exposure training" is done improperly or rushed.

Exposure is often done without a plan. Many handlers think it is just a matter of getting the dogs around things that bother them, such as slick floors. Unfortunately, without a proper plan, this will likely only make the problem worse. You can spend a lot of time working on "exposure" thinking you are actually doing something for the dog, when in fact you are actually not doing anything constructive despite the time

you are putting in. When these kinds of situations occur, I hear handlers say, "I really worked hard with him on that slick floor problem, but he never came around." It could be that your plan was a poor one, or that you actually didn't have a plan at all beyond taking him to a place with slick floors and flooding him with stress. Training must have a plan.

Let's continue with the example of slick floors. Many imported dogs are used to living outside where all the surfaces such as grass, dirt, blacktop, and gravel allow him to be able to walk and run naturally by pushing off and driving his nails into the ground and getting traction in the process. When a dog is exposed to slippery surfaces like painted concrete, tile, or polished institutional floors, his normal way of propelling himself suddenly doesn't work. He slides, loses his footing, and the dog feels out of control of his environment. The simplest

thing which he took for granted doesn't work anymore and it can create a feeling of panic in the dog. To function well on slippery floors, the dog must learn to run with his pads, shorten his stride a bit, and not dig in with his nails which make him slip all the more. Learning how to do this is a bit of a trial and error sort of thing. The dog needs exposure to adapt, but the problem is that exposure also causes stress and can shut the dog down. If he stops trying to walk and decides to sun on the floor, he can't learn how to adapt. It is a catch-22. They will often get low, almost crawl, hug the wall, or just plain lay down and not move. The dog uses these behaviors to quiet the stress. In order to train the dog to function on slick floors, he has to have something to help counteract the stress so he will continue to try to move around and learn to adapt, and you need a plan to systematically desensitize him to the stressor.



By the time the dog has come to you for training in a class, the dog may have very limited exposure to these stressors, and coupled with a new environment, new handler, new food, and new living routine, the stress gets to him. After a few times on the slick floor, the dog learns he doesn't like it and experiences stress as soon as his paws hit the slippery surface, anticipating the stress of not being able to move normally. When the dog feels trapped, it can cause him at first to panic and flail his limbs feverishly trying to extract himself from the "quicksand". That just makes him slip and slide even more, compounding his feeling of incapacitation, and making his feelings about the slippery surface even worse. So after a few tries of walking on the floor, he now has made an association of stress with the slick floor and will try and avoid it, which is a normal behavioral response for a dog. There is now a classical association (Pavlov) between the surface and stress which has created an avoidance response.

**Stimulus (slick Floor) =>
Response (avoidance) => (negative)
reinforcement**

The negative reinforcement is experienced by getting off the slick floor. This removes the stress thus increasing the likelihood he will avoid it in the

future when faced with a similar stimulus. We created a worse problem. The result being that he learns that the avoidance response improves his life. This, however, is a problem for us. We need him to want to, or at least tolerate, operating on slick floors. A police dog must be able to function in these environments.

Systematic Desensitization

The first line of defense in tackling such a problem is to employ the behavior changing methodology of systematic desensitization. If successful, this method of changing behavior will change the association between the stimulus and the avoidance response.

**Stimulus (slick floor) =>
Response (operates fluidly) =>
positive reinforcement**

The hard part is when the bad association has already been reinforced numerous times, making the association more difficult to

break. Our process of systematic desensitization relies on the dog being able to experience good feelings on the slippery floor. If the dog is completely shut down and cannot experience these good feelings, it makes it difficult to change the association. That is why it is imperative that we initiate a plan immediately to desensitize the dog before the problem worsens.

First, let's explore what systematic desensitization is. This technique can be used for so many things in police dog training. Teaching the dog to be more neutral and obedient around distractions, including decoy distractions, can be taught using this technique. Teaching neutrality to the handler approaching the dog on the bite (if your dog spins away from you when you approach) and any number of



other important things can be taught like this - we will explore these in upcoming articles.

In systematic desensitization, our aim is to expose the dog slowly to the stimulus that elicits the unwanted behavior, while ensuring the dog experiences a response to that stimulus that is positive. This establishes a new classically trained association that results when the stimulus occurs.

