

How the human-animal bond complements treatment for veterans

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Dogs are often referred to as man's best friend, but for some military veterans, these four-legged accomplices also take on the role of therapist and confidant in the battle against post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When combined with traditional, evidence-based interventions, the human-animal bond has proven to be an effective, complementary treatment for PTSD, with positive impacts for veterans—and dogs, too.

Leah Blain, clinic director and licensed clinical psychologist at the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic in the department of Psychiatry, treats a number of patients who struggle with PTSD.

"At the Cohen Clinic, creating access to care really drives the mission of what we do each day," Blain says. "We know that 30% of service members and veterans returning from deployment meet the criteria for a mental health condition, but only half of this group receive care. These are treatable conditions, and the faster we get ahead of them, the less they become entrenched."

Although the Cohen Clinic does not directly provide animal assisted therapy, it does strive to create a tailored, individualized treatment plan for all patients—and that treatment plan sometimes includes animal support.

"Our treatment plans are really driven by preference," Blain said. "In addition to an evidence-based treatment such as cognitive processing therapy or cognitive behavioral therapy, we aim to integrate whatever each person is oriented toward into their treatment plan. People are really aware of the power of animals, so I've had several patients come in and ask us to connect them with an organization that provides animal assisted therapy or service animals."

The Cohen Clinic has a number of partnerships that enable its providers to connect patients with animal-assisted therapies, when appropriate.

"While there is really good research and evidence to show the positive impact animals can have with patients, there is not specific evidence to support animal-assisted therapy as the main approach for treating

disorders we see at the clinic, like PTSD. But this doesn't mean animals don't have an incredible impact. We view these types of therapies as complementary—they can be woven into the care approach we take with patients," Blaine said.

There is evidence, however, that demonstrates how the [human-animal bond](#) promotes a positive physiologic response. In particular, research indicates that oxytocin—a bonding hormone—increases in both [dogs](#) and humans during interactions. Oxytocin is a pro social promoter that helps modulate sleep and movement.

Bess Pierce, DVM, DABVP, DACVIM, DACVSMR, an adjunct associate professor at the Penn Vet School of Veterinary Medicine, has a particular interest in the human-animal bond.

"There is evidence of dogs alongside the earliest humans, so, in many ways, dogs and humans evolved together," Pierce said. "As we settled into agrarian societies and incorporated dogs into our community and culture, dogs became master communicators who are incredibly in tune with human emotions. Research has shown us that dogs are able to read human faces and pick up on stress signals, making them great companions, particularly for someone who is in need of extra support, whether it be emotional or physical."

A dog's ability to read emotions, provide stress relief, and act as a companion can be critical for a patient diagnosed with PTSD, particularly as they work to combat the intrusive symptoms and impairments associated with PTSD and regain control of their life.

Paula Crawford-Gamble, MSN, CRNP, CAPT, NC, USN (Ret), Penn Medicine Veterans Care Excellence Program liaison, has benefited deeply from the human-animal bond. Crawford-Gamble's dog, Sgt. Major Bearre Manning, was trained by the Warrior Canine Connection

Team. Bearre became a marine, pounding the ground during search and rescue missions with the U.S. Navy Seals, before he found his second duty in life with Crawford-Gamble as a trained military service and therapy dog.

"Bearre's intuition was just unbelievable," Crawford-Gamble said. "It was very natural for him to comfort me. He could sense when I was nervous, and he would place his head in my lap. If I was having a nightmare, he would hop into the bed and lay next to me."

Bearre has since passed, but his impact is not forgotten. "I'm so happy I experienced having him. It was such a rare and special connection," Crawford-Gamble said of Bearre, who also spread joy to patients as a HUP Pup. "To have an experience like that with an animal is the most precious thing—I know he felt the same way. We were soulmates."

Ultimately, the foundation of the human-animal bond is built upon a mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals that promotes health and well-being. The science in support of this special bond continues to grow but, in the meantime, PTSD patients are making strides thanks to the help of their furry friends.

Therapy and Service Dogs

Did you know? There is a distinct difference between therapy and service dogs, although both have benefits for the dog handler:

Therapy Dogs

- Therapy dogs are not service dogs as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Therapy dogs engage with their human handlers to provide

animal assisted [therapy](#) (AAT) or animal assisted activities (AAA), such as comfort or emotional support.

Service Dogs

- Defined by the ADA as "dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities." This includes seeing eye dogs, medical alert dogs, or mobility dogs.
- Service dogs have the sole function of providing comfort or emotional support do not qualify as service [animals](#) under the ADA.

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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