

Service dogs change lives of veterans with PTSD for the better

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Veterans can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after stressful or traumatic events. Utrecht University researcher Emmy van Houtert studied the influence of service dogs on the symptoms of PTSD. She also looked at the effect of the service work on the dogs. Service dogs appear to change the lives of people with PTSD for the better. The dogs themselves do not seem to experience any stress from their work.

PTSD is the result of one or more very stressful or traumatic event(s). Common symptoms are nightmares, anxiety and dejection. PTSD can affect a person's life and that of their loved ones very negatively. Veterans, police and other uniformed professionals can develop post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) in the course of their work.

Service dogs have been used for years to help [veterans](#) with PTSD. Until now, there was no scientific evidence that service dogs can have a positive effect on the mental state of the veterans. In the Ph.D. research of Van Houtert, the effect of the interaction between service dog and veteran was studied, with the aim of improving the treatment of PTSD whilst guaranteeing the welfare of the service dog at the same time.

Results show that—thanks to their service dog—veterans are able to cope with their PTSD symptoms better. The physiological characteristics of PTSD, such as the stress hormone cortisol, did not change, yet the veterans felt significantly better: they had fewer nightmares, slept better and had fewer clinical symptoms.

Effects on service dogs

The effects of the work on the service dogs themselves were also

examined. The dogs involved in the study did not show any signs of prolonged stress. Further research must now show whether this applies to all PTSD service dogs, and over a longer period of time.

Service dogs continue to be used

In summary, service dogs can change the lives of veterans with PTSD for the better. The well-being of the veteran is improved, and the dog does not seem to be stressed by the work itself. Further research on the interaction between [service dogs](#) and veterans with PTSD is important to improve the understanding of the effect of animals on veterans with PTSD, and to make this form of therapy more accessible for veterans.

Research continues

Thanks to the support of the Karel Doorman Fonds and an anonymous donor, this line of research will be continued in the years to come. The research project 'V-PWR 2.0' aims to gain insight into the long-term effects of the interaction between dogs and veterans. After all, PTSD is a condition that affects veterans for the rest of their lives. The relationship between a service dog and a veteran often means a bond for life. How does the veteran react when the service dog 'retires' and is succeeded by another, younger dog? And what does this mean for the dog? Interviews with veterans and their family members indicate that the service dog can be important for family members, too. In V-PWR 2.0 this dimension will also be mapped out.

More information: Veterans PTSD Workingdog Research (VPWR) Dissertation, (2022). [DOI: 10.33540/1288.dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/416590](https://doi.org/10.33540/1288.dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/416590)

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