In order to do this we need to be able to do two important things:

- (1) Identify and be able to control the stimulus that elicits the unwanted behavior.**
- (2) Identify the threshold at which the unwanted behavior occurs in the presence of this stimulus.**

Example: Desensitizing Gunfire

In order to explain the process, let's switch examples to one that is very easy to comprehend, systematically desensitizing a dog to gunfire. For some dogs, when gunfire is introduced improperly, it can cause a startle reflex, which creates a fear response. For other dogs, gunfire is associated with biting and they become gunfire

aggressive, which is something we do not want for our police dogs either.

As we explain the systematic desensitization process, you can imagine that if the dog has no history of a bad association with slippery floors, stairs, or gunfire, or any other environmental stressor, that this process of systematic desensitization can be used to properly introduce the dog to these challenges in order to ensure a proper result. It is both a technique for correcting problems and introducing stressors to ensure no problems are created, and as such, is a powerful technique for a trainer to have at his disposal. Assume before you begin training, that you will just gradually and systematically introduce major environmental stressors to the dog instead of waiting for a problem to show up.

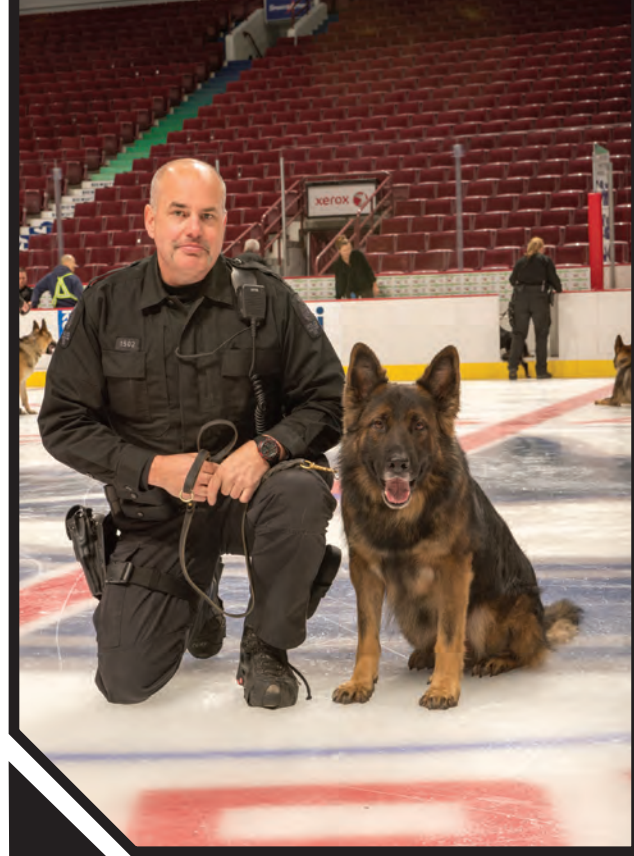
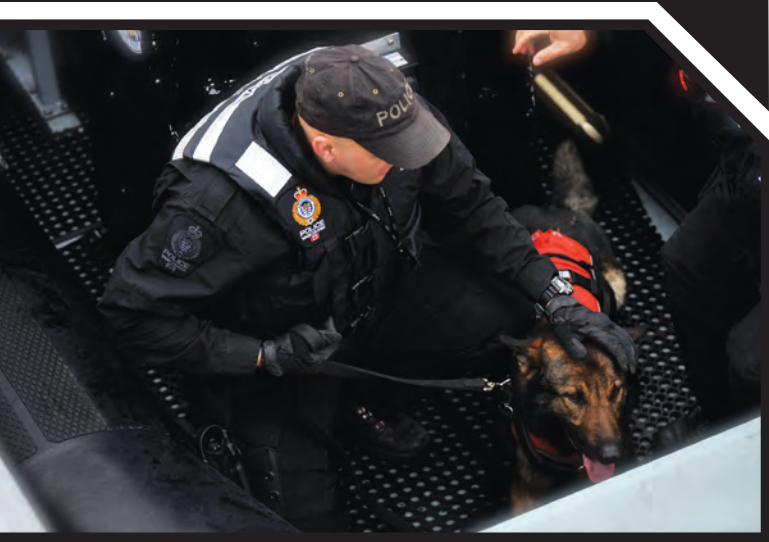
Gunfire is a noise we can usually desensitize through this same process of association with a pleasurable event, slowly making the gunfire noise closer and closer to the dog with the intention to distract him with play to make him neutral to the stimulus. Again, this occurs over a few weeks of work, first with small caliber proceeding to larger caliber

shots only when the dog is completely comfortable with the small arms fire. If the dog already has a bad association with gunfire, it may take longer to get that neutral response. We always increase the distance away from the dog when introducing a larger caliber.

