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Summer 8-19-2020

## The Occupation of Training Service Dogs: A Therapeutic Intervention for Combat Veterans with PTSD

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# The Occupation of Training Service Dogs: A Therapeutic Intervention for Combat Veterans with PTSD

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## BACKGROUND

Combat Veterans living with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are at a high risk for suicidal ideation and death by suicide. (Kashiwa et al., 2017). In addition to intrusive PTSD symptoms and low retention and involvement rates in therapy, reintegration into the civilian lifestyle presents a unique challenge for Veterans living with PTSD. Occupational therapy is uniquely positioned to address this challenge through meaningful occupational engagement, such as training a service dog (Zimolag & Krupa, 2010; Zimolag, 2011).

## PROBLEM

There are few interventions that present opportunities to engage in meaningful occupation (Kashiwa et al., 2017) to help Veterans reintegrate into the civilian lifestyle that create a desire to participate and attend therapy (Goetter et al., 2015).

## PURPOSE

To explore the effectiveness of training service dogs as an occupation and means of social support for combat Veterans living with PTSD.

### Outcome objectives:

- Explore an occupation based intervention that addresses low retention rates in occupational therapy.
- Teach coping mechanisms and provide social support as a by-product to training service dogs in order to assist in reintegration into the civilian lifestyle.
- Decrease symptoms of PTSD experienced in everyday life through increased purpose and quality of life.

## Military Death by Suicide Rates

Time Frame	No. of Deaths by Suicide
2005-2017	78,875
Yearly*	6,572
Daily*	18
Every 80 minutes*	1

(Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2019)

Note. These statistics account for the active duty and Veteran population

\* Calculated average for 2005-2017

## RESEARCH DESIGN

**Sample:** 30 Veterans living with combat related PTSD

**Control group:** 15 Veterans living with combat related PTSD participating in traditional occupational therapy treatment

**Intervention group:** 15 Veterans living with combat related PTSD participating in the service dog training occupational therapy program

### Method:

- Purposeful sampling through fliers posted in local VA Hospitals and on military base hospitals
- Quantitative, randomized control trials

**Setting:** Walter Reed National Military Medical Center

**Frequency:** 90-minute sessions 3x/week for 4 months

## PROGRAM

### TREATMENT TEMPLATE COMPONENTS

#### General Program Outcomes:

- Establish a sense of purpose after military service.
- Establish a sense of routine after military service.
- Promote well-being through engagement in meaningful occupation.
- Provide support through a safe environment for social opportunities with peers with shared lived experience and occupational interest.
- Aide in role transition from service member to civilian through role competency.
- Explore symptom management related to living with PTSD.

#### Temporal Focus of Treatment:

Veterans will focus on their present and future contributions to society through their occupational engagement and will use past lived experiences to enhance role competency and quality of life.

#### Assessment Tools:

- Qualitative intake survey
- PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5)
- Patient Recorded Outcomes Measurement Information System (PROMIS)
- Engagement in Meaningful Activities Survey (EMAS)

#### Theoretical Framework:

Ecology of Human Performance (Cole & Tufano, 2008)

#### Intervention:

- Groups of 5 Veterans, each paired with 1 dog for the full 4 months.
- Routine time and days of the week.
- Veterans will explore symptom management through occupational engagement.
- With guidance from an occupational therapist and professional dog trainer, Veterans will teach the service dog how to perform service tasks.
- At the end of each session there will be opportunity for group processing, sharing and generalizing.
- At the conclusion of 4 months, the intervention group will be given the opportunity to give the service dog to their new owner.

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