

# The Complete Guide to How Service Dogs Can Help People with PTSD

Since World War I, service dogs have helped veterans reintegrate into society and lead fulfilling lives. These experiences laid the groundwork for decades of scientific research that would confirm a vast array of tangible and intangible benefits that service dogs can provide to those with PTSD.

This guide outlines

- how and why service dogs are used in the treatment of PTSD.
- how patients can speed their recoveries by working with service animals,
- the scientific support for this approach
- how service animals are trained to assist with PTSD,
- and organizations that connect vets with a service dogs.

## What does it take to be a certified service or therapy assistance dog for PTSD patients?

Some of the symptoms of PTSD are distressing flashbacks of the traumatic event, disruption of sleep and normal functioning, and hyper-vigilance. Everyday occurrences can cause intense, anxious responses when the survivor's fear impulse is activated. In order to offer robust emotional support to PTSD patients, service dogs undergo intense preparatory training with a high level of rigor.

[Patriot PAWS](#), a nonprofit in Rockwell, Texas, [sends dogs to prison](#) to complete their training: Inmates assist in the process, and becoming accustomed to an unpredictable atmosphere gives dogs the resilience they'll need on the job.

Service dogs become proficient in [performing complex tasks](#) that PTSD individuals may need support with: patrolling the perimeter of a room to ease the owner's mind, warning the owner about a situation that could trigger a flashback, or reminding them to take their medication. Over time, the coping skills that the dog learns

become integrated into the owner's life and habits, and reduce symptoms exponentially.

Service dogs must be able to help their owners in [all kinds of situations](#). Out in public, the dog may circle the owner repeatedly if they sense that other people are getting too close and the owner needs more space.

In a tense social situation, the dogs are trained to offer the owner an excuse to leave: The owner offers a subtle cue, and the dog paws at or nudges the owner in an obvious way. In all of these cases and many more, the dog reads the owner's emotional state and provides whatever assistance will offer the most immediate relief.

## **How can companion service dogs can improve an owner's life?**

Some traumatic events, such as assault, are more likely to cause PTSD than other incidents, such as surviving a natural disaster. The specific ways that a therapy dog offers aid may depend on the form of support most needed by the patient in question. Assault survivors, for instance, may be especially afraid of leaving home, and a service dog can give the guidance and confidence that they need.

Rick Yount, a clinical social worker, [posits](#) that training the dogs helps individuals "practice modulating their stress level and tone of voice," and that these skills can be applied to recovery.

Furthermore, PTSD patients with service dogs adhere to their medications more closely and sleep better, too: "With the dogs they are getting substantially more sleep—sometimes five or six hours instead of two," Yount says.

Data suggests that interacting with dogs [increases oxytocin and dopamine, and decreases cortisol](#), the stress hormone. Dog owners are happier and healthier than the population at large, and few would be surprised to know of the scientific evidence to these effects.

Some of the demonstrable benefits service dogs offer include:

- Greater self-sufficiency. Because the animal helps with daily tasks, medication compliance, and deeper sleep, patients have an increased ability to live alone and function independently.
- Reduced anxiety and stress, leading to fewer flashbacks and more equanimity. With a lessened need for hyper-vigilance because of the animal's support and the patient's increased trust, cortisol levels can return to normal for longer periods of time, improving the patient's ability to think rationally and respond to stressful situations without losing their sense of control.
- A greater range of coping skills. This comes in part from observing the dog's behavior and cues, and in part from being more grounded in the present moment due to the dog's presence, playfulness, and deep, loving commitment. As patients become more self-sufficient and less anxious, they have an easier time implementing other aspects of their treatment protocols and opening up to accepting help from others.

While there is no surefire treatment to instant recovery from PTSD, service dogs can go a long way toward easing the pain and isolation of living with this disorder. It can take years to navigate the process from trauma to diagnosis to treatment to recovery.

Family members, friends, and medical providers will be crucial supports along the way. However, there are innumerable benefits that assistance dogs alone can provide. If you are inspired to seek a support dog or to train animals for this purpose, keep reading to discover some of the resources available to guide you on your quest.

## Resources for Finding a Care Dog

The following list provides useful information on some of the organizations that can help you in your search.

For more information on what is available to you locally, you are encouraged to reach out to your local [ASPCA](#) or [Humane Society chapter](#).

For non-veteran PTSD patients, there are fewer national organizations that affordably provide trained service dogs. However, local trainers and care providers

may be willing to work with you to help subsidize the acquisition of a service animal.

[ASA Service Dogs](#) offers unique and dynamic assistance to those with physical and mental disabilities by providing dogs that are trained to perform specialized tasks to enhance the quality of life for the dog and the individual, as well as friends and family.

[Assistance Dogs International](#) is a coalition of not-for-profit assistance dog organizations that helps individuals find a dog to match his or her needs.

[Alliance of Therapy Dogs](#) is a national therapy dog registry with over 14,000 members across North America, and can assist those in certifying their potential therapy dog.

[Patriot PAWS](#) provides service dogs to veterans.

[Pawsitivity](#) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to rescuing dogs and training them as service dogs for people with disabilities. Their PTSD support dogs reduce the risk of suicide and improve quality of life.

[Pet Partners](#) provides trained handlers and their pets to facilities looking to incorporate therapy animals into their programs. The website also provides a [list of links broken down by state](#) for finding a program to become a registered therapy pet handler.

[Service Dogs by Warren Retrievers](#) provides service dogs to veterans and children living with PTSD.

[Paws for Purple Hearts](#) provides Canine-Assisted Warrior Therapy™ helping warriors with trauma. It aids healing by training service dogs for veterans and active duty military.