

Man's best friend aids Australian military vets with PTSD

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They are nicknamed "pills with four legs"—highly-trained dogs helping ex-Australian military veterans overcome the mental scars of war.

Australia's servicemen and women have in recent times been posted to danger zones in Iraq, East Timor, and Afghanistan—the nation's longest-running military conflict.

With some undertaking multiple tours of duty, psychologists are concerned traditional treatment such as counselling do not sufficiently address the trauma of combat.

"I lost my home, my marriage," Ken Lloyd, an experienced former special forces commando who has battled severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), told AFP.

"Thankfully I am still in contact with my sons, thankfully I'm better," he added.

The Afghan veteran found he was able to better understand PTSD symptoms, such as anxiety and anger, when he began training his pet labrador Jaeger to help him with tasks.

Understanding the psychology behind training the dog, gave him an insight into his own behaviour.

"I was able to rationalise... why I had become hyper-vigilant, what

triggers were there for aggression," Lloyd said.

"I then started to think, well, maybe I can do this for others," he added.

Suicide risks

A parliamentary report in August noted that "for modern veterans, it is likely that suicide and self-harm will cause more deaths and injuries for their contemporaries than overseas operational service".

Suicide rates for ex-servicemen were particularly acute, according to 2001-15 data compiled by the government's Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

They were twice as high as those serving full-time or in the reserves at 26 suicide deaths per 100,000 people, compared to 11 and 12 respectively.

Ex-servicemen were also about 14 percent more likely to kill themselves than men in the general population.

PTSD is the top reported condition for Iraq veterans and second-most reported for those who served in Afghanistan, according to the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Former personnel are more vulnerable as they tend to show signs of PTSD when they leave the forces—a time when support services are at the lowest, said traumatic stress specialist Zachary Steel.

"The symptoms of PTSD are actually the symptoms that you need to be combat-effective, it's only when these fail to shut down when you return home that we realise that an injury has occurred," he said.

"They remain engaged in a mortal threat response which isn't appropriate to civilian life and actually it becomes extraordinarily debilitating over time," he explained.

'He's my wingman'

Steel has been working with Lloyd and Integra Service Dogs Australia programme co-founder Ben Johnson to collect more research about the effectiveness of therapies such as "canine guardians".

One of the programme's goals is to pair veterans with the animals cheaply—an assistance dog might usually cost up to Aus\$50,000 (US\$40,000)—so they can help carry out everyday tasks made difficult by PTSD, such as being in public places.

For Lloyd's scheme costs are low because guide dog associations and Australia's border force donate animals that are highly trained but are no longer eligible for work, sometimes due to injury.

Struggling ex-soldiers often become isolated as encountering people can trigger their symptoms, but being with the dogs helps act as a buffer between them and society, allowing them to feel better about venturing outside or interacting with others, Steel said.

Another aim is to get the men and women to directly teach the animals.

The training is done through group sessions so the ex-personnel can build up friendship and a support network with people experiencing similar issues.

"It helps with your self-esteem, your PTSD, your depression, your anxiety," participant Ashley Smith, who served in Timor as a military policeman, said.

"He's (labrador named Leroy) my shadow, he's my wingman, he's everything... This programme is a life-changing thing for me."

Another Timor veteran Shane van Beurden said his dog Kalu stops him from having a "meltdown in front of the children".

"He helps me with PTSD if I am having a bit of anxiety or something at home," he said.

"And me and him can go for a run and I can address whatever issues I might be having, just me and my dog, you know."

Lloyd hopes to expand the programme—launched in Canberra in February—nationwide with the help of volunteers training other veterans and dogs.

But he is already buoyed by the anecdotal success of the trial.

"These guys you see when they're broken and the ladies as well, they're shattered," he said.

"To see them smile, to enjoy something and reduce their medication and the effects of their medication, to support their therapy... is fantastic."

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