

# THE MEANING OF COMPANIONSHIP BETWEEN A PERSON WITH A DISABILITY AND AN ASSISTANCE DOG

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*Assistance dogs not only ameliorate functional limitations, but also enhance the psychological and social aspects of the lives of persons with disabilities. Insights on the individual meaningfulness of the companionship provided by partnering with an assistance dog are valuable in understanding the disability experience. Note: Humans' and assistance dogs' names were changed to maintain confidentiality.*

The social and therapeutic benefits of pet ownership or simply interacting with a companion animal are well-documented in the human-animal bond literature. In contrast, limited documentation exists on the effects of assistance animals on the quality of life for persons with disabilities. It is estimated that over 20,000 assistance dogs (guide, hearing, and service) are currently working with persons with disabilities in the U.S. (Eames & Eames, 2004). These partnerships represent a truly unique model of enablement for persons with disabilities. An understanding of this dimension of the disability experience enables human service workers and health care practitioners to engage more effectively with their clients.

## **The Effects of Partnering with an Assistance Dog**

My interest in the relationship between handlers and assistance dogs evolved as the result of over 20 years of experience of volunteering with my own Newfoundland dogs in a variety of animal-assisted activities. Through informal conversations I found anecdotal evidence that the benefits provided by an assistance dog extended beyond functional support. I decided to investigate this relationship further by conducting an exploratory study consisting of surveys, interviews, and observations designed to assess self-esteem and social connectedness among persons with disabilities. The meaning of companionship with an assistance dog emerged as a finding of this study.

The 15 participants in the study obtained an assistance dog through a placement agency

to mitigate physical limitations. Their pre-placement expectations were overwhelmingly related to assistive functioning to perform daily tasks. When I spoke to the participants prior to receiving their assistance dog, all but one of them spoke of their expectations for their assistance dog to perform tasks, including pulling a wheelchair, opening doors, retrieving objects, helping with balance, and alerting them to specific sounds.

During our pre-placement discussions, it was apparent to me that they felt marginalized by society. Isolation and loneliness were common topics, so it surprised me that companionship was mentioned as an expectation of partnering with an assistance dog by only four participants. In fact, three participants expressed concerns about their ability to bond with their future assistance dog. However, during the post-placement interviews conducted six months after partnering, 14 participants eagerly initiated discussions on the meaning and value of the relational aspect of partnering with an assistance dog.

## **Personal Experiences**

I was overwhelmed by the depth of the bond that the handlers reported having with their assistance dogs after being together for six months. Here is a sample of some of the experiences that were relayed to me.

Bob is a 52-year-old married man who owns a financial consulting firm. He became disabled after an automobile accident left him with a spinal cord injury three years ago. Prior to receiving his assistance dog, Bob stated:



*My family has been very supportive, but I know they can't understand what I've experienced. A lot of my friends and associates have drifted away. I don't blame them. Everyone's busy and now we don't have a lot in common. I'm the poster boy for "I never thought this could happen to me." Counselors are helpful, but still, I don't know, something is missing.*

Bob was partnered with Jacob, a Labrador Retriever, who was donated to the assistance dog placement agency by a breeder and raised by a volunteer family. Bob, who had no prior experience with companion animals, had this to say after being partnered with Jacob for six months:

*I love animals, but have never owned a dog before. I'm not sure what I originally expected, some sort of furry robot, I guess, to open doors and pick up dropped items. My doctors explained the benefit of having a dog to help me, but this [our relationship] is so much more than that. I never thought we'd be so close. Sometimes we almost seem to communicate without words. I never expected my assistance dog to give me so much joy and be so much fun. Jacob has become a big part of my life. He is a big help and a great friend.*

Ann is a 66-year-old single woman with diabetes who has had both legs amputated above the knee. She is a wheelchair user and has been partnered with a "laptop" assistance dog, Chaz. Chaz is a rat terrier who was acquired from an animal rescue shelter. Prior to meeting her assistance dog, Ann spoke to me about her lack of companionship:

*I'm single and I don't have many friends. Sometimes you just*

*need someone to talk to. I miss having someone to share my life.*

After spending six months with her assistance dog, Ann said:

*We bonded immediately and this, of course, grows stronger every day. Aside from family, Chaz has become my truest companion. It's hard to think of life without Chaz. He has a strong desire to do things for me and he does them out of love and respect. It sounds silly, but it's the closest relationship I've ever had. I truly love him and he me.*

