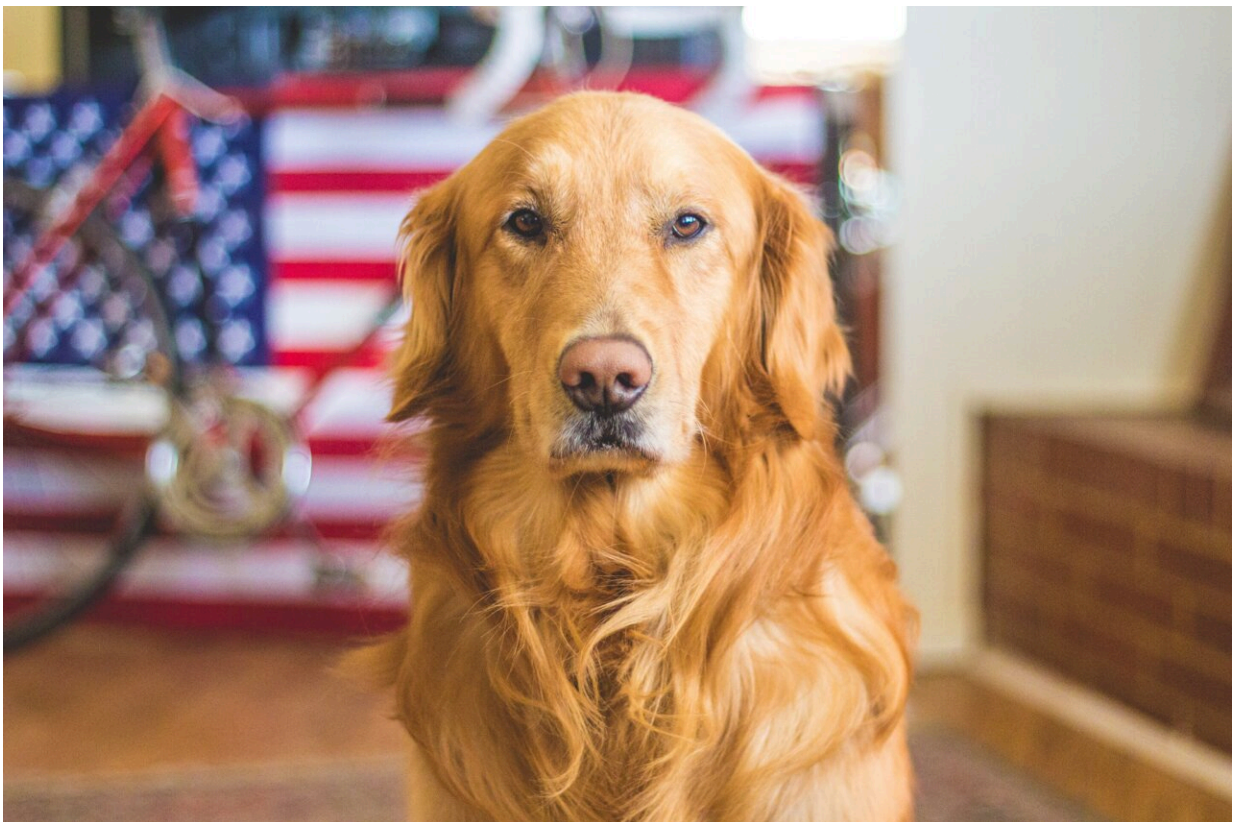


Lending a paw for defense veterans: 'Clear evidence' that assistance dogs help improve mental health

March 1 2023



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

A new Australian study focused on defense veterans' mental health has found strong evidence that assistance dogs used in conjunction with

traditional therapies provide the most effective treatment outcomes.

Almost 90% of veterans reported improvements in their post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety 12 months after being matched to an assistance dog, according to researchers from the University of South Australia (UniSA), University of Adelaide, and Military and Emergency Services Health Australia (MESHHA).

Of the 16 returned veterans who took part in the study, 63% reported "significant clinical improvements" to their mental health thanks to an assistance dog provided by the Operation K9 Program run by See Differently with the Royal Society for the Blind.

The study is the first in Australia to use self-reported measures, clinical assessments, and face-to-face interviews with veterans to investigate the value of an assistance dog over time.

It is published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

UniSA Master of Clinical Psychology student Melissa Sherman, who analyzed the data, says the findings are relevant to policymakers and demonstrate the power of human-animal relationships.

"Previous studies have shown that existing treatments for post-traumatic stress among returned veterans are not ideal, with high dropout rates and poor adherence," Sherman says.

"This study provides clear evidence that assistance dogs can play a key role in a [veteran](#)'s recovery from post-traumatic stress and other mental health conditions, supporting existing treatments."

Of the 5,000 ADF members who transition from the forces to [civilian](#)

[life](#) every year, 46% experience mental [health](#) issues, including [suicidal thoughts](#), anxiety, and depression. Almost a quarter of them are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress in their lifetime.

"This is an important issue that needs addressing," according to MESHHA Executive Director Miranda Van Hooff, an Adjunct Associate Professor at both UniSA and the University of Adelaide.

Three major themes emerged from the study: that assistance dogs were a "life changer," a constant companion, and helped returned veterans to increase their social interactions.

"For many veterans, an assistance dog gave them a sense of purpose and a reason to live," Assoc Prof Van Hooff says.

Veterans reported their dog helped them "reclaim their life," giving them independence and a way to manage their [mental health issues](#) and fluctuating emotions, including hypervigilance.

Some participants described their dog as "a comfort or security blanket," with one veteran saying he was a recluse for many years until being matched with an assistance dog: "Now, every day is an adventure, giving me something to look forward to."

The study showed a slight drop in participants still reporting suicidal feelings after 12 months, but the reduction was not significant. The main benefits were a large reduction in depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Researchers say the study was limited by the lack of a control group of veterans with post-traumatic stress not receiving an assistance dog, and the small number of study participants due to the cost of breeding, training, and matching dogs to veterans.

Further research is being conducted by the team to overcome these limitations.

More information: Melissa Sherman et al, Effectiveness of Operation K9 Assistance Dogs on Suicidality in Australian Veterans with PTSD: A 12-Month Mixed-Methods Follow-Up Study, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20043607](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20043607)

Provided by University of South Australia

Citation: Lending a paw for defense veterans: 'Clear evidence' that assistance dogs help improve mental health (2023, March 1) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-03-paw-defense-veterans-evidence-dogs.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.