



Dog Helps Man Manage PTSD Symptoms

Haunted by the horrific memories of Vietnam combat brought on by [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), confined to a wheelchair because of multiple sclerosis and racked by a blood disorder and breathing problems, 67-year-old Michael Gaither spent four years holed up in his Chiefland, Fla., home, leaving only for doctor appointments.

About three months ago, things got worse when he fell and broke four ribs. The agonizing pain and the thought of yet another disabling condition left Gaither wondering if life was still worth living.

"The doctors didn't think I was going to make it," said Gaither.

But all that changed when he found just the relief he needed: a 16-month-old German shepherd named Honey. Gaither's wife had contacted an organization called Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs, which donated Honey to Gaither after meeting him.

Honey, he said, helps relieve the unbearable anxiety of PTSD as well as the frequent nightmares.

"When I get tense, she knows it, and she comes up and puts her head on my leg or my chest to comfort me, and I forget what I'm concerned about," said Gaither. "If I have nightmares, she'll jump on my chest and wake me up."

Honey also picks things up if Gaither drops them, and if he's inside and needs his wife when she's outside, Honey will go fetch her.

When his [multiple sclerosis](#) causes him to sweat profusely, while he's sleeping, Honey leaps into action.

"One night, I started sweating really bad and I had a blanket on, and Honey jumped up and pulled it off."

Gaither isn't the first person whose life has dramatically changed thanks to some four-legged alternative treatment. Dogs -- and other animals -- have made headlines for their ability to [sniff out cancer](#) and [alert diabetic owners](#) to changes in blood sugar levels.

Dogs Help With Mental Illness Too

But Honey and other service dogs have also been found to have the unique ability to sense changes in people's mental state and can be of tremendous service to the mentally ill.

A growing number of veterans are turning to dogs to help with PTSD symptoms, and experts say dogs can help with other psychiatric problems as well, including major depression and panic attacks.

"Dogs are very sensitive to escalations of mood. They can tell if a person's mood is starting to escalate to a panic attack," said Joan Esnayra, president and founder of the Psychiatric Service Dog Society. "They can tell their handlers this well in advance, before the handler has lost their composure and lost their ability to think clearly."

Dogs also help people with mental illnesses devote attention to the needs of the dog instead of solely on themselves.

"Dogs give them an alternate focus," said Esnayra. "Going out of the house, for example, is for the dog. That displacement frees up the brain a little bit and reduces [anxiety](#)."

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For Gaither, Honey became his purpose.

"I had something to look after. I had to take her out, and it was somebody I was responsible for. She was helping me, but I was helping her also."

Esnarya explained that although the symptoms of many disorders can be alleviated by service dogs, not everyone with one of these illnesses can have a service dog.

"A person has to be able to support the cost of a dog, for example," she said.

Dogs Help Some Cut Down Medication

"Some people who have the dogs have been able to cut down on their medication," said Carol Borden, founder and executive director of Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs.

Borden says that despite the benefits medical service dogs can offer, there are very few available. It costs about \$20,000 and takes anywhere from 500 to 1,500 hours to train these dogs, and her organization gives them away for free after an application process. She and others who train service dogs have to rely mostly on donations since there is very little funding available.

Service dogs are protected under the law, meaning they are allowed to be with their handlers in public places provided they are well-behaved. The dogs must be specially trained to respond to their handlers' needs and to act appropriately in public.

Gaither is one of the fortunate few to receive a medical service dog, and he's not sure where he'd be without his Honey.

"It's like a miracle what she's done for me," he said.

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