**Can Psychiatric Assistance Dogs Help Military Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?**

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can result from witnessing or experiencing a traumatic event. Symptoms can include flashbacks of the trauma, sleep disturbances and intrusive memories, among others. PTSD is also associated with increased anxiety, depression, substance use and suicide.

Military personnel are at particular risk, with as many as 1 in 4 veterans receiving a diagnosis compared to 1 in 14 non-veterans.

Although several potential treatments are available, PTSD remains very hard to cure. Currently, fewer than 1 in 10 veterans will seek treatment, follow through with treatment, and be cured by treatment.

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Recently, psychiatric assistance dogs trained to help with mental health symptoms have become increasingly popular as a complementary PTSD intervention. These dogs are trained in tasks to help with PTSD symptoms, such as anxiety or nightmare interruption. They can accompany their handler in public spaces and environments where pet dogs are not normally allowed, such as on public transport.

As of 2019, there are over 3,000 psychiatric assistance dogs partnered with veterans with PTSD, making up around one-fifth of assistance dog placements worldwide.

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Despite their popularity, there is still a need to scientifically investigate the effectiveness of these assistance dog partnerships so that doctors, policymakers, government agencies, and assistance dog organisations can make the best recommendations for veterans. Sarah Leighton and her colleagues from Purdue University and the University of Arizona in the USA are working to fill this important knowledge gap.

The researchers undertook a comprehensive review of the literature with three key goals: to understand the characteristics of these assistance dog partnerships, to evaluate the quality of existing evidence, and finally, to summarise the findings so far.

They searched research databases to gather all of the relevant articles, finding 41 relevant articles, containing research on a total of 1,765 veterans and 1,200 assistance dogs. The researchers read the articles, which included 29 peer-reviewed papers and 12 dissertations, and extracted the relevant information.

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They found that this is a new and growing area of research, with all articles published in 2014 or later. Veteran participants were primarily white male veterans of the United States Army, and an average of 42 years old. Black and Hispanic veterans with PTSD were under-represented, suggesting a possible lack of equity in access to assistance dogs.

The dogs came from 19 unique assistance dog organisations and were mostly Labrador retrievers, Golden retrievers and German Shepherds. Less than a third had been purpose bred for their working role, which is unusual compared to other assistance dog categories.

The quality of the research conducted varied widely, with larger studies being more likely to have higher scientific rigour.

They found that these placements were associated with a large, statistically significant and clinically meaningful improvement in PTSD severity, but are not a cure. They also found benefits in other areas of mental and social health for veterans. However, while most findings were positive, new challenges can also arise – such as stigma and rude questioning from the public, or public access denials from businesses.

Sarah Leighton and her colleagues conclude that while the evidence supports a positive relationship between psychiatric assistance dog partnerships and higher functioning, the approach should currently be considered a complementary rather than a standalone intervention for veterans with PTSD.