
All You Need Is Unconditional Love

by Dave Morton

The doctor's letter reads, "Meghan Saweikis is my patient. I am treating her for a chronic medical disability. Meghan uses a service dog to assist her in managing this disability, and I support her in doing so. Please accommodate Meghan and her specially trained service dog, Nadia, as needed. Sincerely, Dr. Pickering."

Some additional background information from her doctor might have read something like this: "Meghan was treated for 3 years with talk therapy and medication, but progress was minimal. When I suggested that she get a dog, and have it trained as a psychiatric service dog, the results were dramatic. She's still taking medication, but with the dog added to her treatment protocol, she's now doing well."

Fiction? Fantasy? Not at all. This is a true story, and it demonstrates the degree to which bonding with animals--primarily dogs--can help alleviate depression and give people who are struggling with mental illness a reason for living, a theme that recurs in interviews with depressed people who own dogs.

Meghan's case goes beyond depression and bonding. Her dog, Nadia, a German shepherd, is a "psychiatric service dog" (PSD), which was trained for 18 months to perform such tasks as waking her when she's having a nightmare and shielding her from people who approach too closely.

But the bonding is key. For her and others in similar circumstances, half the "medicine" for daily living is her bond with the dog. As she relates, "Nadia gets me out of bed when I wouldn't otherwise leave my house."

Jon Katz, who authored a book called "The New Work of Dogs" explains why dogs are becoming increasingly important and more numerous in American culture: "In an increasingly disaffected and disconnected society, where the extended family has declined, people are mobile, work has become insecure, and many Americans spend hours a day in front of TV or computer screens, Americans are turning to dogs more and more for emotional support. Dogs are helping them through loneliness, divorce, and aging – all the anxieties of modern life." It makes one wonder what the difference in depression and suicide rates is between those who own dogs, and those who do not. Do dog owners get deeply depressed or commit suicide as often as non-owners?

Four general categories of dogs may provide support for emotional problems, including depression and other mental illnesses:

1. A pet.
2. A therapy dog.
3. An emotional support dog (ESD) - or other emotional support animal (ESA).
4. A psychiatric service dog (PSD).

The latter two types may be recommended by a psychiatrist. A PSD is classified as a "service dog" for legal purposes.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) defines a service dog as one that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks that benefit persons with a disability. **Psychiatric service dogs** (PSD's) are useful for people suffering from major depression, anxiety, agoraphobia, autism, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other psychiatric conditions. A PSD may be used only by people with a disability, as defined by the ADA, and when the severity of their symptoms requires a highly skilled form of canine assistance.

State and federal laws govern public use and access with service dogs, and the owner should get acquainted with them before venturing out. General ignorance of the ADA by gatekeepers of public access, coupled with the seeming vacuousness of the law and the lack of a government-issued ID tag for the dog cause many PSD owners grief when they attempt to enter restaurants, movie theaters, etc., and find themselves and their dogs illegally barred from entry. The law, which was supposed to open doors for the disabled, often seems to keep those doors shut for PSD owners when challenged by business owners and other gatekeepers.

An **emotional support dog** (ESD), in contrast to a PSD, is not necessarily trained and may be used for its companionship and calming physical presence more than anything else. People with disabilities are permitted to have an "**emotional support animal**," even in no-pets housing, under the Fair Housing Act. A request for "reasonable accommodation to no-pets policies" of an apartment complex must be made in writing, accompanied by a psychiatrist's letter of disability and support for use of the animal. The Doris Day Animal League (www.ddal.org) is an excellent resource for information on ESA's.

Obtaining a psychiatrist's letter that recommends an ESA or PSD could take time, and finding and training a PSD could take a *year* or more, even if the patient were deemed suitable. Thus, for people who have just begun their mental health journey, the fastest and easiest route to emotional support from a dog, is to acquire one as a pet. A **pet dog** should bring psychological benefits almost immediately to its new owner.

Before going out and purchasing a pet dog, though, it is important to do your homework. Dogs have special needs and requirements, and dog ownership is similar to raising a child in terms of time and effort! Maintaining a dog will cost a minimum of \$1,500 per year. But owners need to "pay the dog" for what they receive from the dog. The book, "Dogs for Dummies" is a good place to begin your self-education about dogs and their needs.

For those who feel they need more than a pet, service training of the pet may be a possibility, depending upon the dog's individual temperament and trainability. A professional trainer of service dogs can help you make that determination.

Another type of dog, a **therapy dog**, is sometimes used in group homes. Beth Stopka works as a direct care specialist at a group home in the Minneapolis area. Her four female clients have various mental and physical disabilities ranging from severe mental retardation, to depression and schizophrenia. Beth is an advocate of using animals to help such persons, as is the company's management, which keeps a golden retriever named "Camp" on its staff to provide additional comfort for residents.

"When the main office sends the dog over for an hour to be with the clients, the beneficial effects last all day. It's amazing to witness," says Beth.

Therapy dogs are also used in institutional settings such as mental health facilities, outpatient programs, individual therapists' offices, even nursing homes. Such dogs are often an indispensable source of comfort and stability for those who interact with them.

