Overcoming PTSD Through the Use of Service Dogs

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an affliction that is very much in the headlines today as approximately 31 percent of our returning service men and women search for ways to cope with the rigors of combat. Furthermore a full 41 percent of veterans from previous wars are estimated to be afflicted with PTSD. The articles “Loyal Companion Helps a Veteran Regain Her Life After War Trauma”, and “Bringing to Heal” discuss how dogs are influencing these afflicted men and women’s very lives. Another article “VA Limits Funding for Service Dogs” helps to provide us with another point of view. Finally a short story called “The Things They Carried” highlights the stresses of combat and the loneliness that these returning veterans feel. These men and women who served our great nation and returned with this disorder are looking for ways to combat it from traditional therapies like counseling to some more unusual methods such as dog training or even just having a dog to comfort them. This need has given rise to a multitude of new companies and non-profit organizations whose only intent is to train a new type of service dog called PTSD dogs and pair them with a returning veteran. PTSD dogs are changing the lives of the men and women diagnosed with this disorder for the better and in ways that traditional therapies cannot.

PTSD dogs being a relatively new type of service dog are undergoing a variety of changes from legal and even training aspects. As time has passed a non-official guide for trained PTSD dogs has developed into service dogs that can perform different tasks such as “checking
rooms for uninvited visitors, turning on lights, blocking people who begin to get too close to their handler, and providing comfort for their handlers” (Thompson). These actions have proven to be extremely useful in easing veterans anxiety as many of these things can remind the veteran of being in combat. Returning veterans suffering from PTSD often feel alone even when surrounded by their family and friends. They are often reluctant or even afraid to go out in public and be around people. Due to their personalities many of them are usually unwilling to seek out help as it makes them appear to be weak. The short story “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien has some underlying meaning about PTSD. A noteworthy quote is “It was very sad, he thought. The things men carried inside. The things men did or felt they had to do” (529). This quote can be applied directly to veterans suffering from PTSD and I believe shows how they feel alone and unworthy. While there is currently little hard science to validate the claims that PTSD dogs provide medical benefits “many PTSD experts say that there is much anecdotal evidence that dogs make veterans feel better” (Dao). There are also many veterans who claim they would not be able to function or possibly even be alive today if it were not for their PTSD dog. However, even with multiple veterans and PTSD experts being in favor of PTSD dogs, the necessity and capability to help victims of PTSD is still being put up for debate amongst members of our government.

Even with the substantial amount of support of using dogs to assist veterans with PTSD there is still a large number of people and officials who are against their use. In 2012 the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, which is a government office that oversees veteran’s needs, announced that it will no longer finance service dogs for veterans diagnosed with PTSD and other mental disorders. They cited that there is a lack of scientific data concerning the medical benefit that these service dogs provide to veterans even while acknowledging the
opinion of veterans and other various experts that they do indeed help them (PTSD: VA Limits Funding). Without the VA’s help many veterans will be forced to go through private organizations where a PTSD dog could cost them $15,000 or more. This cost does not even include the cost to feed and provide proper veterinary care to the dog. Indeed the sheer amount of the cost is a gigantic drawback that will force many veterans to explore other, perhaps even less effective options. Another drawback for dogs to be used to treat PTSD includes dealing with people who have a negative outlook about dogs in general. While service dogs are protected under the law and are allowed to live and go anywhere as long as they are not being disruptive there are many cases where people have been asked to leave a building or plane simply due to the presence of their service dog. These drawbacks can all be overcome of course. Financial assistance from the VA can make PTSD dogs more available to vets and the enforcement of current laws can assist us in allowing our service men to go where they need to go. Even with these drawbacks PTSD dogs provide a much needed relief to many veterans suffering from PTSD.

While there are many different types of therapies and medications that can be used to treat PTSD, dogs can assist us unlike any other therapy. They comfort us when we are sad or anxious and they make us laugh with their antics and playfulness. Most importantly dogs can be trained to perform multiple useful tasks providing veterans with assistance in situations that can be stressful to them. With the growing demand for PTSD dogs will come greater acceptance and understanding in the roles that they play to help those suffering from PTSD resume their lives. Great strides are being made every day in support of these dogs and this noble cause with supporters being on the right side of history. Help support the troops! Help support the service dogs that they need!
Works Cited


