The Influence of Psychiatric Assistance Dogs on Veteran Families

Leanne Nieforth, MS, PhD
Maggie O’Haire, PhD
Agenda

Learning Objectives:

- Participants will be able to explain potential benefits of assistance dogs to military families.
- Participants will be able to explain potential challenges of assistance dogs to military families.
- Participants will be able to apply research findings to develop evidence-based practice.

PART ONE: What is an assistance dog?

PART TWO: Caregivers & Families
What is an Assistance Dog?

An assistance dog is trained to do specific tasks that mitigate specific symptoms of an individual’s disability.
Why an assistance dog for PTSD?

PTSD is difficult to treat

More than **23% of veterans** are diagnosed with PTSD upon returning from deployment

- **50%** will seek treatment
- **20-40%** will dropout of treatment
- **60%** will retain a PTSD diagnosis
Why an assistance dog for PTSD?

Flashbacks or Nightmares

Hypervigilance, Fear

Loss of interest, Inability to feel positive emotions

Nudging, pawing or licking

Watching the handler’s back

Constant companion, source of love and joy
Common PTSD Assistance Dog Tasks

Interrupt/alert to anxiety

Calm/comfort from anxiety

Cover (watch back)

Make a friend

Block (make space)

Graphics: Clare Jensen, 2021
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PART ONE: What is an assistance dog?

PART TWO: Caregivers & Families
Why is this research important?

Families of veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may experience **significant challenges** post deployment.

- Mental & physical health concerns
- Issues with family functioning

Herzog et al., 2011; Manguno-Mire et al., 2007
Why is this research important?

Recent literature calls attention to the importance of family focused interventions for military families post deployment.

But, very few studies have explored the influence of psychiatric assistance dogs on military families.

Keeling et al., 2020; O’Haire et al., 2018
The influence of PTSD service dogs on resilience processes in military families

To investigate how service dogs for PTSD may influence family dynamics and communication in military families.
Participants

N=101 individuals with service dogs were recruited from K9s For Warriors, a national, nonprofit service dog provider.

n=67 veterans

n=34 spouses
Methods

Measure: online, open-ended survey completed 3-months after receiving a service dog

Data was analyzed using a constant comparative content analysis:

1. Experiences were grouped into categories
2. Definition of categories
3. Refinement of categories
4. Categories situated in established theory
Open-ended questions:

1. What is the most helpful aspect of having a service dog?

2. What are the drawbacks to having a service dog?

3. How has the service dog positively impacted your spouse or children?

4. How has the service dog negatively impacted your spouse or children?

5. Is there anything else you would like to share about your service dog?
“bridges communicative, perceptual, and physiological aspects of stress within the context of social relationships to explain personal/relational risk, resilience, and thriving”

Adverse external events and depleting internal resources can increase relational load on families and couples.

Afifi & Harrison, 2018, p. 324
Through relational maintenance behaviors...

1. Relational adjustments can be made when internal and external stressors are encountered.

2. Communal orientation may emerge

Ultimately, relationship maintenance is all the processes that make deposits in the bank account of relational reserves, where couples and families see themselves as a team to reappraise and manage adverse events.
Service dogs may help to build emotional reserves.

- Trained role of the service dog
  - Interrupts veteran PTSD experiences
  - Supports the veteran
  - Creates safety for the veteran

Veteran- “He gets in my lap to help with anxiety, and he interrupts me to bring awareness to myself and my surroundings.”

Spouse- “[service dog] nudges [veteran’s] leg when he feels him getting anxious or angry or having a mood change”
Service dogs may help to build emotional reserves.

- Service dog influences veteran mental health
  - Veterans gained independence
  - Veterans received understanding
  - Veterans acquired purpose

Veteran- “[service dog] reminds me every day to continue to fight and not give in to the thoughts that drag me down, while helping me to accomplish the daily struggles I deal with.”

Spouse- “[service dog] gives him something other than his problems to focus on.”
Service dogs may increase relational load.

- Associated labor
- Ambiguity of living with a service dog
- Veteran/child relationship disrupted
- Veteran/spouse intimacy disrupted
- Public stigma

Veteran- “Having a service dog is a lot of work. Feeding, grooming, vet appointments, and keeping my house allergy free and clean”

Spouse- “[veteran] doesn't spend the time he needs to train her [service dog] and then gets frustrated when she doesn't follow commands immediately. Also, the kids don't always remember [service dog] isn’t a pet”
Service dogs may facilitate relational maintenance.

- Service dogs beyond their trained role
  - Companions for the children
  - Intermediary between children and veterans
  - Alleviate spouses’ stress related to veteran PTSD

Veteran- “Made me a calmer person and has helped me have a more collected mindset which helps when I am interacting with the kids.”

Spouse- “Added buffer from his behavior making him chill out more before easily blowing up like he used to.”
Service dogs may facilitate relational maintenance.

• Service dogs as family
  – Enable & empower family time
  – Change the household environment
  – Make emotional re(connection) possible

Veteran- “[service dog] is a great companion to all of us and our family wouldn’t feel complete without him with us.”

