

Service dogs benefit the well-being of their handlers, research shows

15 February 2019



A service dog trained by Canine Assistants gets a scratch from its handler. A recent study from Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine shows that service dogs can have measurable positive effects on the health and wellbeing of individuals with physical disabilities. The participants from the study were recruited from Canine Assistants. Credit: David Scott, Canine Assistants

Low self-confidence. Social isolation. Longing for independence.

Service [dogs](#) have been long thought to help individuals with [physical disabilities](#) find some relief from these feelings. The waiting lists for these dogs continue to grow, but the evidence to support their effectiveness has been missing – until now.

A recent study, led by the Purdue University's College of Veterinary Medicine, shows how service dogs can have measurable positive effects on the health and wellbeing of individuals with physical disabilities. The study, which was published in *Disability and Rehabilitation* and funded by Elanco, was led by Kerri Rodriguez and Maggie O'Haire from the Center for the Human-Animal Bond.

Rodriguez and O'Haire's focus during this study was to discover just how much these dogs affected the overall well-being of their handlers. A major finding of the study was how service dogs affect the psychosocial health of their handlers, which is an individual's state of mental, emotional, and social wellbeing.

"We found that compared to individuals on the waitlist, those who had a [service dog](#) had significantly better psychosocial health including better emotional, social, and work/school functioning. However, we found that having a service dog was surprisingly not related to other indicators of wellbeing such as anger, sleep quality, or social companionship," O'Haire said. "These findings help shed light on the fact that having a service dog may impact some areas of life more than others."

Service dogs – more specifically, mobility and medical alert service dogs – can be placed with individuals with a variety of different conditions or disabilities, such as seizures disorders, quadri- or paraplegia, or cerebral palsy. Service dogs can benefit them through helping with mobility – including helping with basic tasks such as opening and closing doors – or they can be trained to recognize and respond to the onset of a medical emergency such as a seizure.

The study recruited 154 individuals from the databases of national service dog provider Canine Assistants to participate in a survey. A total of 97 individuals had a service dog from Canine Assistants while 57 were on a waiting list to receive one.

Rodriguez and O'Haire said the findings help shed light on how service dogs may impact their handler in ways that extend beyond what they are directly trained for.

"Our findings are important because they

empirically validate the numerous anecdotal reports from individuals with service dogs that say that these dogs really have an impact on their life," Rodriguez said.

But if service dogs provide these sorts of benefits, what about dogs in general?

"We are still unsure how having a service dog and a pet dog may differ," Rodriguez says. "Although these service dogs are extensively trained to provide medical or physical assistance, we know that their companionship and unconditional love are important factors in the relationship."

Rodriguez also says future research will benefit from measuring wellbeing, self-esteem or sleep quality both before and after an individual receives a service dog to measure change over time.

O'Haire has also been leading research regarding how psychiatric service dogs may help veterans with PTSD. So far, her research has revealed how service dogs might offer both psychosocial and physiological benefits to veterans. O'Haire's research group is currently conducting a clinical trial that is studying [veterans](#) with and without [service dogs](#) over an extended period of time.

More information: Kerri E. Rodriguez et al. The effects of service dogs on psychosocial health and wellbeing for individuals with physical disabilities or chronic conditions, *Disability and Rehabilitation* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/09638288.2018.1524520](https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2018.1524520)

Provided by Purdue University

APA citation: Service dogs benefit the well-being of their handlers, research shows (2019, February 15) retrieved 14 November 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-dogs-benefit-well-being-handlers.html>

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