

WHEN YOU NEED A FRIEND

Animal affection helps military families thrive.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse

Lindsey Stanek started the charity Paws and Stripes to train shelter dogs as service animals for veterans after she saw how Sarge, pictured here, helped her husband Jim's recovery from PTSD.

Lisa Turner's dad served in the Army, so by the age of 7 she was already experienced at moving often. Looking back now, she says, "I made friends wherever I went, but then we moved and I lost touch with them."

And then a cat named Misty arrived. Turner, now an Air Force spouse, remembers how Misty changed her life: "We became inseparable," she says. "Misty listened to me, comforted me and played with me. She gave me a strong sense of stability."

In many military households, pets are family. They help us cope with relocation and separation, and make us feel safe in unfamiliar territory. Pets are always available for sympathetic snuggles



Mandy and Sophie

and—no matter how bad we feel about ourselves—they accept us.

Air Force spouse Mandy Scarsella moved home to Buffalo,

N.Y., when her husband deployed for the second time. Being with Sophie, her 14-year-old calico cat, has been hugely comforting. "Sophie has always had a special way of knowing when I was upset. Her way of soothing me is to jump on my lap and put her face as close to mine as possible. During this deployment, she's done that many times. It always makes me feel better."

Furry Friends Who Make a Difference

"Pets meet our psychological needs of belongingness and control, and they give life more meaning," says Allen McConnell, Ph.D, professor of psychology at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Although pets' perks may be most obvious when we're lonely, animal affection isn't just for outcasts or introverts, McConnell says. And pets actually provide unique benefits beyond what other people provide.

The effects aren't all in your head: A pet's presence diminishes the body's

STANEK WAS DIAGNOSED WITH POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) AND BRAIN INJURY AFTER THREE TOURS IN IRAQ. WHEN HIS WIFE LINDSEY SAW HOW THERAPY DOGS FACILITATED JIM'S RECOVERY, SHE ENLISTED THE HELP OF EXPERT SERVICE-DOG TRAINERS.

physiological response to stress, so you're more relaxed and less susceptible to illness. Even deployed service members may benefit. McConnell's research shows that just thinking about a beloved pet offsets the impact of rejection. In fact, thinking about a pet was just as effective as thinking about a best friend.

Animal Therapy

Animals help us heal in therapeutic settings, too. Deborah Elliott-DeSorbo, Ph.D, a psychotherapist and faculty member at the University of the Rockies, sees clients with her therapy dog, Pavlov.

When the Bernese Mountain Dog greets a client, they're instantly put at ease. Pavlov has also lost the use of his hind leg, a limitation many military clients understand, says Elliott-DeSorbo, who is a former Air Force officer. Talking about Pavlov's disability allows people to open up about their own challenges.

Army spouse Julie Costello, M.S., a licensed marriage and family therapist, provides equine-assisted therapy to service members and their families at Heart Rocks Therapy outside Fort Hood, Texas. Working with a counselor, the client leads a horse through planned activities. "People see where they're stuck in their own lives and push past problems in ways they may not in traditional therapy," Costello says. "It's hard to put up a front when you're training a 1,300-pound animal." ☒

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MILITARY SPOUSE



NAVY SPOUSE KELLY MAHLER SAYS HER DAUGHTER ALYSSA'S HORSE GLACIER "IS SOMEONE FOR ALYSSA TO TALK TO AND SPEND TIME WITH, AND ALSO AN ICE BREAKER FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH HER DAD WHEN HE RETURNS FROM SEA."

Horses are always honest, and they're keenly aware of nonverbal cues and body language. A client may complain, 'This horse is stubborn' or 'That horse doesn't like me,' Costello says. "The lesson is that if they change themselves, the horse will respond differently."

Animals Serve Too

Army veteran Jim Stanek noticed that his anxiety leveled off in the presence of therapy dogs at Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. "It took me a while to notice the pattern," he says, "but the dog's presence was key."

Stanek was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and brain injury after three tours in Iraq. When his wife, Lindsey, saw how therapy dogs facilitated Jim's recovery, she enlisted the help of expert service-dog trainers. She has since founded Paws and Stripes, a New Mexico-based charity that trains shelter dogs as service animals for veterans. Jim was the first recipient.

Service dogs are more than feel-good friends, Lindsey says. They're

trained to help people with PTSD cope with anxiety, flashbacks and blackouts. The dogs also assist brain-injured handlers with balance and mobility issues. That boosts veterans' confidence and allows them to get back into civilian life.

Jim's dog, Sarge, helps him navigate crowds that used to be overwhelming. "I'd be on complete overload at the mall, attending to threats as if I were still on patrol in Iraq," Jim says. "With Sarge at my side, my anxiety drops from a 10 to a 3." The dog also notices subtle behavior cues and alerts Jim of an upcoming blackout or panic attack. That allows him to prevent episodes before they happen. "Sarge has turned my life around," he says.

At home and away, in good times and bad, social and physical support from animals improves military family members' lives. Their calming, constant companionship boosts our mood, improves our health, and helps us cope with everyday stresses and life-changing events. Need an instant uplift? A little animal magic may be just what the doctor ordered. ♥