

nePsi.com New England Psychologist

December 2006 Issue

A new leash on life

Psychiatric service dogs worthy partners

By Nan Shnitzler

Dogs are valued for their uncanny abilities to sniff out bombs, drugs and even cancer and to assist those with physical disabilities. Add to the pantheon psychiatric service dogs that via instinct or training can help restore a higher level of functioning to those disabled by mental illness.

"When service dogs began to be used for individuals living with brain-based disorders, the landscape of service dog training began to change," says Joan Esnayra, Ph.D. (genetics) founder in 2002 of the Psychiatric Service Dog Society (PSDS) in Arlington, Va., a non-profit advocacy group (www.psychdog.org).

Canine assistance can profoundly change lives and restore functioning, Esnayra says. Among other work, dogs can warn of an impending dissociative episode or anxiety attack, allowing time for the handler to take corrective action; provide a reality check for those with schizophrenia or paranoia; and help people with major depression, panic disorder or agoraphobia feel secure enough to leave the house.

It's more than mere companionship. "When a dog can restore an individual's ability to function, there is obviously more going on than when a healthy person enjoys the companionship of a pet," Esnayra says. "It's not so much what the dog does for an individual with mental illness, as it is how the individual construes the interactions with the dog in her mind. Thus, what may appear as simple companionship is a form of cognitive behavioral therapy in which dog and handler, by virtue of 24/7 togetherness, become astute observers of each others' behaviors, attitudes and dispositions."

Kathryn Neel of Massachusetts is counting on it. Diagnosed with major depression, posttraumatic stress disorder and dissociative identity disorder, she is training a four-month-old German shepherd named Aegius to be her psychiatric service dog.

Trained as a neurobiologist, Neel, 47, was skeptical at first. But via research and personal experience, she realized a dog could reliably signal "when things are going off the rails."

Neel is working with a professional who told her that training Aegius would be most effective if she could be honest about what triggers her negative behaviors and be specific about tasks the dog could do to help. On her list: find her car, remove her from crowds, intervene in an emotional crisis, and nudge her out of bed in the mornings.

"My psychiatrist may not like it, but I consider the dog in the same category as her," Neel says.

The use of psychiatric service dogs is growing. According to a PSDS survey, users live all over the U.S. and Canada, are aged 18 to 69 years old, reflect all the major Axis I disorders and most take psychotropic medication. Many are severely mentally ill so it might seem paradoxical that they are self-aware enough to take care of a dog and identify how it will help them.

Clinical psychologist Carmen Davis, Ph.D., of Portland, Ore. has no problem with that paradigm. She has been prescribing service dogs for five years and says they are a valuable adjunct to therapy.

"A dog forces those with mental illness to become more functional and encourages them to be responsible for another life 24/7," Davis says. "The benefits are great and so are the responsibilities."

Typically, it's up to a therapist to determine whether a patient can handle a dog. A letter confirming the disability and recommending a service dog usually qualifies a patient to an agency or trainer, Davis says.

Access issues will inevitably arise. While the federal Americans with Disabilities Act does not distinguish between physical and mental disabilities, some states limit service dog access to those with physical disabilities only, Esnayra says. She recommends that handlers be prepared to defend their service dog assertion with training documentation and knowledge of state law.

Usually the exchange between handler and dog is unobtrusive and does not advertise itself as therapeutic. But it is constant. Neel overcame her misgivings with a risk-benefit analysis.

"I had to get comfortable with being able to go out in public with the dog and take him everywhere I go. Some family members are embarrassed to be seen with me," Neel says. "But I'm not getting any points from suffering needlessly. It makes sense for me to get as many tools as possible for me to live as full a life as I want to live."

http://www.masspsy.com/leading/0612_ne_dog.html