



Bundeswehr School of Dog Handling

International Working Dog Conference 2017



Effects of a
dog-assisted intervention
in soldiers with PTSD

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Commandant

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Data, Figures and Facts

Since the beginning of Bundeswehr missions abroad, the number of military personnel suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had continuously increased.

2014 a total of **1, 697** treatments of PTSD cases, to include
204 new cases
(+25.6 % compared to 2013)

2015 a total of **1,750** treatments of PTSD cases, to include
235 new cases.



*"What helps here is to find the
right method of treatment ...
and to be open for new
approaches at all times ..."*

Commander (MC) Dr. Preuße, Bundeswehr Central Hospital
Koblenz

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Origins of Dog-Assisted Work

- Development of the relationship between humans and animals
- Systematic employment of dogs in a psychotherapeutic setting since the 1960s
- About 100 scientific studies on the effects of interaction between humans and animals
- Increased employment also in therapeutic and social work





"By shortly wagging its tail, a dog is capable of expressing more motions than any individual during long hours of talking"

Louis Armstrong

- *Unbiased*
- *Authentic*
- *Different communication*
 - ✓ *no need to talk*
 - ✓ *less prone to injuries*
 - ✓ *always open and honest*
- *High challenging potential with respect to physical contact and affection*
- *Reassurance*
- *Integration*
- *Distraction*
- *Motivation*



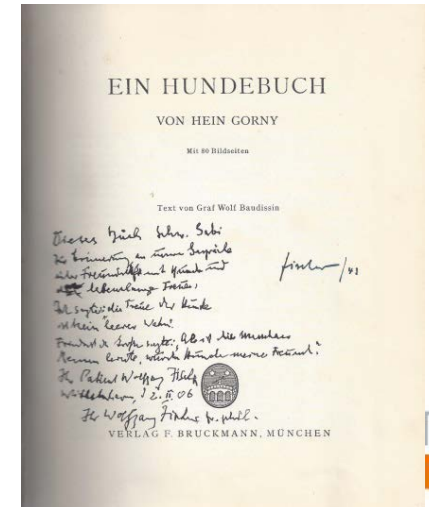
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Effects:

Emotional-psychological level

- *Communicate a feeling of warmth, affection, joy and confidence*
- *Feeling of being needed without making any assessment/requirement*
- *Reduce the feeling of loneliness*
- *Communicate a feeling of safety*
- *Promote self-confidence*
- *Increase self-esteem*
- *More confidence in oneself and one's own skills*

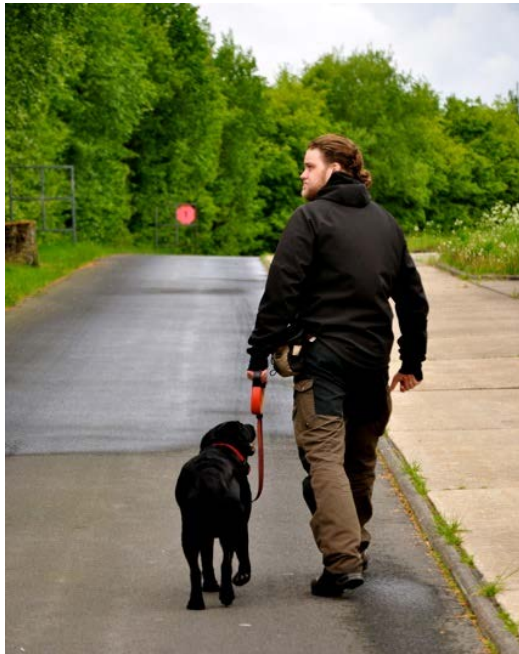




Effects:

Social level:

- *Assumption of responsibility*
- *Development of empathy*
- *Promotion of social behavior*
- *Function as social catalyst*
- *Openness toward the outside world, enlargement of the social environment*





Effects:

Physical-cognitive level:

- *Stress reduction and relaxation*
- ✓ *Stimulation of the Oxytocin system*
Feeling of calmness, confidence, safety, love
- ✓ *Proven reduction of "stress hormones"*
(cortisol, adrenalin, ...)
- *Positive effect on blood pressure and heart rate*
- *Promotion of the ability to concentrate*





Selection of Service Dog Teams and Planned Intervention Units



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Effects of a dog-assisted intervention during guideline-oriented psychotrauma therapy

Participants

- 30 soldiers with PTSD having psychotherapy treatment at Bundeswehr Central Hospital Koblenz
- Control group (to be surveyed until April 2017) of 30 soldiers with PTSD and no dog-assisted intervention