These are two variables that control the intensity of the sound to the dog, and as such, we need to manage them independently. Does noise sensitivity such as gunfire pass the test of being able to be conditioned properly using systematic desensitization?

1. Can we control the Stimulus?
Yes, sound of a gunshot can be adjusted by proximity and caliber and only occurs when we initiate the pull of the trigger so it is completely under our control.

2. Can we identify a Threshold?
Yes, there is a distance away from the noise where the caliber and proximity do not create the startle effect in the dog.



The process would take place as follows: Take the noise to a distance away from the dog where the dog will not experience a startle effect. This is managing the threshold so we get the response we need. The dog and handler are outside on a training field familiar to the dog where good things have happened in the past and are ready to engage in a play session with the tug or Kong. A second person down at the end of the field (perhaps 75 yards or more) will have a small caliber .22 with the muzzle pointed away from the dog and handler. The stimulus is beyond the threshold where the dog would concern himself with the noise. The handler now initiates a very highly stimulating game of tug with the dog, so that it is already under way when the first shot occurs. Keep the dog tugging and occupied with the game as the shots, spaced out and random, occur. The distraction of the game makes the randomly occurring gunfire inconsequential. This will create neutrality. Over a few sessions, move the .22 shots closer, while continuing to play. Watch the dog's reaction. If at any time he gets nervous or is concerned with the gunfire, move the shooting away again. When the shooter can be 20 or so yards away, popping off occasional shots and the dog is engaged fully in play, ignoring

the gunfire, move the shooter far away again and use a larger load. Continue with this process, increasing the size of the load and moving the noise farther away to start, and then as success is seen, close the distance. This systematic approach will desensitize your dog.

Example: Slick Floors

If we go back to the slippery floors, we are going to adapt a similar approach. We would first start with identifying whether we have control over the stimulus and the threshold at which the dog begins to have trouble with the slippery floor. We do, in fact, have control over the stimulus - we can control the type of surface the dog is introduced to in training and we can identify the threshold. As we progress from less slippery concrete floors all the way to polished institutional floors, we can identify where in that transition the dog starts to have a problem. It is important to have multiple surfaces available to you. If all you have are polished floors that are very slick, the dog will not be able to be systematically desensitized. It would be like desensitizing gunfire with

only .45 rounds and no ability to move the noise far away.

Something to keep in mind as we do this is that many dogs, by the time systematic desensitization is undertaken, have developed a phobia of entering the building with a slick floor inside. This can be especially true if you do not have access to multiple surfaces in multiple buildings or have tried to flood the dog initially. Try to enter the building from another entrance unfamiliar to the dog so you do not initiate a stress response before you even start.

We begin then by going to a building with a surface that is unlikely to cause a problem - say a bare concrete floor that actually has decent traction. This is initiating the desensitization process outside the threshold where the dog is concerned with the floor. The dog is brought just outside the entrance of the building. The dog should be on a flat collar and a 15-foot line. The building door is propped open. Using two people



is very helpful. The handler can hold the dog and the trainer can tease the dog with a ball or a Kong. The dog is stimulated with the toy, so he is excited and up in drive. The toy is tossed just to the entrance of the building, still outside. It is important to generate some momentum before entering. The dog is allowed to retrieve a couple of times and the handler engages the dog in some exciting play, with an excited praise voice. Having the ball or Kong on a string really helps.

The tosses now go just inside the door. Make sure the Kong doesn't bounce wildly, and be sure that the dog is only going to step a foot or two into the entrance. He is allowed to pick it up and come back outside for play. If we see the dog enter and grab the Kong with enthusiasm, we can make the next tosses a little deeper into the building and so on. After about six or seven times, the dog should be entering about 10 feet inside. The handler can move up

to meet the dog inside the door to grab the Kong and lead the dog back out. As we go further and further onto the floor, the play is initiated more and more on the slick floor. This in and out process is very important. If the floor causes stress (it will as we get to more slippery floors) then it is important to allow the dog to relieve his stress. The going in and experiencing stress is balanced by the toy (a positive association) and coming back outside for the play (relief of the stress).

