



**Assistance Dogs
Australia®**



Changing lives

We boarded the train bound for Central Station. The busiest train station in Sydney. The train was moderately full. So far so good. When things got too much and anxiety rose, we would look down and focus our attention.

The more stations we stopped towards the city, the more people got on and the noise rose. It was the biggest test we went through on our training week. Public transport at the best of times was hard enough living with post-traumatic stress.

It was so hard to admit that what may seem a simple thing to do, like be on a train, could be such a difficult thing. Similar to going out to a shopping centre or a place that people gathered. Only a few years before, we had been responding to critical incidents and working at high levels of great demand serving our community as a first responder or our country in the Australian Defence Force.

Fortunately, we were in the right place, with the right people. We were not struggling alone. We had a great team of trainers around us and our new assistance dog. When we were too overwhelmed on the train, or any other place, we would focus on our dog. Focusing reduced our triggers, calmed our breath and being, and brought us to be okay with ourselves again.

"There were so many things to focus on with the dog, I forgot where I was! I was sitting in a crowded train not having an anxiety attack. I had made it in the city where incidents had occurred without triggers going off." A participant of the program reflected back.

The first time in meeting your lifelong companion is precious. The first day with him in training is awesome. The first night with him is terrifying!

“ *After a long day of bonding and training, we were ready to rest together. In myself I felt unable and insufficient. Alberto, the Manger, told me he could see the difference in me already. After going through the traumatic experiences, my confidence and assertiveness was at an all-time low, but I also knew I had it in me to step up."* A veteran reflected.

After some rest and play together, we reunited with the group in the park near the hotel. This drunk guy appeared in our circle pretending to be on the phone. We weren't sure what he wanted. One participant froze. Her dog stayed consistently focused on her. The other participant wanted to fight. His dog stayed consistently focused on him. Both of us struggling with our PTSD hypervigilance and auto-responses to threats. Alberto fortunately stepped in and removed the person from our inner circle. On reflection after the drunk man left, we realised we weren't triggered, our dogs helped us to stay focused.

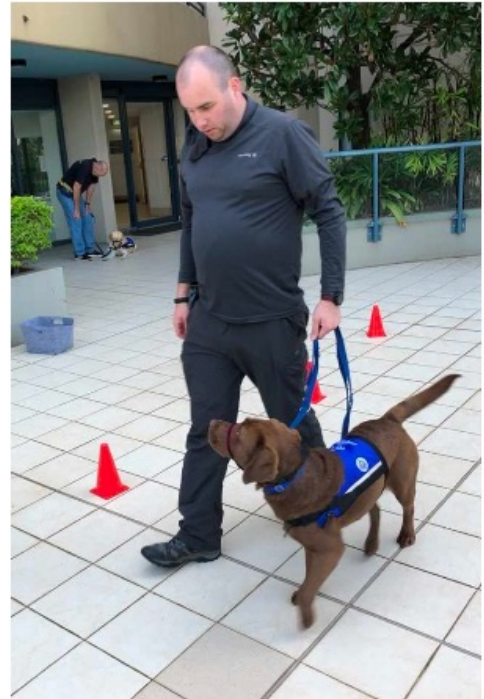
In our training, there was definitely mixed emotions, but the time and connection we had overall was priceless.



Assistance Dogs Australia (ADA) provides specifically trained assistance dogs for former military and first responders across Australia who suffer from PTSD. For up to two years, these puppies go into training to be the best dog they can be to their new companion. When the person is having a nightmare, the dog will gently wake them up. When the person is out in crowded areas, the dog is trained to behave and to bring comfort. When the person is withdrawing, the dog helps them to socially interact, increase physical activity and provide companionship.

"Since being with my assistance dog, I've been able to go out more. I felt confined to the house and struggled to leave my property. With the dog, I can enter supermarkets, go into shopping centres, engage with community again. I still have triggers, but the dog helps me to get through." A former police officer stated.

ADA has matched 62 people with PTSD assistance dogs in this program that began in 2016 with a 95% success rate. All participants of the program go through a number of training days and have an ongoing connection with an ADA trainer. Participants learn about dog handling, commands, grooming, health, understanding the dog's needs with hands on training and practice.



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ADA PTSD assistance dog program

PTSD Assistance Dogs are trained to reduce the impact of specific symptoms for people living with this condition and improve their overall quality of life. They can help guide those living with trauma back to a sense of safety, helping to improve interpersonal connections, encourage engagement in the community, and regain areas of functioning that may have been diminished. They are trained to the highest standards and are accredited by Assistance Dogs International.

Our dogs undergo rigorous preparation for up to two years, including 16-20 weeks of advanced skills training. They master bespoke cues aimed at addressing PTSD-specific areas of difficulty, including:

Positioning cues – allow the handler to position the dog as needed and create space for themselves in public or crowded places, allowing for an increased sense of security and encouraging community engagement.

Contact cues – allow the handler to request physical contact facilitating grounding, mindfulness and focus.

Nightmare interruption – allows a dog to recognise signs of distress in sleep, or immediately after waking and provide support for calming.

People living with PTSD often show external signs associated with their stress response, for example, bouncing legs, rubbing hands, breathing heavily, sweating excessively etc. Our PTSD dogs are trained to use these external signs as cues for relevant skills to provide support when it is needed most. Our training is highly personalised, shaping the dog's skills to individual needs.

We encourage and support ongoing skill development in our dog teams. We work with

successful applicants to encourage a strong bond with their dogs, and through this bond, gain the skills and motivation they need to reach their goals. The Public Access Rights granted to Assistance Dogs allow this calming influence to be present as needed throughout the day, across almost all settings.

Our services are completely free of charge to our clients. The cost of training an accredited Assistance Dog is \$40,000, which is supported entirely by generous donations, philanthropic activities and grants. We carefully select our dogs based on their health and temperament. From eight weeks of age, our expert staff invest hundreds of hours training each puppy over a two year period, transforming them into qualified Assistance Dogs.

Once our Assistance Dogs have received all necessary training, they are carefully matched to a client on our waiting list. Our trainers provide regular check-ups and training classes in the first 3, 6 and 12 months post-placement. After this initial period, annual visits are conducted for the Public Access Test. Our staff are always on-call to help with training or to answer questions for the remaining 8-10 years of the dog's working life. We develop close, ongoing relationships with our clients and provide continued support.

The PTSD Program offers full access to our mental health professional, who provides support, during all phases of the program process. All staff who have direct contact with our PTSD clients also receive trauma informed training from a mental health professional.

The Team

at Assistance Dogs Australia



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