

# **A Man's Best Friend Or A Soldier's Best Medicine? How Rehabilitation Dogs Can Be Utilized To Treat Veterans With Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

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*The screams echo in your head as you sprint to your rendezvous point. A Humvee flies into the air, having come into contact with a roadside bomb, and erupts into a ball of fire. The gunshots are deafening and the ringing in your ears aggravates you to the point of insanity. You are running as fast as you can, when suddenly an enemy soldier accosts you from behind...*

*You wake with a start, realizing this nightmare is the same you've had every night since returning from Iraq. The anxiety you feel is debilitating, so much so that sometimes you are afraid to leave the house. You are alone and scared, that is, until you are given a rehabilitation dog to help combat the crippling symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. When you wake with a start in the middle of the night, you reach for the warm fur of your companion who now sleeps at your feet. The nightmares subside, along with the feeling of having to always be on alert. Over time, you're no longer afraid to leave the house and your best friend and canine companion marches unwaveringly at your side.*

This is a hypothetical point of entry, but all over the United States combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) struggle with similar circumstances. Sometimes PTSD manifests itself in extreme irritability, guilt, and uneasiness about falling asleep for fear of reliving the trauma through nightmares. Traditional methods of treating this disorder include medication and therapy, however, when the veterans return home they are often alone and isolated.

Rehabilitation dogs can help solve this problem. Canines, as a species, have been nicknamed "man's best friend" for a reason. Since primeval times, dogs have provided a source of companionship and have also been useful in hunting and searching. How might dogs be useful now? They have been called upon to serve those with physical disabilities like deafness, blindness, and limb deficiencies, but what purpose might dogs serve in treating those ailments that we cannot see—illnesses of the mind? Recent studies have shown that dogs are useful in treating those with psychological problems, and in my study I seek to discover the effectiveness of rehabilitation dogs in treating a specific subset of individuals—our servicemen and

women who have returned from combat with crippling symptoms associated with PTSD.

## **BACKGROUND**

According to Schwartz (1984), posttraumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder that often results from experiencing a traumatic event. Symptoms of the disorder are nightmares, severe anxiety, and often irrational fears. Very little research has been done regarding PTSD in veterans and how service dogs can be used to rehabilitate them.

For veterans, having PTSD doesn't just affect mental health—it affects physical health and day-to-day functioning as well. A study conducted in 1998 by Beckham et. al. that surveyed and tested 276 combat veterans (225 with PTSD and 51 without PTSD) found that "when age, socioeconomic status, minority status, combat exposure, and cigarette pack-year history were controlled, combat veterans with PTSD reported and were rated as having a greater number of health problems than combat veterans without PTSD" (p. 1568). Although this sample size is relatively small, other studies with larger sample sizes have shown similar results. For example, in a study conducted by Schnurr et.

al. (2006), a group of 325 male veterans with PTSD was surveyed. The researchers concluded that “Higher PTSD severity was associated with poorer psychosocial and physical health-related quality of life” (p. 711). In an even larger study conducted by Vasterling et. al. (2008), 800 veterans were assessed and the results indicated that:

“PTSD symptoms seem to adversely impact physical health functioning via their negative effect on health symptoms, which in turn negatively influence day-to-day functioning. While it seems intuitive that the impact of health on day-to-day functioning has much to do with the number and frequency of somatic symptoms, particularly for military veterans and other trauma victims seeking treatment for PTSD, such health symptoms appear to be set in motion by PTSD” (p. 354).

Posttraumatic stress disorder has even been correlated with later medical morbidity in veterans. In a large study conducted by Boscarino (2006), 15,288 male U.S. Army veterans (some with and some without PTSD) were surveyed 30 years after their military service (all served in the Vietnam War). The data was examined 16 years after the survey was conducted and the study findings indicated that “adjusted postwar mortality for all-cause, cardiovascular, cancer, and external causes of death (including motor vehicle accidents, accidental poisonings, suicides, homicides, injuries of undetermined intent) was associated with PTSD among Vietnam Theater veterans” (p. 248).

This data emphasizes the gap that exists in current treatment plans for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder. Much of their treatment has to do with treating the emotional issues that stem from the disorder (like anxiety, nightmares, uncontrollable anger, etc) through prescription medication and therapy rather than finding a way to help veterans accomplish even those simple day-to-day tasks that become complicated when

battling PTSD (like going to the grocery store or seeing a movie with friends) which seem to be overlooked by more traditional rehabilitation methods. The studies highlighted above emphasize the need for well-rounded treatment plans that can positively impact veterans’ capability to go about their daily lives with confidence—this is where rehabilitation dogs can become useful.

