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The Pilot Study on the Efficacy of Service Dogs for Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Results from this HABRI-funded study conducted by researchers at Purdue University are among the first to demonstrate the benefits of psychiatric service dogs for military veterans with PTSD.

Researchers compared outcomes among 141 post-9/11 military veterans either with a trained service dog or on the waitlist (usual care alone) and found significant benefits across three indicators of health:

- **Self-perception indicators** (self-reports)[1]
- **Physiological indicators** (stress hormones produced by the body)[2]
- **Medical indicators** (medication use and number of doctor visits)[3]

Self-Perception Results

OBJECTIVE: Evaluate the effects of service dogs on PTSD symptomology.

Compared with usual care alone, having a service dog was associated with clinically significant reductions in PTSD symptoms including:

- **Lower depression**
- **Higher quality of life**
- **Increased psychological well-being**
- **Higher social functioning**
- **Increased life satisfaction**
- **Lower social isolation**

PTSD symptomology meaningfully improved after acquiring a service dog while not being associated with a loss of diagnosis.

Physiological Results

OBJECTIVE: Determine if service dogs were associated with changes in the physiology of stress to better understand how and why a service dog may help with PTSD.

Using saliva samples to measure cortisol, the body's main stress hormone, researchers found that military veterans with a service dog produced more cortisol in the mornings than those on the waitlist. This pattern is closer to the cortisol profile expected in healthy adults without PTSD.

Having a service dog was associated with more normal patterns of stress hormones.

Medical Results

OBJECTIVE: Quantify the effect of PTSD service dogs on medication use in veterans with PTSD.

There were no significant differences in medication types or numbers between between groups, indicating that the **service dogs were not associated with any lapse in regular treatment.**

However, veterans with a service dog were more likely to report that their doctor had decreased dosage or removed medications. In contrast, veterans on the waitlist were more likely to report no changes or an increased dose in their medications.

For more information about this research supporting service dogs for veterans with PTSD as a complementary, therapeutic intervention, please visit www.habri.org.

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