

Research shows how service dogs can help veterans with PTSD

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For veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, service dogs might be able to offer both behavioral and physiological benefits to help counter some of those symptoms, according to research that is being led by the Purdue College of Veterinary Medicine.

Maggie O'Haire, assistant professor of human-animal interaction in the College of Veterinary Medicine, is at the forefront of the research that is taking a closer look at how service [dogs](#) help veterans with PTSD. The latest findings have indicated that veterans may benefit physiologically from having a [service dog](#)—the first published research to use a physiological marker to show the effects of service dogs.

"I think a lot of veterans are struggling and they are looking for treatment options anywhere they can find them," O'Haire says. "There is a lot of hope around this practice and veterans deserve to know if it works."

A preliminary study that took place in 2015-16 showed that overall symptoms of PTSD were lower among war veterans with service dogs. The pilot study was co-funded by the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) and Bayer Animal Health. The study examined 141 veterans—with 76 of them having a service dog and 66 being on a waiting list for a dog.

O'Haire led that study with the help of K9s For Warriors an accredited nonprofit organization that provides veterans with service dogs. The pilot research project provided scientific evidence of mental health benefits experienced by veterans with PTSD who have service dogs. The findings during that study also went beyond behavioral benefits and assessed [cortisol levels](#) because it is a biomarker in the stress response system, O'Haire says. For veterans with service dogs, their cortisol levels were higher in the morning than those who were on the waiting list. People without PTSD typically have [high cortisol levels](#) in the morning as part of their response to waking up. O'Haire's research has also revealed that for veterans, having a service dog was also associated with less anger, less anxiety and better sleep.

Another phase of that study funded by Merrick Pet Care and Newman's Own Foundation examined the dogs themselves and how they are incorporated into the treatment of veterans. That data is currently being analyzed.

A large-scale National Institutes of Health clinical trial has been ongoing for about a year and has two years to go, according to O'Haire. Researchers are studying veterans with and without service dogs over an extended period of time. O'Haire hopes the longitudinal nature of this clinical trial will reveal a better understanding of physiological and behavioral processes, PTSD symptoms, and [service](#) dogs in general.

Provided by Purdue University

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