Rehabilitation animals (including dogs, horses, etc) have been used for centuries to help those with physical and mental impairments. Researchers Rintala, Matamoros, and Seitz (2008) discuss the usefulness of service dogs in their study. They state, “Service dogs help persons with mobility impairments achieve an optimal level of functional independence in activities of daily living and enhance participation in society” (p. 489). These researchers surveyed and observed 40 individuals given a service dog and found that “all but one participant with a service dog indicated that the dog made a positive difference in the lives of family members, friends, and/or attendants” (p. 496). Additionally, the dogs were found to have a positive impact on emotional well-being. The researchers discovered that “provision of emotional support and companionship by the dogs was mentioned by 44 percent of the participants as having a major impact” (p. 496).

Dogs have also been shown to lessen stressor response symptoms. In a small group study, with ten individuals observed and tested, researchers Barker et. al. (2010) looked into the physiological stress response of the individuals studied before and after being introduced to a therapy dog. The researchers discovered that “positive attitudes toward pets in the total sample of dog owners were associated with decreased levels of self-reported stress” and “results support a buffering effect on the stress response

associated with owners interacting with their dogs” (p. 89).

Other therapy animals have had a positive impact on the emotional well being of individuals. This impact is emphasized by Burgon’s (2011) research involving “at risk” adolescents and equine therapy. She discovered that the youth involved in the program, after working with the horses, experienced an increase in “self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of mastery, empathy, and the opening of positive opportunities” (p. 179). It can be argued that many therapy animals, including dogs, might have a similar impact.

Military groups in multiple nations have been utilizing dogs for centuries, and Ostermeir (2010) in his account of the history of guide dog usage traced the practice of using dogs to assist veterans back to World War I. He principally highlights the use of dogs to assist veterans who were blinded in battle. Ostermeir states in his conclusion, “Today there are approximately 10,000 active guide dog teams in the United States, with more than a dozen schools providing guide dog services to blind civilians and veterans” (p. 592). Because the practice of providing guide dogs to blind and physically impaired veterans is so common, it would be such a small step to begin using dogs to rehabilitate veterans with PTSD and other mental/emotional impairments resulting from their military service. Beck et. al. also mention in their research that, “Historically, the US military has promoted the therapeutic use of animals with wounded soldiers. In the years that followed World War I, dogs were used with psychiatric patients at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, DC.” (39)

As recently as 2011 moves have been made within the U.S. government to begin helping veterans with PTSD acquire rehabilitation dogs. The Veterans Dog Training Therapy Act was passed in 2011 and, according to the measure, a pilot

program will be established in VA centers helping veterans with mental health conditions to address the symptoms of PTSD through the use of therapy dogs. Because the suicide rates are so high and the numbers of servicemen and women combating the symptoms of PTSD has increased significantly, the bill emphasizes the need for additional, possibly unconventional treatment methods—like rehabilitation dogs.

### **RATIONALE**

Many men in my family have served in the military and several of them have returned to the United States with crippling psychological ailments. I’ve devoted my life to being an advocate for veterans either through government organizations or nonprofit organizations. I would love to discover, through this project, alternate, non-invasive methods for treating posttraumatic stress disorder and other psychological ailments that plague returning combat veterans. I have read multiple pieces that seem to provide evidence for the effectiveness of using therapy dogs to treat veterans with PTSD and I'd like to do more research into this potentially useful technique. Along with traditional treatment methods, the use of a rehabilitation dog to address the symptoms of a veteran with PTSD could potentially help create a more well-rounded treatment process. If the usage of a rehabilitation dog were successful and more widely implemented, we would likely see a decrease in the number of suicides in our servicemen and women. The use of service dogs may also decrease medical costs associated with providing medical and psychological care for veterans, thereby improving the quality of healthcare for veterans overall.

### **METHODS**

I plan to perform a literature review on topics associated with PTSD and how veterans with the ailment could benefit from service dogs. I will examine articles in relation to cost

associated with owning a dog, qualifications that may be necessary to own such a dog, current and past legislature within the government pertaining to the topic, etc.

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

The research found in my literature review could open up interest in continued research about a whole new avenue of care for veterans that does not rely upon drugs with unpredictable side effects, but rather dramatically improves the morale of a veteran with PTSD through the companionship of a canine. On a broader scale, if the government were to endorse and accept the use of rehabilitation dogs as effective treatment for veterans with PTSD the cost of healthcare associated with providing medication and psychological assistance could be lessened and the long-term usefulness of a rehabilitation dog would likely be more cost effective.