We are teaching the dog a structure for introducing multiple iterations of slippery surfaces, and if the dog has a routine for this, the routine itself will be comforting to the dog. We generate success slowly and systematically. This is why we start with a surface that is not really slippery, but is in a building (which in the future will contain progressively more slippery floors). We are setting down a process that we will repeat as we progress to

more and more slippery floors.

Watch the behavior of the dog on the floor, since the first one isn't very slippery at all. The dog should go in easily and quickly to get his toy, pick it up fast, and come enthusiastically to the handler. This is the baseline we hope to see as we progress.

Next, go to a building with a floor that is slightly slicker, something like painted concrete. Repeat the same process. If the dog's retrieving is a little subdued because he is sliding around more, make your praise and stimulation more exciting to balance the extra stress. Progress more slowly and don't push it. Return to the building where you last had success (less slippery floor) and do another session to build confidence. Do not go to more slippery floors until you see the baseline level of behavior you saw on the concrete floor. Once you see that, take a step to a floor that is more slippery, and so on.



This process will take some time. If you rush it, you will make the problem worse.

More experiences being stressed on the floors will only strengthen the dog's fear of walking on slippery surfaces. As the dog develops more comfort on progressively slippery surfaces, you will see the dog learn to use his pads and not his nails, slide into changes of direction by slowing down and locking his legs, and sliding like a tennis player on a clay court! The dog learns how to adapt. Just like when you go outside in the winter onto an icy driveway - you measure your strides shorter, and slide in a controlled manner.

As you see the dog get more comfortable, short tosses deeper into the building with the dog returning to the handler for play are initiated. The dog should start to relax and play more normally. Don't be afraid to repeat sessions to build confidence

and success before moving to more slippery floors. Take it slow and steady and the return will be greater. End on a good note and don't push the sessions too long or to failure. Do short, multiple sessions and progress will be steady.

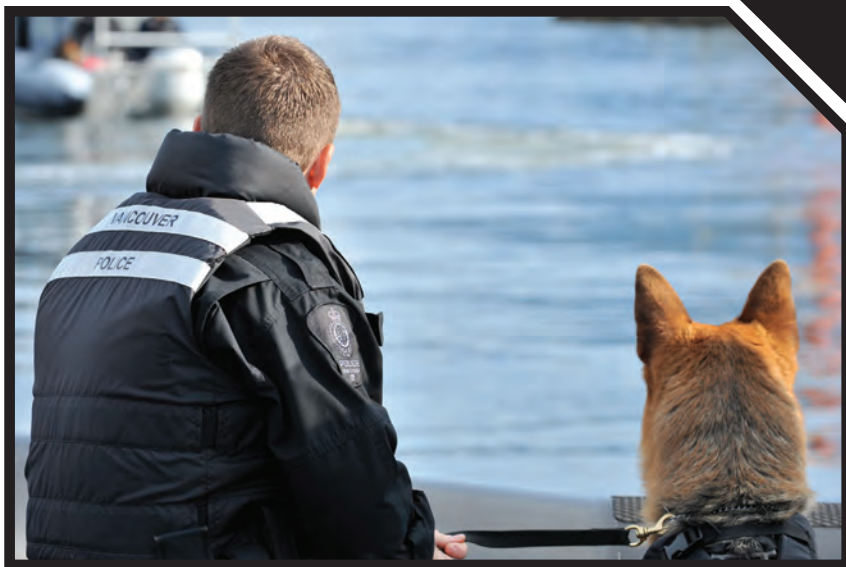
Flooding

Flooding is a behavioral term which describes forcefully exposing the dog to something that causes stress and continuing the exposure until the dog's stress over the exposure reduces as he adapts to his reality. An example would be taking the dog afraid of slippery floors and walking him confidently into the building with shiny polished floors and forcing him to come with you until he realized he could adapt to the situation. This, unfortunately, is a technique used often with environmental stressors and can often have counter-productive

results. It works best with mild cases. Once this massive flooding takes place, the dog is not likely to take a toy or bite, and it can easily create a very strong phobia that will be close to impossible to extinguish. Systematic desensitization is a more time consuming approach, but it is an approach which you can manage and raise confidence gradually. It is unlikely to create a phobia.