Selection of patients

Recruitment through information

Diagnosis of deployment-related PTSD

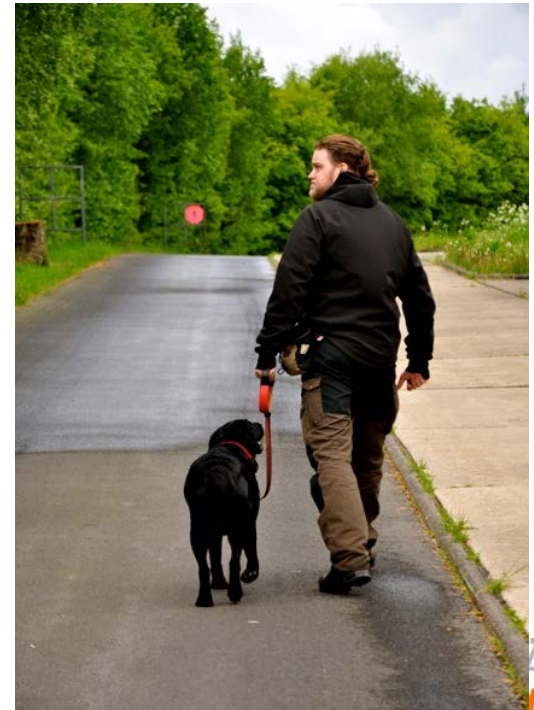
Patients from all three phases of guideline-oriented psychotrauma therapy

Voluntariness

Exclusion criteria

Allergy to the coat of dogs

Fear of dogs



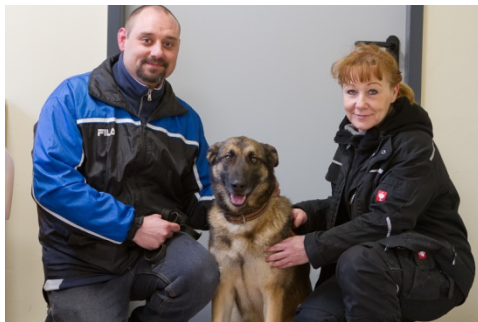
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Effects of a dog-assisted intervention during guideline-oriented psychotrauma therapy

Conduct

- Dog-assisted intervention 1x per week (3 hours) over a period of 4 weeks in addition to the regular treatment at Bundeswehr Central Hospital Koblenz
- Each patient was supported by a certified team consisting of a dog handler (soldier, previous PTSD training) and his/her dog;
- a medical specialist was available on the premises at all times for emergencies
- Interaction included activation modules and slow-down module (no fighting or dragging games)





Effects of a dog-assisted intervention during guideline-oriented psychotrauma therapy

Data

4 weeks before, directly at the beginning and at the end of intervention and 3 months later:

- state of health (Hopkins Symptom Checklist)
- loads and relation with therapist

prior to each intervention unit:

- state of health
- consumer behavior
- Perceived Stress Scale

the day after each intervention unit:

- state of health
- trust in dog handler
- STEP (psychotherapeutic factors)



Effects of a dog-assisted intervention during guideline-oriented psychotrauma therapy

Goal

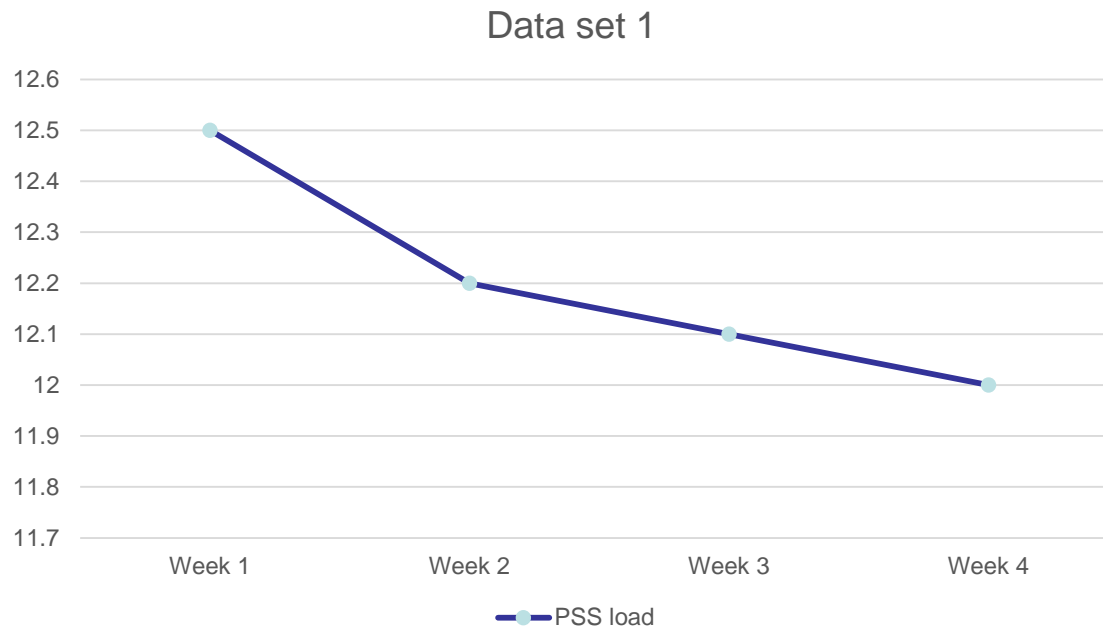
- Creation of a robust data situation on the short- and medium-term effects
- Improvement of the guideline-oriented therapy of traumatized soldiers by dog-assisted intervention with regard to duration, effectivity and sustainability



