



New Life K9s

Nonprofit Branch of Son Care Foundation, Inc.

Service Dogs for Veterans and First Responders with PTSD

PTSD: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly about Diagnosis: Part I

As a Licensed Psychologist who has worked with military and law enforcement trauma for close to 30 years, I'd like to share my understanding around concerns which are coming up for many about a diagnosis of PTSD. I hope this information may bring some context and perspective to a challenging issue and keep the conversation going.

The mental health field has a long history of working to establish itself as a legitimate scientific field. As such, it has adopted a medical model which uses terminology which sounds.... well, pathological. That is unfortunate to the degree it can create an image of sick or "crazy," though fortunate, in that **being able to name something is the starting place for a common language which allows us to organize, research, and develop approaches for assistance or "treatment."** Through decades of training mental health professionals, including in the art of diagnosis, I continue to trip over a language which does not match my own sensibilities or training about the work of facilitating and supporting fellow human beings through their profound and meaningful challenges. I have found that those inclined to diminish others based on their struggles and symptoms will do this, with or without a diagnosis. Likewise, **those who recognize and respect the body and mind's way of expressing/manifesting human suffering, and with it, a potential roadmap to well-being and even flourishing, will not diminish any human being or reduce her/him to a "diagnosis."**

The term "disorder" reflects a set of symptoms that result in significant distress or difficulty in living fully. One thing that sets apart some traditional medical diagnoses from mental health diagnoses is that many medical diagnoses are categorical, meaning you have a condition or you don't. Think of a bone fracture...or being pregnant. There is no

“kind of broken” or “a little pregnant.” In the world of our mental health, symptoms are more often on a continuum. Think of a sad mood. At one end of the continuum, we all will experience sadness over a situation or loss...which is not a disorder. It is life and life is not an illness. **When a sad mood is considered a disorder, it is due to its intensity, duration, and frequency.** It is the point on a continuum where symptoms make the person’s existence significantly compromised.

Around the concerns of a PTSD diagnosis (and sometimes other diagnoses), I’d like to mention a common tendency people have to thinking if the symptoms someone is experiencing “make sense,” under the circumstances, it isn’t a “disorder.” I can honestly assure you nearly all of what I see in my work “makes sense”, and it is my responsibility to uncover that sense, as it can hold clues to the paths to wellness. I also refer you back to the idea of *intensity, duration, and frequency* and the degree to which someone is suffering and intervention is called for. If that intervention is within the mental health community, it is called treatment or therapy but what is “therapeutic” goes far beyond the confines of a consulting room. **There is so much that can be done to support our veterans....** More on that in Part II.

Finally, I want to mention another concern voiced around a diagnosis of PTSD, that being a belief it is a lifetime diagnosis. Once again, I would return to the concepts of intensity, duration and frequency. After any trauma, what begins as a natural reaction and may evolve into PTSD will initially deeply color the experience of the traumatized individual. With time, support, and a potentially wide range of healing/therapeutic experiences, those colors become woven into a much larger fabric of one’s life. **Resilience and growth are the possible offerings.**

In the system we work within, however imperfect and flawed, at the point of diagnosis, what is opened is accessibility to assistance, insurance payment and, **in the case of our veterans with PTSD, the possibility of the profound bond, skills, and healing support of a service dog trained through New Life K9s.**

While I have barely touched the surface here and there is more to come, I welcome any and all comments, concerns or questions to rlewis@calpoly.edu.

Robin Lewis, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist
Co-Chair, New Life K9s Advisory Board



Year of the Dog

We need YOUR help this year!

We have several graduations scheduled which means we will have several new puppies as well! We rely on our generous donors to keep our program going and we hope that in honor of the Year of the Dog, marked by the Chinese New Year starting on February 16th, you will join our fight to save the lives of Veterans and First Responders!

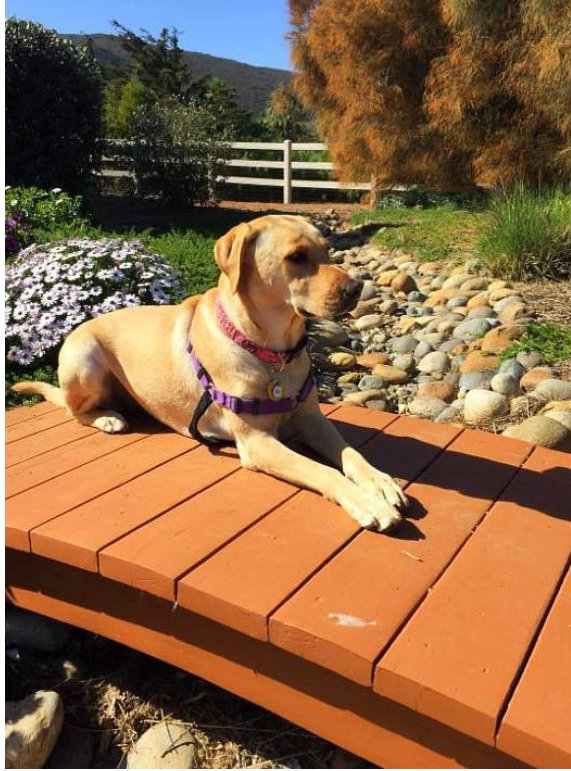
We have many ways you can help, including volunteering, puppy raising, donating a vehicle, or donating financially.