Passive Desensitization

Consider another more "passive" desensitization approach. My training room in my building is a painted concrete slippery floor. I have a 4x4x5 kennel that I can assemble anywhere. We take a 5x5 rubber mat, assemble the kennel mostly on the rubber mat, and leave about a 1' strip of slick floor inside the kennel. Bring the dog into the kennel and he will move around stepping mostly on the



mat but alternately on the 1' strip. He will barely notice it. Every day, move the kennel about 6" more onto the slippery floor. Put the dog in an area where he can watch some training, get excited, and bark a little, so he is distracted by what's going on. Over time, by this gradual exposure, he will eventually be completely on the slick floor.

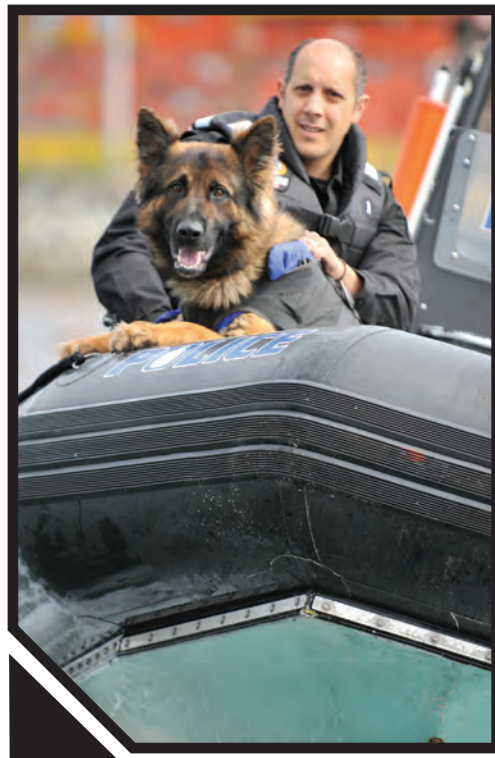
Some trainers have kennels with partial concrete floors and partial tile floors. If you can make a few kennels like this with progressively more tile and less concrete, eventually with a kennel with all tile floors, you can move the dog through the kennels over time, and let them systematically desensitize to the tile.

Conclusion

If you are a department buying green dogs, you should test thoroughly to make sure you have few, if any, environmental problems to deal with. Training a police dog is hard enough. The fact of life, however, is that most green dogs will, at some time, show some kind of issue with an environmental challenge and if you continually wash out every dog that shows

an issue, you will never get through training. Some dogs might be great with all their drive work, bite like monsters, and only have one flaw (slick floors), so using these techniques could keep you from washing out an otherwise excellent dog. In training, everything is about trade offs, as no dog is perfect.

You may wonder why I don't suggest using bite work as a way to provide the dog with an even more stimulating experience. Understand I am not saying you can't. The process would be very similar with quick bites and slips of the sleeve. The problem is, for some dogs, introducing bite work can stimulate defensive aggression as well. If the dog balks or you push the process too quickly, avoidance to the man on a slick floor can be created and the dog will feel even weaker. Until the dog is moving fluidly on the floors for a toy, I would keep the bite work out of it, unless you have an excellent decoy that can really read dogs and understands drives and drive channeling, and can absolutely keep a problem from occurring. You will eventually have to engage the dog in



bite work on slick floors. However, when the dog is on the bite being moved around, you must be careful to have a dog that understands pushing into the grip very well or you can have the dog pop off the bite as he slides around. Bite work adds the dimension of the dog worrying about the confrontation with the man, as well as the floors, and can add unneeded complexity.

Learning techniques for dealing with these issues properly will smooth your training. Systematic desensitization techniques can be used for: introducing distractions in bite work, stairs, elevators, tight spaces, dark rooms, and thresholds to name a few. This technique is something we use literally every day in training. In upcoming articles, we will expand on dealing with environmental issues in training and discuss how the dimension of bite work adds complexity to the situation. ■