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Service dogs assist those with psychiatric disabilities

Animals once trained for the blind now also help people cope with problems like anxiety, depression and post traumatic stress.

by [Erin G Edwards](#)

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It was 9 a.m. and Zeus was standing patiently in line at a crowded downtown Chicago Starbucks, a common morning ritual for so many humans. Zeus, however, is not your typical Starbucks patron: he sports a blue vest and has four legs.

Zeus is a psychiatric service dog, a relatively new breed of service animal that works to mitigate a handler's psychiatric disabilities, such as anxiety disorder, depression or post traumatic stress disorder.

The 5-year-old shih tzu plays a valuable role for his companion, Connie Clark, a consultant who suffers from mental illness. In town on business Wednesday, she said Zeus helps her cope with an anxiety disorder and panic attacks.

"It causes me personally to kind of freeze in my environment at times, or feel like I need to run, or not recognize where I'm at," Clark said about her anxiety. "In Zeus' case, when I have a panic attack he starts tapping me on the leg or stretching out so that I will focus on him,"

she said.

'Psychiatric service dog' is "a legal classification referring to a dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks that benefit its owner with a mental illness such as depression," according to the Psychiatric Service Dog Society (PSDS). Only people with a disability, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act, can qualify for a psychiatric service dog.

"This is something that is relatively new in the service dog world," said Pat Schwartz, the executive director of Golden Kimba Service Dogs, a Colorado-based organization that trains and places service dogs with people with disabilities.

Schwartz noted that psychiatric service dogs differ from therapy dogs, which are trained, certified pets that provide comfort and emotional well-being during visits to people in nursing homes, hospitals or other institutions.

"I coined the phrase 'psychiatric service dog' in 1997, and at that time I realized that this was going to be big," said Joan Esnayra, Ph.D., the president and founder of PSDS. The organization provides education for mental health consumers about psychiatric service dogs, advocacy, research and training facilitation.

She said most of her clients have either mood disorders or anxiety disorder, and a small percentage have psychotic disorders.

Like service animals that perform tasks for people with disabilities such as blindness, psychiatric service dogs fall under the American Disabilities Act and have the right to go anywhere that business patrons would normally be allowed to go.

On business trips, for example, Zeus flies with his owner and sits on her lap, Clark said, because she can become extremely panicked on planes.

However, some business employees and customers are unfamiliar with the ADA rules on service dogs. Clark said she has been questioned in restaurants and was stopped in her Chicago hotel when Zeus returned from a walk without his service dog vest. Clark explained that he was her service animal and pointed out that she'd been a hotel occupant all week.

"The reason that I go ahead and put his uniform on is because he's such a little dog, people don't see him as a service animal," Clark said. "And, I mean, I look physically healthy, so not knowing what the underlying factors are, they wonder why this little cute thing would be wandering around .. Zeus is not a pet while he's working."

Little scientific research exists on psychiatric service dogs' effect on their human handlers. However, Esnayra said her organization is pushing for grants that will fund clinical trials.


Esnayra points to stories about clients who have become reclusive as a result of severe panic disorder, and through the help of a service dog been able to return to society. Others battling severe depression, she said, have even called their dogs "suicide prevention."

Esnayra said she is often asked: 'Aren't these dogs acting like a crutch?'

"Is medicine a crutch? Is talk therapy a crutch? These partnerships are restoring people's ability to function

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and that's the bottom line," she said. Service dogs are meant to be an adjunct for people who still suffer debilitating symptoms despite undergoing more conventional treatments, she said.

"We have placed two with people and they do work," said Jack Giambone of Morris Service Dog Program in Burr Ridge. However, Giambone stresses that under the ADA, a service dog must "provide at least two specific tasks directly related to the disability."

One sector where psychiatric service dogs are becoming more widely used is among veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"My contract rate with veterans has gone way up in the last two years," Esnayra said. In fact, PSDS is planning to launch a pilot program at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and will soon begin a campaign to raise \$100,000 for the program.

Schwartz said Golden Kimba, too, has begun working with a New York-based program, called "Dog Tags," places service dogs with veterans.

"One of the main things is helping the veteran to be comfortable ... away from home," Schwartz said. She said they train the dogs to meet the veterans' needs and that the dogs provide a "constant, non-judgmental presence."

"It's so beautiful when you see it work," Schwartz said.

Psychiatric service dogs may not be for everyone suffering from mental illness, however. Liking dogs is an understandable prerequisite and cost is another important consideration.

Esnayra estimates that service dogs can cost around \$4,000 for the first year and after that annual upkeep is about \$2,000 a year. At Golden Kimba, an 18-month-old, fully-trained service dog costs around \$3,000. Schwartz said they do not charge for the dog, but that the cost covers the dog's training, some veterinarian costs and two weeks of intense team training with the handler.

To learn more about psychiatric service dogs, visit PSDS at www.psychdog.org or call (571)-216-1589.

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