

## Benefits that animals have for War Veterans with PTSD (Post Trauma Stress Disorder)

For years, animals have been used with great benefit in the treatment of the elderly people, children with autistic and other disorders and diseases or the terminally ill patients. Now Animal Assisted Therapy is benefitting war veterans sufferers of the so called *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*.

Soldiers share a deep bond based on the belief that none but a fellow soldier can understand what is seen and experienced by soldiers. Therefore if the war veterans suffer in a way that feels apart even from his/her companions, the sense of isolation and anxiety can be extreme. Helping soldiers who are suffering as a result of the horrors of war has been focused mainly on the counseling, offering medication, and partnering with other military veterans. Nevertheless, the healing process for PTSD very often continues to be prolonged and lonely. This explains why doctors are enthusiastic about the positive results they are seeing with the relatively new treatment of **PTSD through animal assisted therapy**.

While the majority of cases involve pairing PTSD patients with **dogs**, the treatment has also seen positive results when patients interact with other animals like **horses, cats, birds** and **dolphins**.

Pets have measurable positive impacts on the humans who care for them since they:

- reduce stress
- reduce anxiety
- lower blood pressure
- boost the immune system
- promote exercise

Now to that list can be added: **help PTSD patients to reduce their symptoms**.

## **How animals can help PTSD war veterans:**

1) **Demanding care** - the animals require attention and caring for a pet provides structure and purpose. Animals are dependant upon someone for their food, for their grooming, and, often, for their exercise. For the PTSD patient troubled by recurring thoughts of a traumatizing experience, it is helpful to have an animal near at hand which requires the focus to be shifted away from self and toward them and their needs.

2) **Overcoming emotional numbness** - animals draw out even the most isolated personality, and having to praise the animals helps traumatized veterans overcome emotional numbness. Teaching the dogs service commands develops a patient's ability to communicate, to be assertive but not aggressive, a distinction some struggle with. The dogs can also assuage the hypervigilance common in vets with PTSD.

3) **Animals are accepting creatures** - unlike humans, animals are not at all prejudiced toward differences among people. Relationally speaking, the animal neither notices nor cares if the human has been handicapped or is in some way impaired. The use of prostheses, wheelchairs, or crutches holds no attached meaning for a pet. For the PTSD patient, pets are the ever-affectionate friend determined to give and receive comfort and attention. In the case of dogs and cats, they are the warm body that curls up beside you when life, or your past, threatens to overwhelm you.

*Note: In the case of horses, there is another benefit since horse perceives and reacts to the emotional state of its rider. In fact, horses don't simply react; instead they reflect the mood of the person handling them. If the human's mood is positive and relaxed the horse will mimic that attitude. Conversely, if the human's attitude is negative the horse will adopt a negative mood. This can be helpful for the PTSD patient as it helps them to recognize how their own moods and attitudes affect those around them. Many treatment centers use equine-assisted therapy to treat a number of dual diagnoses.*

4) **Physical health benefits** – among well-established physical benefits animals offer to veterans are lower cholesterol, blood pressure and triglyceride levels.

5) **Psychological benefits** – animals ease the impacts of PTSD, depression and anxiety. Often associated with depression and anxiety, veterans coping with PTSD may experience a range of symptoms, including insomnia, difficulty relating to others, nightmares, panic attacks and self-isolation. For individuals whose symptoms are so severe that they rise to the level of disability, a mental health provider may prescribe a psychiatric service animal sometimes called a “PTSD dog” (which is different from companion pets).

6) **Dogs for PTSD patients** - dogs are perhaps the most popular animals associated with the PTSD treatment through the Animal Assisted Therapy. Here are some reasons why dogs might help individuals with PTSD:

- **Dogs are vigilant** and they immediately let you know if you are really in immediate danger (somebody is in the room) or if you have just had a nightmare. This extra layer of vigilance mimics the buddy system in the military, no soldier or grunt or sailor is ever alone in the battlefield and the same is true when you have a dog by your side. You are not alone.

- **Dogs are protective** just like the buddy system in the military, someone is there to have your back.

- **Dogs respond well to authoritative relationships.** Many military personnel return from their deployments and they have difficulty functioning in their relationships. They are used to giving and getting orders. While this usually doesn't work well in the typical American home, dogs love it.

- **Dogs love unconditionally** and as many military personnel return from their deployments, they have difficulty adjusting to the civilian world. Sometimes they realize that the skills they learned and used

in the service weren't transferable or respected in the civilian sector. This can be devastating when they were well-respected for their position in the military. Dogs don't play any of these games. They just love.

- **Dogs help relearn trust.** Trust is a big issue in PTSD. It can be very difficult to feel safe in the world after certain experiences, and being able to trust the immediate environment can take some time. Dogs help heal by being trustworthy.

- **Dogs help to remember feelings of love.** The world can look pretty convoluted after war and dogs love just helps veterans to remember the basic feelings like love.

*The results of Animal Assisted Therapy in the treatment of PTSD patients has seen significant results. In one study of the effect of dogs with patients, psychologists noted an 82% reduction in symptoms. One particular case noted that interacting with the dog for as little as one week, enabled a patient to decrease the amount of anxiety and sleep medications by half.*

## **STORY:**

### **Adam's Story: How a Dog Helped a Veteran With PTSD**

<http://www.everydayhealth.com/emotional-health/adams-story-how-a-dog-helped-a-veteran-with-ptsd-8871.aspx>

### **Combat Veteran Honors Cat That Helped Him Through His Darkest Days**

<https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20161012/andersonville/national-cat-day-wes-king-ptsd>

## **VIDEO STORIES:**

### **FOX NEWS STORY: „Service Dog Helps Veteran with PTSD“**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6WfDX8KPFU>

## **SBFNonProfit: Jason's Story of PTSD & Soldier's Best Friend**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErFgYXta2gk>

## **Love Meow - Elisas The Caring Cat Helps His Veteran Dad From PTSD**

<http://www.lovemeow.com/elisas-the-caring-cat-helps-his-veteran-dad-from-ptsd-1608392432.html>

## **Parrots to the Rescue: How they Help Veterans with PTSD**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/animal-emotions/201601/parrots-the-rescue-how-they-help-veterans-ptsd>

### **USEFUL LINKS:**

#### **U.S. Department for Veterans Affairs: National Center for PTSD**

[https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/treatment/cope/dogs\\_and\\_ptsd.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/treatment/cope/dogs_and_ptsd.asp)

#### **Pets for Vets**

<http://www.petsforvets.com/>

### **MEDICAL STUDIES:**

#### **Frontiers in Psychology**

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4528099/>

#### **Psychology Today**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/survivors/201107/why-dogs-heal-ptsd>

1) Source: Elements Behavioral Health -

[www.elementsbehavioralhealth.com/trauma-ptsd/animal-therapy-ptsd-treatment/](http://www.elementsbehavioralhealth.com/trauma-ptsd/animal-therapy-ptsd-treatment/)

2) Source: Psychology Today -

[www.psychologytoday.com/blog/survivors/201107/why-dogs-heal-ptsd](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/survivors/201107/why-dogs-heal-ptsd)

3) Source: Naval Center Combat & Operational Stress Control -

[www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcsc/nccosc/healthProfessionalsV2/reports/Documents/white-paper-animal-assisted-therapy-and-ptsd.pdf](http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcsc/nccosc/healthProfessionalsV2/reports/Documents/white-paper-animal-assisted-therapy-and-ptsd.pdf)