Based on the information that I have read thus far through my research, I expect that using a rehabilitation dog to help treat combat veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder in conjunction with other traditional treatment methods like seeing a psychologist and being prescribed certain medications will have a positive correlation with an individual's recovery.

I expect that through my investigation of the literature that exists on the topic at this time, I will come to the conclusion that rehabilitation dogs are a useful and non-invasive method for rehabilitating combat veterans with PTSD.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Currently, more and more research is being conducted pertaining to the possibility of using service dogs in treating veterans with PTSD with promising results. For example, the organization NEADS (National Education for Assistant Dog Services) has been conducting such research and outline their progress in an article. Kathy Foreman and

Cynthia Crossman (2012) state "In July 2009, NEADS undertook a 2-year study to more definitively evaluate whether specially selected and trained service dogs could lessen the symptoms of PTS in Veterans" (62). In their study, they began by placing trained service dogs with 15 combat veterans diagnosed with PTS. "To date," they add, "we feel that this study has been quite successful. The results are being tabulated and we will publish our results in the near future" (62). The group NEADS emphasizes that it is extraordinarily important to match dogs and their personalities to the humans they will interact with, stating, "A particular strength of the NEADS program is that we take great care in matching dogs with their human partners. Applicants complete a detailed application and participate in several in-depth interviews, the purpose of which is to get to know the applicant and find the right dog match to meet his or her needs" (62).

A group of researchers, Beck et. al. (2012), desired to research the effects that animal assisted therapy (or AAT) had on wounded veterans who also experienced symptoms of PTSD. The researchers found that, "It is possible that AAT primarily brings about reminiscence and comfort due to the immediate socialization that one experiences when interacting with pets. Recollection of memories related to past personal experiences with pets may provide a transient state of emotional well-being" (43).

An article by Yount, Olmert, and Lee (2012) discussed the cost effectiveness of a certain service dog training program called the Warrior Canine Connection (or WCC) and how future research of the program would likely result in a more advanced understanding of how service dogs can assist veterans with PTSD. They state,

"The WCC program breeds its own high-quality, purpose-bred service dogs...This circumvents the logistical difficulties of owning and keeping service dogs on

military...property. It also affords active duty service members and veterans who cannot or do not own dogs the opportunity to experience the high quality connection with a dog that can provide powerful relief of PTSD symptoms. The program is also highly cost effective, providing dog-assisted therapeutic relief to the largest number of PTSD patients with a limited number of service dogs. The Warrior-trainers experience relief from their PTSD symptoms while creating highly valuable service dogs that can be provided free of charge to Veterans with disabilities” (64).

The researchers also assert that more research is needed to understand how service dogs can benefit veterans with PTSD saying, “Studies designed to investigate the causes and effects of the WCC program may provided valuable evidence that has been lacking in the study of animal assisted therapy” (67).

Currently, Walter Reed Army Medical Center is one of the only military medical centers in the country that encourages and provides service dogs as a means for holistic therapy to its patients. Researchers Yeager and Irwin (2012) state that “The tremendous and far-reaching impact animal assisted therapy has had on current and prior Wounded Warriors is difficult to measure and therefore hard to quantify. Indeed, it is especially difficult for those who have not experienced close interaction with animals, particularly dogs, to truly appreciate the

therapeutic power of that interaction” (60). The authors also indicate that without further funding and participation in animal assisted therapy for veterans with PTSD, it is difficult to fully grasp the potential for the program. They state, “The willingness of those first at Walter Reed...to explore nontraditional approaches and try animal therapy has impacted injured Warriors in positive ways that are still largely unmeasured. Unfortunately, these successes may remain largely unrecognized unless and until more such programs are instituted throughout the military medical system” (60).

### CONCLUSION

The United States has always had and will always have veterans. Especially now, when troops are returning home from tours in the Middle East, effective means of treating inevitable psychological disorders are needed. Veterans like Luis Carlos Montalvan, author of *Until Tuesday: A Wounded Warrior and the Golden Retriever Who Saved Him*, know first-hand the tremendously positive impact that rehabilitation dogs can have on the management of symptoms associated with PTSD. While medication and psychological counseling have always been the standard treatment, if rehabilitation dogs are proven to be an effective means of treating veterans it could mean a dramatic improvement in care and recovery for those who serve our country so selflessly.

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