NEWS

A dog that can help with more than you can pawsibly imagine

It's being trained to bring a Durban woman with a stress disorder her medication and get help should she need it

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Reading Time: 4 Minutes

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A DOG THAT CAN HELP WITH MORE THAN YOU CAN PAWSIBLY IMAGINE

IN TRAINING Poppy is being trained as a psychiatric dog.
Image: supplied

Poppy will not magically make Tina le Roux's post-traumatic stress symptoms disappear or take away her trauma, but she is helping the Durban woman become more functional.

The husky cross ridgeback is currently being trained as a psychiatric service dog to help Le Roux, a rape survivor with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Unlike emotional-support animals, which can include birds, miniature horses, rodents and even reptiles, psychiatric dogs and their handlers have to undergo training for more than a year and have to be registered as a service dog.

"I got Poppy from Charnell Ruth at Husky Rescue KwaZulu-Natal when she was six months old. I had been doing my own research for a few months about how service dogs have helped other survivors of trauma, and was trying to find someone in SA to assist me when I found Charnell on social media."

> **" Service dogs for psychiatric conditions are still quite new in South Africa. People are used to guide dogs for blind people or those in wheelchairs "**

- Tina le Roux, rape survivor

"There are a lot of service dogs that have been trained for war veterans in the USA who suffer from PTSD, and after doing research it was incredible to see how these people have reintegrated into society with help from their dogs."

"I knew I needed a service dog to help me after reading these stories of victory. The only 'qualification' was my diagnosis of PTSD by a qualified psychiatrist and that I'm a survivor of

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Le Roux said though she was still in the training phase, Poppy

has already "radically" changed her life.

"I am more outgoing and confident with her by my side. Simple day-to-day tasks like going out for coffee or a walk are no longer filled with anxiety for me. She helps me at night when I wake up from nightmares by licking me – it helps me realise that the dream was not real and grounds me back into 'reality'."

"If my PTSD triggers a 'flashback' episode, Poppy is able to sit next to me and reassure me too," she said.

Poppy is training to be able to remind Le Roux to take her medication, stand close to her so people cannot invade her personal space and trigger her, and to be able to fetch help if she needs it.

The canine wears a service-dog-in-training gear in public, sparking curiosity from those who come into contact with the pair.

"Service dogs for psychiatric conditions are still quite new in SA. People are used to guide dogs for blind people or those in wheelchairs. Because my illness is largely 'invisible', I've had to explain why Poppy is with me at times. Mostly people have reacted positively.

"At times it's difficult to stop people from wanting to come up and play with Poppy. She is incredibly beautiful, so I guess it's natural for people to want to come over, but on the other hand, when we are out together, she is a working animal, and her focus needs to remain on me."

"I'm open to explaining to people about my condition, but in the long term it would be lovely for us to be able to go out together and for me not to have to field hundreds of questions too. Some days it can be quite triggering for me," Le

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Animals that help the emotional wellbeing of their owners have been in the global spotlight since the US transport

have been in the global spotlight since the US transport
department announced a week ago that it would no longer
allow emotional-support animals (ESAs) on flights.

The department said it would only allow trained service dogs,
including those that assist with psychiatric challenges, on
board.

This comes after airlines complained that there was an
increase in ESAs as passengers were trying to get out of

paying pet fees by taking their pets – sometimes pigs, rabbits
and hamsters – on board for free.

There were also instances when emotional support dogs had
attacked passengers on board.

Americans can register an ESA online by paying a small fee
and filling out a questionnaire without the animal being
evaluated.

Charnell Ruth of Husky Rescue KZN told Times Select that
ESAs, service dogs and their handlers should go through a
basic obedience and socialisation training programme
together.

"Both should be registered, and both should wear the
relevant gear indicating their purpose. The only aspect that
would then set a service dog apart from an ESA is that the
service dog would undergo further specific task-orientated
training to negate the shortcomings of a disabled person.

"This would eliminate unforeseen tragic incidents occurring
on public transport and also eliminate the unfortunate abuse
and misuse that occurs from people using the label of an ESA
who don't really have a legitimate reason for having an ESA,"
she said.

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