Stress Load

PSS (Perceived Stress Scale) – current stress load (to feel unable to solve problems, to have no control), measured on the day before the intervention unit

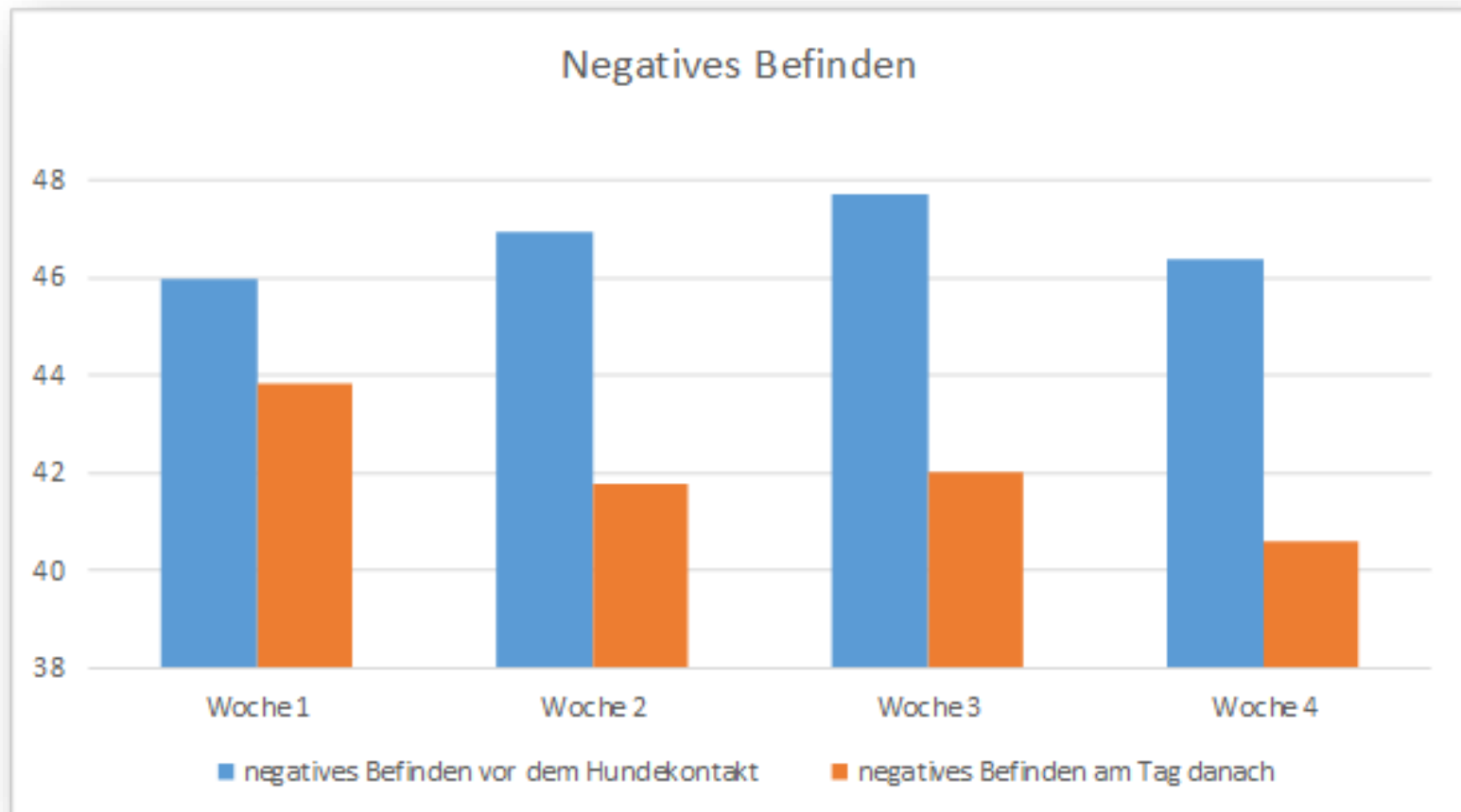
No significant decrease in the current stress load, but a downward trend





