

Service dogs may reduce suicidal impulses, stress among veterans

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Trained service dogs may reduce stress symptoms, including suicidal thoughts, in American military veterans, according to a recent study co-authored by researchers at Georgia State University School of Public Health and Kaiser Permanente.

"Veterans with [posttraumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) are increasingly seeking [service](#) dogs to help them manage trauma-related symptoms, yet literature describing service dog use in this population is scant," the researchers noted.

During the study, the researchers interviewed and observed 41 veterans in Oregon and Georgia with service dogs and eight caregivers who were recruited for the study through community-based service dog training agencies.

The results of the study are published in the *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* in the article "Benefits and Challenges of Using Service Dogs for Veterans With Posttraumatic Stress Disorder." The study's authors are Dr. Ashli Owen-Smith, assistant professor of health management and policy at Georgia State, and Dr. Bobbi Jo H. Yarborough, Mr. Scott P. Stumbo, and Mr. Micah T. Yarborough with Kaiser Permanente Northwest Center for Health Research. Dr. Owen-Smith also is affiliated with the Kaiser Permanente Georgia Center for Research and Evaluation.

Study participants reported that their service dogs reduced

hypervigilance by alerting them to the onset of this symptom so they could turn their attention away from invasive trauma-related thoughts. They also reported that the dogs wake them from nightmares, which also yielded greater sleep quality and duration.

Additional benefits reported by the veterans and caregivers included improved emotional connections with others, increased community participation and physical activity, and reduced suicidal impulses and medication use.

Reported challenges to having service dogs included the demands of training and adjustment to life with a dog.

"Service [dogs](#) may be a reasonable option for veterans who are reluctant to pursue or persist with traditional evidence-based treatments," the researchers concluded.

More information: Bobbi Jo H. Yarborough et al. Benefits and challenges of using service dogs for veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder., *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/prj0000294](#)

Provided by Georgia State University

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