

Is an Assistance Dog right for me?

Perhaps you live with PTSD, Anxiety Disorder, Clinical Depression, Panic Disorder, or other mental health conditions and are wondering whether an Assistance Dog is the right therapeutic intervention for you?

Well, assistance dogs are great. They can help people with physical, emotional, social and economic functioning. They can even assist in aspects of daily life, such as health maintenance, mobility and household chores.

They are not, however, a magic pill to solve mental health problems. They need to be used in conjunction with other forms of treatment and mental health support.

And the decision to get one must be taken carefully. Only you can decide if it is the right choice for you. The responsibilities you'd be taking on are similar to that of having a small child. You've got to be prepared to take care of all its needs on a daily basis because it cannot take care of itself.

THIS DOCUMENT AIMS TO PROVIDE YOU WITH ALL THE INFORMATION YOU NEED TO MAKE THE RIGHT DECISION



The first thing you should know is that having an Assistance Dog is a lot of work. It is not possible to simply put a harness on a dog and head out into public spaces. You have to begin with an animal that has potential to become an assistance dog and you should be aware that not every animal will pass the course.

A dog's good behaviour at home does not necessarily equate with appropriate assistance dog behaviour in public, or an ability to reliably perform disability-related tasks. These require special training over a long period of time in many different environments.

One of the most important elements of a partnership with a dog is the bond. And in order to ensure the bond is strong, you must be willing to train with your dog over a prolonged period of time. It can take up to two years to qualify as a partnership.

During that time assistance dogs are trained in three areas: basic obedience, public access skills and disability-related assistance.

Following a structured programme, both Veteran and dog work through each level of competency, from basic commands through to advanced task training, before the partnership can fully qualify with Assistance Dog status.

During this time, whether you realise it or not, your dog will have been studying your every move, learning your baseline behaviours, attitudes, and dispositions. When these change as a result of you being 'triggered', your dog will notice the change.

Just as your dog has been studying you, you must begin to study your dog.

Learning Is Training

Learning to 'read your dog' will allow you to recognise and interrupt behaviours or symptoms at an early stage. You'll be able to employ cognitive-behavioural skills or existing strategies to reduce or interrupt symptoms and minimise the risk of behaviours escalating. This is what we in the Assistance Dog community refer to as 'doing work'. It is trained behaviour, because it relies on the dog having learned your baseline and reacting appropriately when it recognises changes.



Consistency Is Key

You have to be predictable to your dog. When something is promised you have follow through. Whether it is a promise to go to the park, an opportunity to earn a coveted treat or simply following through on a command. Dogs need structure and routine. Even if you don't feel like walking your dog on a given day, you have to. Exercise impacts your dog's mental health, and to be able to work as an assistance dog its needs must be met.

**YOU WILL NEED TO
COMPLETE AT LEAST
6 MONTHS OF PUBLIC
ACCESS TRAINING**

It is also very important, even at this very early stage, that you consider the implications of what an assistance-related dog must live up to; not least what the public will expect of you and the dog.

Public Access is a subject that Assistance Dog owners have to be very aware of, especially in places where their use may not be common. Business owners and employees may not know the relevant laws where assistance dogs are concerned, and some businesses may not wish to grant access to the dog.

The law grants qualified assistance dog handlers the right to be accompanied by their dog in all places of public accommodation. Assistance dogs have a high-profile, and public perception of these dogs is generally of a very high standard. But you must be prepared to occasionally deal with potentially difficult situations which may arise due to service providers not knowing your rights to access.

An accredited assistance dog must be appropriately identified, and you, as the handler will also have to carry identification.

If a business does not understand their rights and responsibilities, providing them with some informative literature can help. It can also save you from having a heated debate on civil rights in an already stressful situation. Remember to remain polite, and remind yourself that this may be the individual's first experience with an assistance dog. Most people, after being educated, are more than happy to provide goods and services. Experience tells us that some may even begin to keep doggie treats behind the counter for your next visit.

As you gain more experience, access challenges become less frequent and easier to deal with.

**ASSISTANCE DOGS
IN TRAINING HAVE
NO LEGAL PUBLIC
ACCESS RIGHTS**

Family and Friends

Just as you will have to educate local business people, so too will you have to educate your friends and family. It is possible that some of them may be resistant to the idea of an assistance dog. Some may be uncomfortable being seen in public with one. Others may resent its presence at events and get-togethers. Some may simply not understand or accept your disability and wonder why you are choosing to partner with an assistance dog at all.

