

# The Human-Animal Bond and Combat-Related Posttraumatic Stress

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## Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of Operational Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) service members with combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms who had a companion animal post-deployment. Twelve OEF and OIF veterans participated in semi-structured interviews analyzed using Moustakas' phenomenological approach. Four themes emerged: (a) rich descriptions of deployment events, (b) the experiences of returning from a deployment, (c) participants' perceptions on their pets' influence on posttraumatic stress symptoms, and (d) other comments and opinions related to participants' experiences. These findings illuminate the experience of combat-related posttraumatic stress and the importance of animals in the therapeutic process and may aid development of alternative treatment options.

## Problem

Since October 2001, **over 2.4 million** United States service members have deployed for OEF and OIF.

Early literature suggested that the number of active duty personnel using mental health services for PTSD-related issues remained below 50%. Two factors appear to influence this problem, a negative attitude about mental health treatment based on cultural and personal stigma and a common perception that treatment is ineffective.

**Untreated PTSD** is associated with increased frequencies of suicides, comorbidity with other psychological issues (e.g., depression, substance abuse, etc.), family conflicts, employment difficulties, and homelessness.

In 2012, the Veterans Administration reported that **approximately 22 veterans commit suicide daily**, and suicide prevention continues to challenge each military department as estimates identify one active duty suicide a day.

Stories on the therapeutic benefits military members with PTSD found in their **companion animals** began surfacing in various media venues in 2010; however, a formal inquiry into the phenomenon, using a military sample, was not identified.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of OEF and OIF veterans who developed combat-related PTSD symptoms and had a companion animal post-deployment.

## Relevant Literature

### Theoretical Foundations

- **Constructivism** recognizes that social and historical interactions operate to create subjective meaning. To reach the level of understanding required to produce a descriptive analysis of meaning of a phenomenon, the philosophical lens of **phenomenology** was also applied.
- The **diathesis-stress model** states that individual factors such as personality traits, childhood familial environments, biological and genetic factors, social support, and response patterns to psychological stress, combine with the severity of a traumatic event to create vulnerability towards the development of a psychological break, leading to psychosis. In simple terms, as individual risk factors towards PTSD increase (e.g., number of exposures to a combat environment), the severity of a traumatic event required for an individual to “break” decreases.
- The literature on the **human-animal bond** suggests that the presence of an animal can increase physical, biological, and emotional well-being. The literature also shows that the presence of an animal enhances client-clinician rapport and trust-building in a number of populations, even in the combat environment.

## Research Question

**What are the lived experiences of United States military members who served in OEF and OIF, developed combat-related PTSD symptoms, and have a companion animal?**

### Supervisory Committee

**Dr. Ruth Crocker** (Chair), **Dr. Stephen Lifrak** (Committee Member),  
and **Dr. Susana Verdinelli** (University Research Reviewer)

## Procedures

### Design

- Moustakas' phenomenological approach

### Sample

- A convenience sample of 12 OEF and OIF veterans reporting experiences with PTSD symptoms and having at least one companion animal.

### Data Collection

- Semi-structured, digitally recorded phone interviews.
- Open-ended interview protocol with 4 questions.

## Data Analysis

A **modified van Kaam methodology** was used

- Interviews were transcribed and entered into NVivo©
- Core themes were identified
- Textural-structural descriptions of each individual experience were developed, and then a single composite description of the group.

## Findings

Experiences varied among participants, however, most shared that even though PTSD screening efforts have increased over the years, negative attitudes towards treatment persist, negatively impacting the number of military member seeking treatment. Bad experiences with treatment attempts also fueled this perception.

All participants felt that the presence of their companion animal positively influenced the quality of life and lessened PTSD symptom severity.

All participants believe that PTSD cannot be cured and that the “cookie cutter” approach to treatment is ineffective.

Although not the focus of the study, most of the participants used the interview to vent grievances about their experiences.

## Limitations

The primary limitation of the study was the small sample of a narrowly defined group.

The findings may not be representative of active duty armed force members with PTSD or address other psychiatric conditions.

## Conclusions

The “cookie cutter” approach to PTSD treatment is fiscally attractive but may overlook the multiplicity of experiences involved in PTSD requiring other therapeutic options.

Broader research is required on the human-animal bond and PTSD; the experiences shared in this study accentuated previous literature on an animal's ability to provide the emotional and psychological relief of PTSD unmet by other relationships.

The experiences also implied the potential of reduced reliance on prescriptions to manage PTSD.

Finally, inquiry into more “veterans helping veterans” programs is needed.

## Social Change Implications

The suggestions proposed by the participants interviewed for this study – veterans helping veterans – are relatively new concepts in the discussion of PTSD treatment (see Mittal et al, 2013).

Many participants commented on the benefits they experienced talking with veterans during their PTSD recovery journey and see employing veterans as a “win-win” regarding helping ease mental health and employment issues surrounding vets.