In contrast to emotional support dogs, therapy dogs, and pets, a psychiatric service dog (PSD) must be owned and operated by a single disabled individual. Joan Esnayra, Ph.D., who coined the phrase "psychiatric service dog" and founded the Psychiatric Service Dog Society (www.psychdog.org), contrasts pet ownership with PSD ownership for those with a greater severity of disability: "The real medicine of PSD ownership is the relationship or bond that the owner enjoys with the dog. With a PSD, the relationship is 24/7. This 'joined-at-the-hip' lifestyle fosters a stronger, more therapeutic bond than one gets from occasional interactions with a family pet."

For 33-year-old Carey Ivey of Dayton, Ohio, the 24/7 relationship is crucial. "Medication, therapy, exercise, and two pet dogs, whom I love dearly, didn't help enough. With Asta [her Rottweiler PSD], I've been able to return to college part time-- a dream I've had since high school. Asta is my rock. She performs special tasks, and gives me emotional, physical, and psychiatric support. I can't imagine life without her."

Asta was Carey's pet before she decided to train her dog to be a PSD. The pairing has worked so well, she's even been able to reduce her medication dosages "...with my doctor's approval, of course!" Carey adds, "I can't imagine my life without pets. They bring a sense of peace, friendship, and responsibility to me, as I'm sure they do for many people."

Brenda Bryant, 44, of Aurora, Colo., comments, "One symptom of major depression is lethargy. But when you take on the commitment of caring for your dog, you are forced to take on its needs, feedings, bathroom breaks, and playtimes. You gain from this, and your depressed phases aren't so low as before."

Brenda's PSD is a boxer/shepherd mix named Lyla, but she had a pet dachshund named Charlie for 14 years before that. "Charlie gave me a reason to *want* to live - something the doctors and medications could not give me," Brenda says.

What was life like before Charlie and Lyla? "I was hospitalized 13 times, attempted suicide 9 times, was homeless a few times, and had more than 300 jobs," she relates. Her last suicide attempt was in 1990, and it seems unlikely that there will be any more.

Here are a few examples of the many tasks that a PSD may be trained to perform:

Symptoms	Trainable Tasks
Anxiety	HUP-UP command (onto lap)
Persistent sadness	HUG command
Hopelessness	CUDDLE and KISS commands
Hypersomnia (excessive sleeping)	Wake-up at specific time each day
Lack of motivation	SETTLE for tactile stimulation sessions
Short-term memory loss	Remind to take medication at specific times

For PSD owners, these symptoms--and many others--can occur anywhere, so they are accompanied by their PSD nearly everywhere they go. Esnayra notes that constant reinforcement of the dog's training is necessary to prevent reversion to poor behavior. "The training never stops; it's a lifestyle. Thus, limiting solo outings without one's PSD is important," she explains.

As for training, "It's a two-way street," says Esnayra. "At first, the owner trains the dog, but over time the dog begins to train the owner--cultivating the owner's insight and body-awareness of developing mental health symptoms."

Frequently, a PSD will alert spontaneously to physiologic changes taking place in its owner. This is critical information for owners who take an active role in managing earliest expressions of symptoms, says Esnayra.

This can be true even if the dog isn't a PSD, as Brenda Bryant says of her late dog, Charlie: "The little guy was with me in the worst of my bipolar days. I joke and say he raised me."

When Charlie finally died, Brenda continued living and went forward, partly because of what he taught her and partly for his sake. "Charlie didn't come this far with me for me to go backwards and let him down," she says fondly. "I owed it to him to survive and live as well as I could."

We thank you Charlie - and all the dogs that have helped others in need.

The unconditional love from a dog--sometimes coupled with training--can make a tremendous difference in the happiness and quality of life for many people.

And I'll just bet that all that love flows right back to the dog--don't you think?

RESOURCES

These books, organizations, and dog trainers offer information and guidance on pets and service dogs for new dog owners and people with mental illnesses.

Books for new dog owners:

"Don't Shoot the Dog", Karen Pryor, Interpet Publishing, 2002.

"Dogs for Dummies", Gina Spadifori and Marty Becker, 2000.

"The New Work of Dogs", Jon Katz, Random House, 2003. 256 pages.

Doris Day Animal League.

www.ddal.org

Request booklet "Best Friends for Life: How To Keep Your Pet In 'No Pets' Housing".

Psychiatric Service Dog Society.

www.psychdog.org

Their mission is education, advocacy, research, training, and facilitation. The website offers a task list for PSD training, a communication board (listserv) for service-dog handlers, and guidelines for severely mentally ill persons who wish to train their own PSD.

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners.

www.iaadp.org/psd_tasks

They offer another task list for PSD training.

North Star Foundation.

www.northstardogs.com

For information on service dogs for children who have challenges that include autism, serious medical conditions, and grief issues.

Animal Humane Societies.

Some animal humane societies conduct service dog training for people with psychiatric disorders. Check with a Society in your area.