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Who Let the Dogs Out? How Therapy Dogs Are Assisting in Trauma Situations

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Contributing Writer: Steve Booth, Therapy Dog Handler

The Counseling Team International (TCTI) has responded to most of the major, horrific events in our country over the years, and more recently the 91 Harvest Festival shooting in Las Vegas, the Tubbs and Thomas fires, the Montecito mudslides and the shooting inside the Pathway Home for veterans in Yountville, California. But we are not the only ones responding. To our delight, it seems a few four-legged therapy dogs are responding too. They are not only going to these major events, but when we show up to help at some of our line of duty deaths, traffic accidents, suicides and the like, there they are again.

Let me tell you about one of those dogs named Henry, and his handler, Steve Booth.

Steve was employed by the Orange County Sheriff's Department for 35 years and reached the rank of Sergeant. When he retired, he and his dog Henry decided to become a team in the therapy dog world. They started by graduating from a therapy animal program called Pet Partners. After graduation, they began to respond to different medical facilities throughout Orange County and provided their team presence to a program called Katy Cares, which helps kids learn the proper responsibilities of pet ownership.

It is not easy to graduate from all these programs. They first must have a year of Animal-Assisted Activity before applying to become a crisis response team. They are then screened to see if they are suitable for the tasks before them. They attend ongoing training, which involves crisis communication skills, stress management, canine behavior/welfare, critical incident protocols, and field training with emergency responders.

After accomplishing all this, Steve decided to attend our Peer Support Training, which we teach to the law enforcement and fire departments in Orange County. Steve wanted to learn how he and Henry could help when there was a critical incident involving first

responders. Since that time, they became a part of the HOPE Animal-Assisted Crisis Response (AACR) program, which allows them to respond to a wide range of events.

So, what do they do? As I have said to many groups, "It is your presence that matters to those that are hurting." That is what they do. They provide a presence that is hard to ignore. Henry is a furry, four-legged Golden



Handler Steve Booth with his therapy dog, Henry, and TCTI's Nancy K. Bohl-Penrod, Ph.D.

Retriever that usually just stands close to you and allows you to pet him (especially his ears, I have found). He is warm and loves to be touched and hugged (no worries about offending him). He is non-judgmental, is a good listener, and never has anything to say that is irrelevant to your situation.

The whole concept of animal-assisted therapy (pet therapy) is something TCTI promotes and believes is beneficial to first responders. Henry proved to be a huge success (and Steve, of course) during the mudslides. I

watched cops and firefighters walk straight up to him, before they asked for help from our tent, which had peer support, chaplains and TCTI clinicians standing by. It was their first relief valve. You could see how their mood changed for the better and how they became more relaxed (an increase in oxytocin and dopamine). It was amazing to see how the dogs drew the first responders to our tent. When we did debriefings or crisis management briefings, the first responders were also drawn to the dogs. Many times, they stayed afterwards to chat (while they were petting the dogs, of course) and therefore had the opportunity to say more.

It was apparent there was an increase in the first responders' communication when the dogs were there. It motivated them to talk more about what they had just experienced. It was also a nice way of building a rapport with the individual wanting to talk but may have been unsure about how to begin. Henry was our "in" when it came to starting our conversation. I also noticed that TCTI's clinicians, peer support and chaplains reached out to the dogs that surrounded us at these horrendous events. We were not above feeling the benefits to petting Henry.

There are many emotional and physical benefits from pet therapy. Many people may benefit from the use of pet therapy, from those suffering from long-term illnesses to those who have been involved in a critical incident.

The benefits range from lower blood pressure, decreases in overall physical pain, and improved cardiovascular health. Pet therapy can also lessen depression, increase spirits, decrease boredom and loneliness, and help reduce anxiety. It has been used in hospitals, crisis response, therapy and for home support.

My first experience with dogs at a disaster was at the Oklahoma City bombing. We had at least 50 search dogs there, working and looking to help the first responders find those who were missing, personal

Health Hub, cont.

items and unfortunately, body parts. It was not easy on the dogs or their handlers, as they were all part of SAR (Search and Rescue). We conducted research on the subject. The experience definitely took its toll on the dog teams.

There wasn't a complete understanding of what they were going through at the time. Fortunately, that has since changed. The dogs and their handlers are now given a safe place to rest and recover. They are also desensitized before they go into a multiple fatality incident. They are now better prepared to handle their job. These dog teams are now taken care of and receive a lot of love and attention after working so hard. These teams are different than what Steve and Henry do; however, we must apply the same love and concern to them. Feelings and emotions can be contagious. The grief reactions experienced by the human beings they encounter will eventually affect their mood if they don't get a break to play ball or run around, or get some rest and relaxation away from all the sadness and heartache. It feels great to unload or dump your unwanted reactions on a dog like Henry, and yes, he can handle it, but we do want to make sure it is not too much for him (or Steve).

We welcome Steve and Henry at our call-outs. It feels great to see them. At the KICK-ASH-BASH in Montecito a few months ago, I found myself going straight for Henry. It was such a comfort to see him there and receive some wonderful love and hugs, which leads to an increase in oxytocin.

I must go now; my dog needs me... or is it the other way around?

Be safe,
Dr. Nancy

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