

# How I Can Help a Veteran with PTSD



**Saving Lives Through the Healing  
Power of the Human-Canine Bond**

# My Story

## Hi my name is Dixie and I was "Born to Serve"

The folks at New Life K9s, with my assistance, put together this pamphlet to teach you about what a Service Dog can do to help a veteran with PTSD. I'm not just a regular dog...although regular dogs are pretty awesome! I did a lot of learning and practice to get where I am today. I'd like to share my story with you so you know just how amazing Service Dogs are!

I had to become highly educated to be a Service Dog for My Veteran with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. By the time I graduated, I knew over 90 different skills! When my preparation was complete, which can take up to 2 years, I was carefully matched with Mike, a veteran with PTSD, and sent to my forever home, free of charge. This was all made possible through a non-profit program called New Life K9s whose mission is Saving Lives Through the Healing Power of the Human-Canine Bond...and, of course, with the generous support of donors like you!

## What is PTSD?

PTSD stands for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Up to 1 in 3 veterans suffer from PTSD which can occur from the traumatic experience of combat, being a First Responder, or sexual assault, to name a few. Stress is a normal response to trauma but when the traumatic situation is no longer occurring and the body and mind remain in a state of threat, it can deeply interfere with daily life.

## What is A Service Dog?

I am known as an unobtrusive help-mate, meaning I assist with daily physical tasks along with emotional support without getting in the way. I learned many skills and over time, because of the bond I developed with Mike, I've learned to offer what he may be needing without being asked. As a highly educated Service Animal, I have public access to go with Mike wherever needed, as established by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

## **How Did I Become a Service Dog?**

New Life K9s, a branch of the nonprofit, Son Care Foundation, Inc., has partnered with the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo and the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad to teach selected inmates to prepare dogs for their futures as Service Dogs. New Life K9s is moving towards a relational form of teaching rather than command based. The benefit of bond-based choice teaching allows the dog and individual to form a relationship so the veteran does not need to express every command or need. The dog can read circumstances and respond to the environment and needs rather than solely relying on commands.

## **Why Does a Veteran with PTSD Need a Service Dog?**

While a Service Dog does not replace other forms of treatment for veterans with PTSD, I provide a unique set of skills along with constant support and companionship others cannot. My purpose is to promote and sustain greater independence and healing by assisting Mike in situations that can be difficult. My presence and skills help enable him to re-engage with the world, others, and challenging situations to rebuild a sense of safety and trust.

A 2009 survey reported PTSD symptom reduction in 82% of those partnered with a Service Dog and 40% reported a decrease in use of medication. (Love, C. (2009). The use of psychiatric service dogs in the treatment of veterans with PTSD. U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command, Fort Derrick, MD.)

The Veterans Administration is currently carrying out a Congressional mandate for extensive study of the benefits of Service Dogs for veterans with PTSD. The existing research also shows significant promise in helping veterans combating depression and thus reducing suicide risk, which is a significant issue. Twenty-two veterans kill themselves each day in the U.S. New Life K9s is committed to being part of the solution to this unbearable reality.

**Now, let me share with you about  
some of the challenges faced by  
Veterans with PTSD and a range of  
ways and situations where I help!**

## Providing and Sustaining Safety and Security as My Veteran Heals

**\*Sleep Support:** When a veteran has PTSD, the heightened sense of anxiety can make sleep a significant challenge. The quality of sleep a veteran with PTSD experiences has been identified as one of the major factors in healing. When I'm in the room, My Veteran can rest easier, knowing I am on the job.

**\*Waking from Nightmares:** Nightmares are one of the possible symptoms of PTSD. By waking My Veteran, I ease the distress of these nightmares by interrupting them. I can also turn on lights to enhance the sense of safety and turn them off when My Veteran is calmed and ready to sleep.

**\*Creating Space:** Because being around others or crowds can trigger feelings of anxiety, I can place myself between My Veteran and others, providing a greater sense of personal space and safety.

**\*Guiding My Veteran Through a Crowd or Uncomfortable Setting:** My ability to accompany My Veteran, without being distracted, helps rebuild confidence in being out in the world again.

**\*Entering a Room, First, to Establish Safety:** When feeling unsafe, I can enter a room before My Veteran to assess any risks and create greater comfort and ease for him to come in.

## Creating a Bond to Reconnect My Veteran to Others

I lead the way for My Veteran to build relationship and trust. Research has established that the Human-Canine interaction releases Oxytocin, known as the "bonding hormone" in both the human and me! Bonding heals and can open the door back to connections with others, reducing the debilitating effects of isolation, an all too common vulnerability for those with PTSD

**\*Generating Human Interaction:** Wherever we go, the attention of others is often (and no surprise!) on me, rather than to My Veteran, which eases the difficulty of social situations and interaction Mike might feel if the focus was on him. While it is important that people do not approach or interact with me when I'm working, or without permission, just seeing me doing my job tends to create warm feelings toward both me and My Veteran. PTSD can carry a stigma that limits the perception and understanding others have of My Veteran. I help overcome that when people can see our great relationship.

**\*A Purpose for my Veteran:** When things are tough, I am an incentive to get up in the morning. Our bond creates the desire to ensure my care and our relationship as well as my commitment to My Veteran. Mike must be pretty grateful for such a wonderful dog like me to be so committed to him!