Cathy, a 40-year-old married woman with multiple sclerosis, hoped that an assistance dog would enable her to regain her autonomy. When I spoke with her prior to obtaining her assistance dog, Cathy commented:

*I have a lot of fear and frustration. I am negative and depressed over the loss of my independence. As my disease progresses, I have lost the ability to do things for myself. I've started using a cane and that helps, but I still worry about my lack of balance. My family is great, but who wants to be a burden to their kids?*

Cathy also expressed reservations about her ability to bond with the dog. She was concerned about the two-week training session that was required for her and her assistance dog to become a working team. Cathy was partnered with a Labrador Retriever named Chester. After being with Chester for six months, Cathy related this to me about her bonding experience:

*We're still working out some of the bugs, but getting Chester has*



*been transforming to me. The training was challenging, but well worth it. He gives me freedom. Who could ask for more? I enjoy the independence of not always having to ask for help from anyone. I'm stubborn and don't like to have to ask for help.*

Cathy eagerly shared several stories of her relationship with Chester. She was amazed that he exceeded all of her expectations. Again, Cathy spoke of Chester:

*Chester is always there when I need him; I'm never alone. There are times when I just want to talk to someone who will listen and not give advice. He depends on me and vice versa. We are a team; together we accomplish things. Much like a child, sometimes he's a pain, but I wouldn't trade him for the universe.*

Dave provides us with another representative example of the relationship that develops between a person with disabilities and an assistance dog. Dave is a 73-year-old single man who, as the result of a disabling illness, uses a walker or cane for balance and mobility. He has been partnered with a Golden Retriever named Andy. Dave stated:

*At first I was skeptical. Only a year ago I lost [my pet dog] Colby. He was the best dog I ever had, but now Andy has won my heart. He is closer to me than many of my friends. [Andy] means as much to me as my closest family. Andy has a keen sense of humor. Sometimes he thinks I should go to bed sooner than I want to. He runs to find my cane. If I don't take the hint, he leaps on the bed and paws down the blankets. At this*

*point I give up and go to bed. He's like a friend. He really is my buddy.*

### **Understanding the Partnership**

There is a vast distinction between an assistance dog and a companion animal. However, I was struck by how often participants in this study referred to their assistance dog in terms of friend, companion, and provider of comfort. In fact, talking about their relationship with the assistance dog was a favorite topic of discussion each time we spoke. It quickly became apparent to me that the relationship between a person with a disability and an assistance dog is complex and extends beyond physical support. Healthcare professionals need an awareness of the complexity of this relationship when considering modalities of care or treatment for their clients or patients with disabilities.

I found interacting with these teams to be a profound experience. I witnessed during this study that partnering with an assistance dog doesn't "cure" anything, but it can provide rehabilitation beyond functional recovery and improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities. Practitioners need to look beyond the framework of the medical model of disability and acknowledge that quality of life encompasses more than health-related normalcy. Being disabled often results in dependence on others and a lack of options. Assistance dogs may be beneficial as a component of independent living for persons with disabilities by providing the means to control and add predictability to their daily lives. All participants in this study experienced a perceived change in self-perception and a change in social relationships as a result of having an assistance dog. After being partnered with an assistance dog, the participants were better able to maximize the positive aspects of their lives and minimize the negative ones. They focused on their abilities rather than their limitations.



## Reference

- Eames, E., & Eames, T. (2004). *Partners in Independence: A Success Story of Dogs and the Disabled* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Mechanicsburg, PA: Barkleigh Productions.

Laurel has been active in animal-assisted therapy for over 20 years and currently serves on the National Pet Partners Committee for the Delta Society. Her research interest is in the human-animal bond, a subject area in which she is a speaker and an instructor. A native of Chicago, Laurel now lives in Connecticut with her husband, Paul Pribula, and three Newfoundlands: Rollo, Ben, & Dooley. She works at the University of Connecticut at the Center for Continuing Studies. Comments concerning this article can be sent to: [Laurel.Rabschutz@uconn.edu](mailto:Laurel.Rabschutz@uconn.edu).



Laurel with Ben at water rescue training. Photograph by Ruby Silver.



Laurel with Rollo at water rescue training. Photograph by Donna Kelliher.

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