Spouse- “She is a great addition to our family.”
Conclusions

Findings:

Multiple communication processes occur between veterans, service dogs, and spouses and these processes influence the resilience of veteran families.

Implications:

Family-focused approaches
Quantifying the emotional experiences of partners of veterans with PTSD service dogs using ecological momentary assessment

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the day-to-day experiences of positive and negative emotions among partners of veterans assigned PTSD service dogs.
Participants

N=87 partners or spouses of veterans with PTSD who were recruited from K9s For Warriors, a national, nonprofit service dog provider.

n=48 in service dog group
Average age: 37
87% female
85% have children

n=39 in usual care group
Average age: 36
90% female
90% have children
Methods

Baseline: 2-week study period

Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA)

State affect and emotions were measured using a modified version of the Discrete Emotions Questionnaire and Positive and Negative Affect Scale.

56 assessments per participant, 3780 total assessments

84% response rate at baseline, 86% response rate at follow up

Data was analyzed using a generalized linear mixed model with an AR(1) structure to account for repeated measures.

Harmon-Jones et al., 2016; Watson et al., 1988
## Results

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<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Affect</strong></td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>0.006**</td>
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<td>Calm</td>
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<td>4.53</td>
<td>&lt;0.001***</td>
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<td><strong>Negative Affect</strong></td>
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<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.773</td>
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* p < 0.05, **p > 0.01, *** p < 0.001
Compared to spouses of veterans without service dogs,

Spouses with service dogs report higher:

- Calmness
- Positive emotions
- Confidence

Spouses with service dogs report no change:

- Negative emotions
Conclusions

Findings:

Positive emotions

Negative emotions

Implications:

The influence of service dogs may go beyond veterans to influence their cohabitating partners.
The influence of psychiatric service dogs for PTSD on military spouses

The purpose of the current study was to evaluate the impact of veterans’ PTSD service dogs on the psychological and social wellbeing of spouses or partners.
Participants

N=88 partners or spouses of veterans with PTSD who were recruited from K9s For Warriors, a national, nonprofit service dog provider.

n=48 in service dog group
- 90% Female
- 88% married
- 89% have children
- 29% BIPOC

n=40 in usual care group
- 88% Female
- 92% Married
- 85% have children
- 35% BIPOC

*BIPOC: black, indigenous or person of color
Methods

Measures: online, self-report, clinical survey measures

Data was analyzed using **linear regression** to examine differences in relation to group (**service dog** vs. **usual care**) at three months follow-up.

**Covariates included:**

- Age
- Gender
- Socioeconomic status
- Education
- Race/ethnicity
- VA caregiver status
- Relationship status
- Pet ownership status
- Children
- Baseline score
Survey measures included:

**Spouse Wellbeing**
- Bradburn Scale of Psychological Wellbeing
- Activity Questionnaire
- Revised Caregiver Appraisal Scale
- ZARIT Caregiver Burden Scale
- Patient Reported Outcome Measures Information System
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Companionship
  - Social Isolation

**Child Wellbeing**
- Patient Reported Outcome Measures Information System
  - Psychological Stress
  - Pediatric Affect
Compared to spouses of veterans in the usual care group,

**Caregiver burden** is significantly higher among partners of veterans with *service dogs*

- $B = 4.52$
- $p = 0.04$
- $d = 0.38$

**Caregiver satisfaction** is significantly lower among partners of veterans with *service dogs*

- $B = -1.09$
- $p = 0.04$
- $d = -0.46$

**Activity participation** is significantly higher among partners of veterans with *service dogs*

- $B = 6.12$
- $p = 0.01$
- $d = 0.59$
The presence of a service dog did not influence:

**Revised Caregiver Appraisal Scale**
- Caregiver Impact ($p = 0.07$, $d = 0.24$)

**Patient Reported Outcome Measures Information System**
- Social Isolation ($p = 0.32$, $d = -0.30$)
- Companionship ($p = 0.65$, $d = 0.31$)
- Depression ($p = 0.15$, $d = -0.24$)
- Anxiety ($p = 0.92$, $d = -0.04$)

**Bradburn Scale of Psychological Wellbeing**
- Positive Affect ($p = 0.23$, $d = 0.37$)
- Negative Affect ($p = 0.78$, $d = -0.07$)
- Affect Balance ($p = 0.34$, $d = 0.29$)
The presence of a service dog *did not* affect veteran children.

Pediatric Positive Affect ($p = 0.87, d = -0.01$)

Pediatric Psychological Stress ($p = 0.65, d = -0.11$)
Conclusions

Findings:
- Lower Caregiver Satisfaction
- Higher Participation in Activities
- Higher Caregiver Burden

Implications:
- Family-focused Approaches
THANK YOU
TO OUR COLLABORATORS, LAB MEMBERS, AND FUNDERS

@ohairelab
leannenieforth@arizona.edu
www.leannenieforth.com

Any questions??