If possible, introduce friends and family to the idea of an assistance dog before you go too far down this route. Provide them with as much information as possible. Discuss scenarios that are likely to come up, like family get-togethers or even mundane trips for shopping. Those closest to you will usually learn to accept your decision, but it may take them some time, be patient.

They are also the ones that will, eventually, be most likely to see the positive change in your life that an assistance dog brings.



Assistance Dogs Are Not for Everyone

Life with an assistance dog will most certainly change your daily routine. Besides the obvious additions of toilet breaks and play times, you will notice that those quick little errands are no longer quite so quick.

People will want to ask you questions or talk about your assistance dog. They may even ask personal questions about your disability and your time in the military. This can be difficult at first. So set appropriate boundaries and find your own comfort level for dealing with such people. While it may initially be uncomfortable (to be the centre of attention), you should remember that most people focus on the dog, not on the Veteran. This shift in focus is important and can work to your advantage. For example, your dog can provide you with a safe topic of conversation with strangers who might otherwise be intimidating. You will also have a convenient 'out' for uncomfortable situations; you can quickly make your exit by using the excuse that your dog has to go for a toilet break.

**YOUR FIRST TRIPS
OUT IN PUBLIC
AS A TEAM ARE
IMPORTANT**

Exposing your 'Assistance Dog In Training' to the public too soon can have negative effects for both you and your dog. It can set back your training if the dog isn't ready. It can get you thrown out of a public facility where people may remember you when you try to come back later with a better-trained dog. It can give the public the idea that assistance dogs are poorly behaved animals and it might even cause some of them to complain about assistance dog public access. These incidents are rare but it's worth being aware of them. For owners, a negative experience can trigger an event and reduce their confidence in their dog's ability.

You will hear the same questions, over and over. This can be pretty exhausting. You should always be polite though as you are a representative of VETERANS WITH DOGS. A badly handled public situation may negatively impact the public perception of veterans and mental health. Be prepared to explain in an appropriate manner the roles of the assistance dog.



**WORKING A DOG IN PUBLIC
DRAWS A LOT OF ATTENTION**

**THE ASSISTANCE DOG LIFESTYLE IS A SERIOUS LONG-TERM COMMITMENT.
IF ANY OF THE ABOVE DISCOURAGES YOU, MAYBE IT'S NOT FOR YOU.**

The Financial Consideration

Costs are also a major factor in deciding whether or not to pursue the idea of owning an assistance dog.

It's not cheap keeping and maintaining a dog. They need bowls, food, bedding, toys, leads, collars, vet visits, home adjustments and even transportation.

Assistance dogs, as a matter of course, should visit the vet every 6 months for a check-up. And this is on top of any other veterinary needs along the way. It is imperative that your dog receives the very best healthcare and support in order to be able to carry out their role. They deserve nothing less.

**WE RECOMMEND
YOU BUDGET FOR
APPROX £100
PER MONTH**

The cost of insurance has to be taken into account, too. Insurance policy premiums increase quite considerably with a dog's age so a 'for life' policy should be purchased from day one.

These considerations are major and should not be underestimated. You'll have these responsibilities for the life of the dog.

If you have financial difficulties, or the potential for a dog to cause these to you, then we would not recommend that you take on an assistance dog.



What Breeds Make Good Assistance Dogs?

A lot of programmes use Golden Retrievers and Labradors, and for good reason. They have many of the characteristics that make for a good assistance dog and have been tried and tested for many years in the UK. However, there are other breeds that have been successfully trained.

Although the needs of the person may determine the ideal size of the dog, the work they do generally requires a dog to be a reasonable size to start with. Small dogs struggle to pick up and present objects in a suitable way, large dogs are hard to put under a table in a restaurant or out of the way on a bus.

A good assistance dog is confident and friendly towards both people and other dogs. They shouldn't be too protective, reactive, have too high a work drive or be overly-active.

Water breeds, such as labs, retrievers, spaniels have all primarily been bred to provide assistive behaviours in a working context. And it is this willingness to work that we look for in our assistance dogs.

Whilst we recognise that any breed has the potential of becoming an assistance dog it would be incorrect of us to give people the impression that any dog would be suitable.

All dogs considered for assistance training are fully assessed by one of our behaviourists and to be considered for training they must be under the age of 3 years old and the only dog in the household. They should also have been owned from the age of 8-12 weeks directly from the breeder.

It is also important to understand that dogs have a limited working life but will live beyond these years. Are you prepared to keep and care for a dog once it has retired?



Want to source your own dog?

