

Exploring animal-assisted intervention among military veterans: The potential social significance and impact of psychiatric service dogs

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Background

Military Veterans are twice as likely to die by suicide than the general population, with an average of 20 service member suicide deaths per day in the United States.¹

Existing research shows that psychiatric service dogs have been useful in helping Veterans reduce the following factors, and which put them at a high-risk for suicide:^{2,3}

- problematic substance use;⁴
- symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD;⁵
- physiological markers of prolonged stress exposure.⁶

Increasingly, research from an attachment framework is showing that the presence of a strong and stable social support is one of the most effective protective factors against suicide.⁷

Research Question

Does the relationship between a military veteran and their psychiatric service dog reduce feelings and/or symptoms of suicidal ideation (i.e. depression, loneliness, hopelessness, etc), and, therefore, reduce suicide risk?

- If yes: does this dynamic enable overall feelings of mattering, and in what ways?

Methods

- Canadian Military Veterans working with AUDEAMUS Service Dog Organization
- 4 Participants - 28 Interview Transcripts over 18 Months
- Exploratory Thematic Analysis
- NVivo 13 Qualitative Coding Software
- 1st Round Coding: Affective Coding
- 2nd Round Coding: Concept coding with attachment framework for 7 markers of "mattering"



Framework: "Mattering"

Mattering is a person's need to feel significant in the eyes of others; to feel we matter is to believe that another cares about us, and is concerned with our fate.⁸ Mattering is a validated psychosocial measure where high levels of mattering are known to reduce suicide risk.⁹

Originally developed by sociologists Rosenberg & McCullough with three primary indicators,¹⁰ mattering has had a resurgence in social psychology where an additional four measures - making for seven total - have been added and validated by Elliot, Kao, & Grant.¹¹

Rosenberg & McCullough (1981):

Attention
Importance
Dependence

ENABLE
FEELINGS OF
MATTERING

Elliot, Kao, & Grant (2004):

Ego Extension
Noted Absence
Appreciation
Individuation

"Ego-extension" was the most prevalent marker throughout the study. Veterans indicated that the bond they had with their psychiatric service dogs brought significance, meaning, purpose, belonging, and hope to their lives - often more so than the relationship they had with their own child, spouse, or peer support network.

Results

My analysis found mattering to exist in every case of the study, with all seven markers frequently present. The psychiatric service dogs provided strong levels of social support, and increased feelings of personal significance which - based on the existing literature - should reduce suicide risk.

Mattering Markers	Veterans' on the human-animal bond
ATTENTION (or AWARENESS) Oneself and one's actions are noticed by others.	"... You communicate with him, he is there; he is still attentive and it doesn't matter how bad it gets, he is still right beside you"
IMPORTANCE (or SIGNIFICANCE) Feeling significant to someone who cares about you.	"She is just there all the time; it is someone to depend on"
DEPENDENCE (or RELIANCE) Feeling important because others are relying upon you.	"I think she would be lost without me...it is my responsibility to take the dog out, and I can't do that if I am incapacitated."
APPRECIATION You and your actions are valued and matter to someone.	"We do things for each other that the other species can't do for each other, like she can love me in ways that a human can't." "If I did not have him and this [AUDEAMUS program] I would probably have fallen apart again."
INDIVIDUATION Feeling unique, special, and centered on by someone based on how they regard your true self.	"There is a sense of peace and a sense of calm and he likes me for who I am, he is not judging."
NOTED ABSENCE Feeling that you are missed by someone.	"If I am not in the room, he comes and finds me." "There is never a moment in the day you are not wondering where she is, or looking for her."
EGO-EXTENSION Recognizing that someone else is emotionally invested in you, and what is happening with or to you impacts them.	"I don't want to make her uncomfortable because as soon as I get uncomfortable, she is uncomfortable, and I think that is quite a bit of the mutual respect we have for each other." "Nobody has ever been able to pick up on my anxiety, and she does."

Discussion

The bond individuals have with their service dogs is incredibly powerful - it provides a unique form of social support with the capabilities of reducing distressing psychophysiological symptoms.

It is imperative that, as human-animal bond and health researchers, we further explore the implications that cross-species relationships have in reducing suicide risk because of quotes like this:

"I need [my Dog] in order to get out of the dark, and I knew enough in my head that I couldn't do it on my own; I needed to have her guide me out, and she is the only guide I have".



"She saved my life."

Limitations

This was an exploratory pilot with a small sample, and a secondary analysis where suicide prevention implications were not a primary consideration during data collection. Future studies should involve a validated "Mattering to Others" questionnaire that is revised for assessing inter-species relationships.

Conclusion

My findings suggest that service dogs have a role to play as a cost-effective, complementary, and holistic health practice in suicide prevention. Validating the claim that animals have a role in reducing suicide for those at high-risk will be the focus of my upcoming empirical PhD work.

Future studies must also keep focus on the welfare of the animal: a strong emphasis on the mutually dynamic relationship between the dog and handler, with acknowledgement of the benefits and drawbacks that may occur for each throughout the interaction.

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Image Credit to Bronwynn Edwards & Alexandria Pavelich

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Related studies can be found at www.servicedogresearch.ca