



# If they're happy you know it

## It's funny

how something so simple can evoke such a reaction. I was driving to work the other day, lost in thought. Suddenly, I heard a siren turn on behind me and saw the flashing lights of a police car coming up in my rear mirror. Immediately my heart began to beat faster and my mind began to race.

I wasn't born to react that way and certainly no one taught me that. Instead, my past experiences have led me to predict that "Police Siren/Lights = Nothing Good".

We call that a "Conditioned Emotional Response" or CER for short. All that means is that I have been "conditioned" that when "SOMETHING" happens I "FEEL" a certain way. Like when you walk into a bakery and the smell of bread hits your nose.

I first heard about this type of thing with Pavlov's drooling dogs. Pavlov during an experiment learned that he could make dogs salivate simply by ringing a bell. Well it didn't happen quite that way. First, Pavlov would ring a bell and then immediately feed the dogs. Over time the dogs knew that a bell ringing predicted food appearing. At first it was the food that made the dogs salivate but over time Pavlov found that the bell now made the dogs salivate. He conditioned the sound of the bell to evoke the same response that food had previously. This became known as "Classical Conditioning" and is an extremely powerful tool when it comes to behaviour. From this came the concept of "Conditioned Emotional Response" or CER.

While it sounds very technical it's quite easy a technique that can be used to change your dog's emotions from a negative one to a positive one. This powerful concept gives you the ability to help change the way your dog feels about things. Why is this so important? Well let's look at what you can do with this knowledge and how it works.

First off let's look at how a negative CER that many of us have learned occurs.

You walk into a dentist office. You hear the drill and smell the antiseptics. Without thinking you probably feel stressed. For me the "Dentist" = "Pain". I have learned to associate the dentist with pain and so the mere sound walking in the door creates a negative emotion in me. That is a Conditioned Emotional Response or CER for short. I was not born feeling this way. It is an emotional response that has been conditioned in me over the years given what happened each time I visited the dentist. A negative CER.

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**What would happen though if we could do the opposite? Turn a negative response into a positive response. Let me show how I am doing just that with my young yellow lab Danielle.**

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Before Dani came to live with us at age 3 her previous owners used a "Prong" collar during walks. A Prong collar will squeeze and pinch a dog's neck when they pull while on leash. The theory is that the dog will learn that "PULLING = PAIN" and thus stop pulling hence stopping the pain. Sometimes it doesn't quite go that way for the dog. Sometimes they make a different association.

During walks, when Dani saw other dogs, she'd get excited and try to go over to them. As she did and hit the end of the leash the Prong Collar would tighten and pinch her neck causing pain. She soon was able to predict that every time she saw a dog, pain would follow. "DOGS = PAIN". That is how a Negative CER is born.

Instead of her being happy to see dogs now they caused her stress when they appeared because she knew pain was coming. Unfortunately, she did not make the “Pulling = Pain” association as the previous owners had hoped for.

But here is how I worked to make that story better. We needed to change the negative CER to a Positive CER when Dani saw other dogs. Here’s how I did it. First, I made sure to have a pocketful of highly valued treats. In my case it was cut up chicken. Next, I followed two simple rules...

## Rule # 1

*It can never appear before the dog but ALWAYS appears IMMEDIATELY after a dog comes into sight. Of course, the opposite rule must also be followed...*

## Rule # 2

*Yes, once the dog is out of sight so is the chicken. The ONLY thing that can make it reappear is another dog.*

On walks, anytime we saw another dog I immediately made chicken appear and fed Dani until the other dog was out of sight. It did not matter what Dani was doing. The only criteria were if we saw a dog, she got chicken. She could be barking, pulling on leash or anything else. I did not ask anything of her or give her any commands. All I did was feed her chicken EVERY TIME a dog was in sight. Once the dog was out of sight the chicken would go away.

Soon, Dani began to learn that other dogs appearing no longer caused pain but instead made chicken appear. A much happier thought emotionally. For Dani now “Dogs = Chicken”. We are changing a Negative into a Positive.



In the past a dog appearing caused her stress and fear knowing that pain was about to happen. Now a happy feeling comes upon her knowing that a dog appearing means highly prized food is coming. That is the power of a Positive CER. CER can be used in many areas to help your dog emotionally. Let’s talk about one more way you can turn a negative into a positive for your pups.

Most dogs don’t like to have their nails trimmed. Pull out a pair of nail clippers and your dog will move as far away as possible. Sounds like another “Negative CER” has been formed. “Nail Clippers = Pain”. To be frank I would guess that clipping nails not only stresses your dog but stresses you the owner too. If anyone has quicked a dog, you know what I mean. The good news is that we can turn this negative into a positive.

To begin get a bowl of real high-quality treats. Put them out where your dog see’s them but ignore them and wait till your dog does too. At first my dogs would just stare at the treats but soon lost interest when they saw they weren’t getting any. Once this happens pull out a pair of nail trimmers from your pocket and keep them out and in sight. Wait until your dog sees the clippers and then and only then begin to rapidly feed your dog the treats you had put out earlier. Keep feeding rapidly for one minute then put the clippers back in your pocket and IMMEDIATELY stop feeding the treats and go on about your day.

Do this 2-3 times each day. “Clippers = Treats” After a while you will notice that when your dog see’s the clippers their tail will begin to wag. This tells you that you have begun to change a negative into a positive and are conditioning a positive CER to the clippers. Something that used to evoke fear and stress will now evoke a wagging tail and full tummy.

Sounds so simple and it is. But the effect is earth shattering when it comes to your pet’s emotions. It allows them to turn stressful situations into happier ones.

When it comes to our companions, we should strive to build good emotional responses and help eliminate stressful and fearful ones. The more we help eliminate stress the better their quality of life and more they trust us to keep them safe. At the end of the day isn’t that what we all want?

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