## Providing Skills that help bring my Veteran "Back to the Moment"

**\*When Anxiety or Distress is Rising:** My skills include the ability to provide an alternative focus when My Veteran might be feeling overloaded by all the things going on around us. This can include nudging My Veteran when my education and experience alert me to rising anxiety or anger. Since driving can be stressful, I can help calm Mike by giving a nudge or sitting in within the view of the rearview mirror as a reminder of his surroundings.

**\*The Importance of Touch, in Distress:** Research has supported the value of physical contact with me to support calming (known as sensory reintegration) and orient My Veteran back to time and place if experiencing a flashback. Studies have shown when someone pets a dog, their blood pressure and heart rate can decrease and good feelings are generated for all!

### Physical Support

**\*Medication Support:** Another thing I learned to do is to remind My Veteran to take medication and bring it to him.

**\*Bracing:** I can make it easier for my Veteran to get up or down by holding a position where my body acts as a physical support. This skill is relevant for veterans with mobility challenges but also when a medication side effect of dizziness occurs.

**\*Assistance with Dressing and Undressing:** Whether it be due to mobility challenges, exhaustion, depression, I can assist in changing clothes by pulling sleeves, zippers, and socks, to name a few of my abilities. You should see me in action!

### Emotional Support: The "Snuggle"

...Need I Say More?





**As you can see, all the skills I learn are very important in helping My Veteran heal. As he regains a sense of safety and reconnects to the world and others, I help him to maintain that progress.**

Lots of my friends have also become Service Dogs or Warrior Support Dogs (WSD) for veterans through the work of New Life K9s and the support of wonderful donors. Here are a few pictures of those veterans and their devoted Service Dogs and WSDs.



Crystal and Louie



Alex and Nara



Jonny and Olaf (WSD)



Mike and Grown Up Me!

# A Day in the Life

***Just to give you an understanding of how all these skills come together, here is what a Day in Our Life might look like:***

**My Veteran wakes up. A veteran may need assistance with everyday tasks that may seem easy for you.**

I can start by helping My Veteran, Mike get out of bed by allowing him to brace himself with my body. I can also help by turning lights off and on and assisting with clothing. I can pull shirts, zippers, and socks. I can also get any medications and water that might be needed.

**My Veteran is walking down the street to get to an appointment.**

I will not get distracted by sights or smells while walking through a crowd or passing others on the street. I am able to stay close to My Veteran without getting in the way and create space between him and other people.

**My Veteran is feeling triggered by a current situation that reminds him of an experience of trauma.**

**(Example: Stuck in traffic)**

When this occurs, I can give emotional support through physical contact...which can also include "snuggles". I am also available to pet to calm and ground him. Sometimes I may nudge him to help him reorient to his surroundings, reminding him I am here and he is not in danger.

**My Veteran is taking care of a variety of tasks**

Common situations and environments where PTSD affects veterans are the grocery store, in lines, and while driving. For example, while in the grocery store there are many corridors the individual cannot see around corners. I offer a distraction from symptoms, creating distance between My Veteran and others inside the store. I can also provide this distance while in line. Having people behind him can be stressful so I position myself behind My Veteran to create space or in front of him so he can pet me. While driving home, My Veteran might experience anxiety or upset. I'll assist by bringing him back to the present by providing a nudge or being in the rear-view mirror and in his line of sight.










**Coming Home**

As Mike's day winds down, we return home. Since no one else is home yet, I enter the house first and turn on lights so he can feel more comfortable all is safe. Since he is tired, he might forget it's time for medication...but I won't! I can bring needed medication to him and even bring him a bottle of water to take it. He has had some challenges today so I am close by for comfort and to nudge him if he starts to feel anxious. After our dinner, he decides to turn in early for the night. While he falls asleep calmly, he has a nightmare which I promptly wake him from, turn on the lights and stay by his side so he can feel secure and calmed by petting me and can fall asleep again. I turn off the lights, settle in to sleep and feel like such a lucky dog to be of service in Mike's life!

# How You Can Help

**Thank you for taking the time to learn more about what we Service Dogs can do for veterans! After reading about and seeing the purpose we serve, I hope you feel inspired to be a valued participant in our mission!**

**You can help by donating to New Life K9s. We have a variety of ways you could help:**

-  Time can be donated by volunteering or being a puppy parent.
-  You can use the services of Thousand Hills Pet Resort for doggie daycare or boarding. The proceeds from this cover all the administrative costs of New Life K9s so 100% of your financial donations go directly to providing Service Dogs for our veterans. [www.ThousandHillsPetResort.com](http://www.ThousandHillsPetResort.com)
-  You can also donate by giving or purchasing cars. Information on this program can be found at [www.MissionCars.com](http://www.MissionCars.com)
-  We have an Amazon Wish List: <http://a.co/8Voj8VE>
-  Finally, you can donate financially as an individual or on a team.
  -  Individually you can donate a lump sum or sign up for monthly recurring donations.
  -  Team donations consist of 22 participants each donating \$22/month for 22 months (in recognition of the 22 veterans who take their lives each day) to fully fund a Service Dog.
-  All financial donations can be given through our website; **[www.NewLifeK9s.org](http://www.NewLifeK9s.org)** or by check, made out to "New Life K9s" and mailed to P.O. Box 4412, San Luis Obispo, CA 93403.
-  More information about New Life K9s and references regarding service dogs and PTSD can be found at our website at [www.NewLifeK9s.org](http://www.NewLifeK9s.org). You can also reach us by phone at the Son Care Office at (805) 596-0409.

**[www.NewLifeK9s.org](http://www.NewLifeK9s.org)**