You are aiming to give yourself the best possible chance of successfully raising a working dog, and therefore, it is sensible to take your time and save (or even fundraise) in order to get the right dog for you.

Picking a canine candidate can be stressful and time consuming.

However, it is not something that should be rushed. This decision will affect and hopefully benefit you for years to come. So it is important to make an informed and reasonable choice. This might mean saying no to lots of cute pups during your search for the right one, or it might mean waiting another 6 months for a litter to be born if no pups in the first litter are suitable.

The time and money spent in your quest for an assistance dog will be a negligible amount over your dog's lifetime, so take your time and do it right. For your sake, and the dog's.

- 🐾 Give yourself the best chance possible by choosing a dog that will be most likely to work.
- 🐾 Choose a dog that will best be able to mitigate your disability and work with you, regardless of your favourite breeds.
- 🐾 Choose a pup whose mother has the temperament for assistance work, or choose a dog from a stable home environment that has right temperament.
- 🐾 Get a dog from a reputable breeder, and ask what relevant health checks have been undertaken
- 🐾 Do your research - seek professional advice, breeder insights and information from people who have interacted with the dog.
- 🐾 We do not accept 'rescue' or re-homed dogs. They have a very low statistical chance of being suitable. (Actually less than 6%).



Ask Yourself These Questions

To give you a better idea of whether or not the 'Assistance Dog' route is the right therapeutic intervention for your needs, answer these questions truthfully.

- ❗ Can you commit to the next 10-15 years of looking after and caring for a dog? (Providing health care, food, grooming, training, attention and love).
 - ❗ Are you willing to embark on the highest levels of training for both you and the dog?
 - ❗ Do you have the time to dedicate to ongoing training and development of a dog?
 - ❗ An assistance dog can only work until the approximate age of 8-10, at which time it needs to be retired. Are you prepared to accept that your responsibilities as an owner will continue beyond the working lifespan of the dog?
 - ❗ The addition of a dog to the family or work environment will affect the current dynamic. Are you, your family and colleagues all aware of that and prepared for it?
 - ❗ Are you willing to clean up after the dog constantly? And not just toilet but hairs around the home, in the car and on clothes?
 - ❗ Are you willing to teach children that come into contact with the dog how to **behave** and treat the dog appropriately?
 - ❗ Do you understand that you must exercise the dog every day, regardless of how you are feeling, as exercise directly affects a dog's mental health, and the dog needs to be stable in order to help you maintain stability?
 - ❗ Have you considered lifestyle-altering events that could occur in your foreseeable future? And how you would deal with these events and their impact on you caring for your dog?
 - ❗ Is your personality conducive to dog ownership? Do you often feel stressed out? Do you like to have total control over your environment or space? Do you require your environment to be excessively clean? Are you flexible? Patient?
 - ❗ Do you have an appropriate environment to introduce a dog to live in? Is there a safe place that the dog can go to within your home where it can be left alone to sleep, relax etc.? Do you access to an outside space where it can exercise?
 - ❗ Will the dog need to be left alone at all during the day? Dogs should not be left alone for any longer than 4 hours. **Most will need to go to the toilet and need social interaction at least every four hours.**
 - ❗ Do you accept that the aim of a 'dog-for-PTSD' is to have that dog with you as much as is practically possible?
 - ❗ Are you willing to spay/neuter your dog, as soon as possible, to reduce the chance of accidental breeding? And do you understand that you will not be able to breed your assistance dog?
 - ❗ Do you travel frequently? And are you willing to make the changes necessary in order for a dog to constantly travel with you?
 - ❗ Do you actually love dogs? And are not in love with the 'idea' of an assistance dog?
- Can you accept that the dog might not achieve the standards required?



If you have anger-management issues, in that you have difficulties coping with anger, outbursts, or violence, then we recommend that you do not take on the responsibility of attempting to train an assistance dog. We make appropriate clinical checks during the application process and take guidance from clinical mental health professionals.

Training is hard work and will last for years to come.

There are several traits and needs that are common to all dogs. All require socialisation, training, a secure, comfortable and safe environment, grooming and health maintenance, professional health care, a quality diet, companionship, attention and love.

It is important that you engage fully in the training process, educate yourself with as many resources as possible and attend training classes so that you will be able to interpret and understand their behaviour and respond appropriately.



Having said all that...

For all that they require hard work, dedication and patience, owning an assistance dog can have an incredibly positive impact on your life and the lives of those around you. It can be a life-changing experience, leading to greater independence and self-worth.

A well-trained, well-loved dog can become a much-loved family member and, quite literally, a best friend.



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