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## Responsible Service Dog Handling

by Veronica Morris, PhD

The most important factor in being a responsible service dog handler is respect: respect for your dog, respect for all the other service dog teams who will come after you, respect for those around you, and respect for yourself.

### *Respect your dog*

Among your top priorities when working with a service dog should be that your dog is healthy and happy while assisting you.

It would be wise to educate yourself about dog body language so you or a professional trainer can help you see when your dog is relaxed, or when they are stressed and need a break. Working a dog that is in pain, is stressed, or is otherwise unhealthy or unhappy is not fair to the dog.

Common signs that your dog is not happy to be working are fearfulness, aggression, running away from the vest or leash, or lots of lip licking and yawning. Consult a professional trainer if you notice these or other unusual behaviors in your dog.

### *Respect other service dog teams*

With every freedom comes responsibility. As a service dog team, to the general public you are representing all other service dog teams out there (many people only see a couple of service dogs in their entire lives). Whatever you or your dog does, they will remember.

Disability mitigation is more important than conforming to preconceived ideas about service dog teams. That being said, it is very important that you leave others with a good impression of service dogs whenever reasonable. Otherwise, people may not support you during access challenges, and may even try to change laws to restrict service dog teams.

As such, your dog should always be well-groomed, under your control, and safe around people of all ages, dogs, and other animals. If your service dog is having a bad day and grossly misbehaves once



or minorly misbehaves in spite of your attempt to remedy the situation, apologize to those around you, leave the situation to give your dog a break (unless you're legally or morally obligated to stay), and consult a professional if you don't understand what happened or it recurs.

### *Respect those around you*

It is important to remember that not everyone loves dogs as much as you do, and some people are fearful or allergic. Do not let your dog approach or sniff people without their permission, and especially don't work an aggressive dog.

Many people don't like dogs around food, so prevent your dog from approaching or sniffing food in a grocery store or restaurant (unless it's working to detect your food allergen!). Keep your dog well-groomed to cut down on allergens for others, and don't let your dog on furniture.

Again, if your dog misbehaves, apologize to those around you, remedy any disturbance your dog has caused, leave the situation when appropriate, and seek the advice of a professional. Before you even take your dog out, it is imperative that you familiarize yourself not only with your legal rights, but also your [legal responsibilities](#).



### *Respect yourself*

Understand that having a service dog brings extra attention. You do not have to answer every question asked of you by the general public.

Develop [strategies for interacting with the public](#) that keep your dignity and that of others intact—you may, for example, hand out [flyers](#) or cards that answer common questions.

Pay attention to your dog's alerts and behavior, and take care of yourself when you need to! By taking care of yourself, you are also taking care of your service dog.

**Psychiatric Service Dogs Partners' purpose is to promote the mental health of people using service dogs for psychiatric disabilities by educating, advocating, providing expertise, facilitating peer support, and promoting responsible service dog training and handling.**

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