For more details on how you can help visit our website and hover over the "Donate"

tab!

We hope we can count on you this year!

www.NewLifeK9s.org



Written by our Inmates California Men's Colony Column

The Journey of Nicole

Written by Wesley Bird



While most people are trying to find a way out of prison, one courageous and ambitious woman was trying to get herself in. Her name is Nicole Hern and it took all of eight years for her goal to come to fruition. With a laundry list of qualifications and experiences – from a Masters Degree in Marriage, Family, and Child counseling, to being a Zoo Keeper, a social worker, and now the Director of Training at New Life K9s – Ms. Hern has had an extensive journey

that has led her to where she is today.

Nicole has always been an animal lover and advocate. Her first real job was as a Veterinary Assistant. Then, while she was going through college, she volunteered at a local zoo and was later hired with a paid position as a Zoo Keeper. Nicole loved this type of work; however, she suffered an injury that made her unable to continue. Still going through college and needing a job, she became a substitute teacher. Working with children was one of her goals and the emphasis of study in her Bachelor's Degree. Once she completed college, with her Masters Degree in hand, Nicole went into Social Work where she continuously climbed the ladder of success.

Nicole loved her career in the Social Work field; however, she still missed working with animals. She had watched television programs and news reports about dogs that were being trained by inmates in correctional facilities, and the impact this type of program was having on the inmates. **She got very excited about the possibility of having a job in a field that combined both her passions - working with animals and working therapeutically with people.** She decided to pursue this endeavor while she

was with Son Care Foundation, Inc. Son Care Foundation and their nonprofit branch New Life K9s were training service dogs for veterans with PTSD; in doing so they decided to send Nicole to Bergin University of Canine Studies for a Summer seminar to further her education in the Service Dog field. That was where Nicole learned that the most successful service dogs are those that were trained in correctional facilities. For Nicole, **this was an obvious win-win situation that once again fueled her motivation.**

After further learning about Prison Pups programs, Nicole decided to take a trip to the East Coast and attend a conference on prison pups. This was where she met a very special woman named Sister Pauline Quinn, who is accredited for pioneering Prison Pups in 1981 at a Washington State Correctional Facility. This new-found friendship between the two women inspired Nicole to new heights. Nicole definitely knew what she wanted to do, however the question arose as to where and how. Sister Pauline had an answer: she would send a letter to the California Men's Colony Correctional Facility in San Luis Obispo, California and recommend not only a dog program but also New Life K9s. This was not instantaneous; from start to finish, it has taken every bit of eight years but Nicole did find her where and how. **With her goal to save as many lives as possible with each individual dog, Nicole's therapeutic vision has given hope and purpose to inmates and veterans alike.**

Nicole shows up to the prison grounds optimistic and ready to help. Without any preconceived misconceptions about the inmates, she is here to turn these men into Service Dog Handlers; and in doing so, she hopes her therapeutic vision will take hold. **Learning a marketable skill, along with nurturing, loving, caring, and fostering these beautiful animals lowers stress levels, raises self-esteem, and teaches the men communication skills that are invaluable throughout life.** She brought with her a couple of key pieces from Bergin University of Canine Studies. A curriculum written by Bonnie Bergin called "The Smartest Dog" and a brilliant trainer and graduate named Rosalinda Mendoza. Together they have taught the inmate handlers everything they need to know to become successful dog handlers. In the year and a half since the arrival of Nicole and NLK9s, the men have learned much about themselves, including the idea that dog handling is a forever-learning process.

In that, Nicole is not afraid to grow with the times and use new methods and new sciences. She decided to make a very brave and bold move to up the ante so to speak. Nicole decided to move in the direction of Bond-Based Choice Teaching, created by Jennifer Arnold. This new philosophy in what is now called dog teaching and educating has a much higher graduation rate and is less stressful on the dogs and their handlers. To Nicole, more graduates means more lives saved and that is a no-brainer. **She wants to produce the most loving, healthy, and confident service dogs as possible in order to give veterans a great partnership and an awesome friend.** Nicole and her students are well on their way to many missions accomplished.



Wesley Bird

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Saving Lives through the Healing Power of the Human-Canine Bond





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