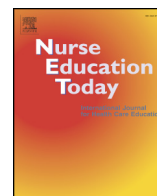


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## Military veterans and canine assistance for post-traumatic stress disorder: A narrative review of the literature

Cheryl A. Krause-Parello <sup>\*</sup>, Sarah Sarni, Eleni Padden

C.-P.A.W.W. (*Canines Providing Assistance to Wounded Warriors*), Health Research Initiative for Veterans, University of Colorado, College of Nursing, Anschutz Medical Campus, 13120 E. 19th Avenue, Aurora, CO 80045, United States

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are a vulnerable population at high risk for depression, isolation, and suicide. A substantial body of anecdotal evidence exists supporting the use of canines as an effective adjunct treatment for this population. However, a comprehensive review of its use based on scientific literature has thus far not been conducted.

**Methods:** A narrative literature review was conducted to examine the current state of the science on canine assistance for veterans diagnosed with PTSD in order to synthesize current empirical knowledge on the subject. Articles were retrieved among the small body of recent literature using computerized database searches. Inclusion criteria included peer-reviewed journal publications published through October 1st, 2015. Only originally published articles that examined the outcomes of canine assistance on veterans with PTSD were examined. Additionally, each included article was specific to veterans, dogs, and, PTSD in combination rather than article that discuss the concepts separately. Exclusion criteria included symposia and conference material, dissertations, media articles, and no mention of canines as a treatment modality. 563 articles were retrieved; 6 met the criteria. When evaluating data, information and themes were extracted into an Excel table; this table was employed in the synthesis of information into manuscript form.

**Results:** The following themes were explored within the selected publications: What is Canine Assistance; Why Use Canine Assistance for PTSD in Veterans; Concerns; and Future Directions. The literature endorsed canine assistance for PTSD in veterans as a promising modality. Authors also raised concerns about lack of protocols, cost and availability barriers, and animal welfare calling for additional, rigorous research to advance its use as a treatment for veterans with PTSD.

**Conclusions:** PTSD continues to pose significant psychological, health, and welfare challenges to veterans and the multi-disciplinary providers who treat them. Analysis of this literature should expand knowledge and outline future directions for healthcare professions and improve health and wellness for veterans with PTSD through the use of canine assistance.

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### 1. Introduction

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a potentially debilitating psychiatric condition that overwhelmingly affects veterans. Considered a signature wound of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, PTSD is complicated and diverse in both its development and expression (Burke et al., 2009; Troyanskaya et al., 2015). A variety of vulnerabilities categorized as pre-trauma, peri-trauma, and post-trauma have been related to the development of PTSD (Hoge et al., 2007). Veterans with a diagnosis of PTSD characteristically present with experiences from each of these categories. It has been hypothesized that the additive effect of various vulnerability factors such as previous history of a mental disorder,

perceived social support, and subsequent life stressors may propel individuals towards the development of the disorder (Hoge et al., 2007). Presenting symptoms of PTSD can include re-experiencing traumatic events, increased arousal and constant hypervigilance, as well as avoidant, numbing, defensive, and self-medicating behaviors. Furthermore, PTSD is associated with increased risk for suicidal behavior, especially among female, young, and rural veterans (Department of Veterans Affairs [VA], 2012; Kemp, 2014); harrowing current estimates point to the loss of approximately 22 veterans a day to suicide (Kemp and Bossarte, 2013).

Healthcare professionals currently address PTSD via multiple treatment modalities. Strategies include pharmacological interventions, behavioral approaches, such as support groups and stress management teaching, as well as therapeutic methods, including cognitive behavioral therapy, eye-movement desensitization therapy, reprocessing therapy, exposure therapy, and trauma-focused therapy (Corrigan and Cole,

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Cheryl.Krause-Parello@ucdenver.edu](mailto:Cheryl.Krause-Parello@ucdenver.edu) (C.A. Krause-Parello), [Sarah.Sarni@ucdenver.edu](mailto:Sarah.Sarni@ucdenver.edu) (S. Sarni), [Eleni.Padden@ucdenver.edu](mailto:Eleni.Padden@ucdenver.edu) (E. Padden).

2008; Taylor et al., 2015). Unfortunately, many individuals remain symptomatic even after receiving these evidence-based treatments. Additionally, distinct challenges have been identified in administering effective mental health care treatments to service members. Mental illness can carry a negative connotation in the military, with service members under pressure to remain stoic. This may result in a hesitance to seek treatment for fear of ostracism and loss of status, community, and benefits (Taylor et al., 2015; McNally, 2012). The culture that exists in many components of the military emphasizes strength—physical as well as mental. As such, a persistent stigma against mental health issues, and an unwillingness to be seen as weak may play a key role in discouraging veterans from seeking help with emotional problems (Greene-Shortridge et al., 2007).

Additionally, the transition from active duty to veteran status is difficult for many individuals as they move from the certainty of a routine and sense of purpose to uncertainty and daily flux. Gaps in social and behavioral health support during reintegration can lead to the deterioration of mental health for new veterans (Defense Centers of Excellence, 2010). Substance abuse, homelessness, and suicide continue to remain significant problems for the veteran population struggling with PTSD (Leeies et al., 2010; Carlson et al., 2013; Wisco et al., 2014; Finley, 2014). There is a clear and pressing need for a variety of dynamic, empirically validated approaches to aid service providers in addressing the PTSD health crisis currently facing our military veterans. As such, this narrative review will focus on critically examining a promising new approach by exploring the impact that canine assistance has been demonstrated to have upon this pressing issue in military mental health and wellness.

Canine assistance is defined in this article as involving interactions between veterans with PTSD and any type of canine (i.e. service dogs, psychiatric service dogs, therapy dogs, and companion dogs), for the purposes of alleviating PTSD symptoms and facilitating recovery. Taking into consideration the largely compassionate and non-judgmental demeanor of canines, these animals have the potential to be especially well suited for the needs of a veteran with PTSD who may be experiencing isolation during reintegration, as well as a persisting desire to maintain appearances of psychological strength to their human companions and service providers. The ability for dogs to serve as alert mechanisms for their handlers may also ameliorate some of the difficulties that individuals struggling with hypervigilance must frequently manage (Lefkowitz et al., 2005; Holowka et al., 2012; Furst, 2015). It has been established that there are a variety of complex social and emotional benefits that may arise from human interactions with a canine, such as a lessening of depressive and anxious symptoms (Hoffmann et al., 2009; Le Roux and Kemp, 2009; Crossman et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2015). As such, a thorough review of the existing literature must be conducted in order to examine the current state of scientific knowledge in regards to studies evaluating canine assistance for veterans with PTSD. This is a necessary step to move the evolving field of study forward in both a systematic and innovative fashion. We will also identify current issues that must be addressed to improve contemporary practice and optimize health outcomes for veterans, ultimately aiming to make this information more comprehensively accessible to our community at large.

Approximately 7.6% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans reporting combat exposure have received a diagnosis of PTSD (Smith et al., 2008). Further, 25% of all veterans seeking health-care from the VA are diagnosed with a psychological condition; up to 52% of these individuals are diagnosed with PTSD (Seal et al., 2007). PTSD and its devastating sequelae, which include depression, violence, substance abuse, homelessness, and suicidal ideation, take not only an immense toll on both the service member's immediate circle, but on society as well (Finley, 2014; Stander et al., 2014; Begic and Jokic-Begic, 2001; Leeies et al., 2010; Carlson et al., 2013; Wisco et al., 2014). These statistics make it obvious that the investigation of treatments for PTSD must be made a national priority. As such, this review actively seeks to explore

the knowledge base regarding the ways in which canines may provide support to our nation's veterans, in hopes that these jarringly desolate statistics may, through evidence-based practice and the implementation of strategic canine assistance, no longer be representative of the health and wellbeing of our honorable service member population.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Questions

The specific research questions (RQs) were to answer: RQ 1 What is the definition of canine assistance; RQ 2 What are the benefits of canine assistance in the veteran population; RQ 3 What are the concerns of canine assistance in the veteran population; and RQ 4 What are the future directions needed for research regarding the use of canines for assistance and promotion of healing in a population of military veterans with PTSD.

### 2.2. Literature Search

Computerized database searching was the primary measure used to access relevant publications. Five electronic databases were used: FindIt, Medline, CINAHL, PubMed, and PsycINFO.

Search words included all combinations of these key words PTSD, veteran, canine; military, dog, and canine assistance.

The inclusion criteria for the search included the following:

- 1) Peer-reviewed journal publications.
- 2) All publications through October 1st, 2015.
- 3) Only originally published articles that examined the outcomes of canine assistance on veterans with PTSD.
- 4) The article was specific to veterans, dogs, and, PTSD in combination rather than article that discuss the concepts separately.

Search parameters were highly inclusive because of the small total body of research on the subject. All relevant articles meeting the identified criteria were included. A total of 563 articles were retrieved (see Fig. 1). An initial review of the abstracts was conducted to remove articles that were clearly unrelated to canine assistance for veterans with PTSD, qualitative studies, or the level of detail was insufficient to evaluate the study's quality. Exclusion criteria included symposia and conference material, dissertations, theses, media articles, and no mention of canines used as a treatment modality. After the exclusion of article only six published articles met inclusion criteria (see Table 1). Although a large number of articles were retrieved there is a small body of research pertaining to specifically canines, veterans, and PTSD.

### 2.3. Literature Screening and Synthesis of Themes

A narrative literature review was conducted to gather, assess, critique, and synthesize information on the current state of the science on canine assistance for veterans with PTSD. Retrieved articles were screened independently by two designated authors. Articles were assessed via relevance of title and abstract content to our inclusion criteria and search terms. If an article's abstract was not substantial enough to deem it includable or excludable, the entirety of the article was evaluated the designated authors in order to make a finalized decision regarding inclusivity. Theme identification was performed by the designated authors. Designated authors independently identified prominent themes in the included literature approved for review. All disagreements concerning article inclusivity and identification of recurring and relevant themes were resolved via discussion and subsequent consensus.

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