Negative Mental Well-Being

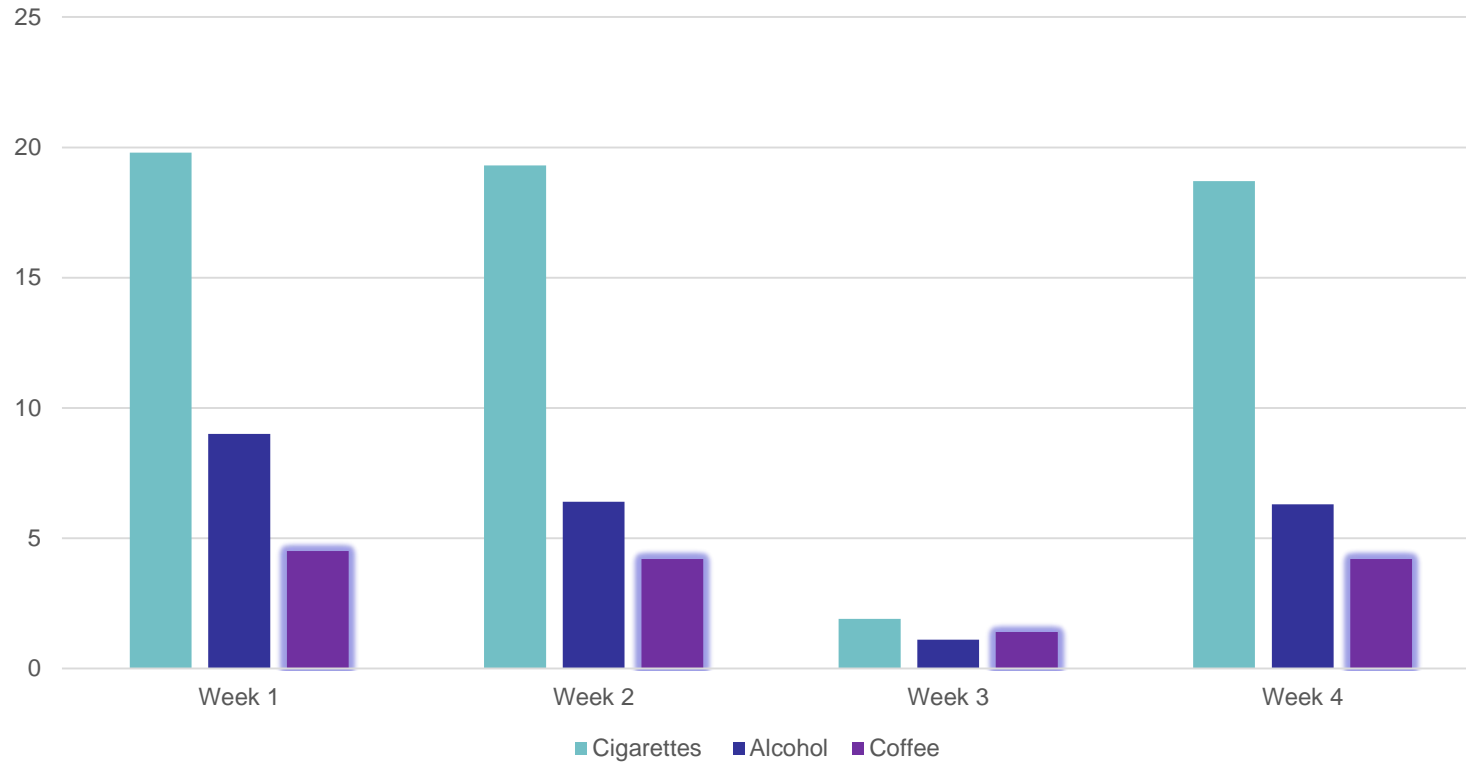
*Negative mental well-being directly before and on the day after the intervention unit (1-4)
(significantly better feeling after intervention unit 1, 3)*





Consumer Behavior

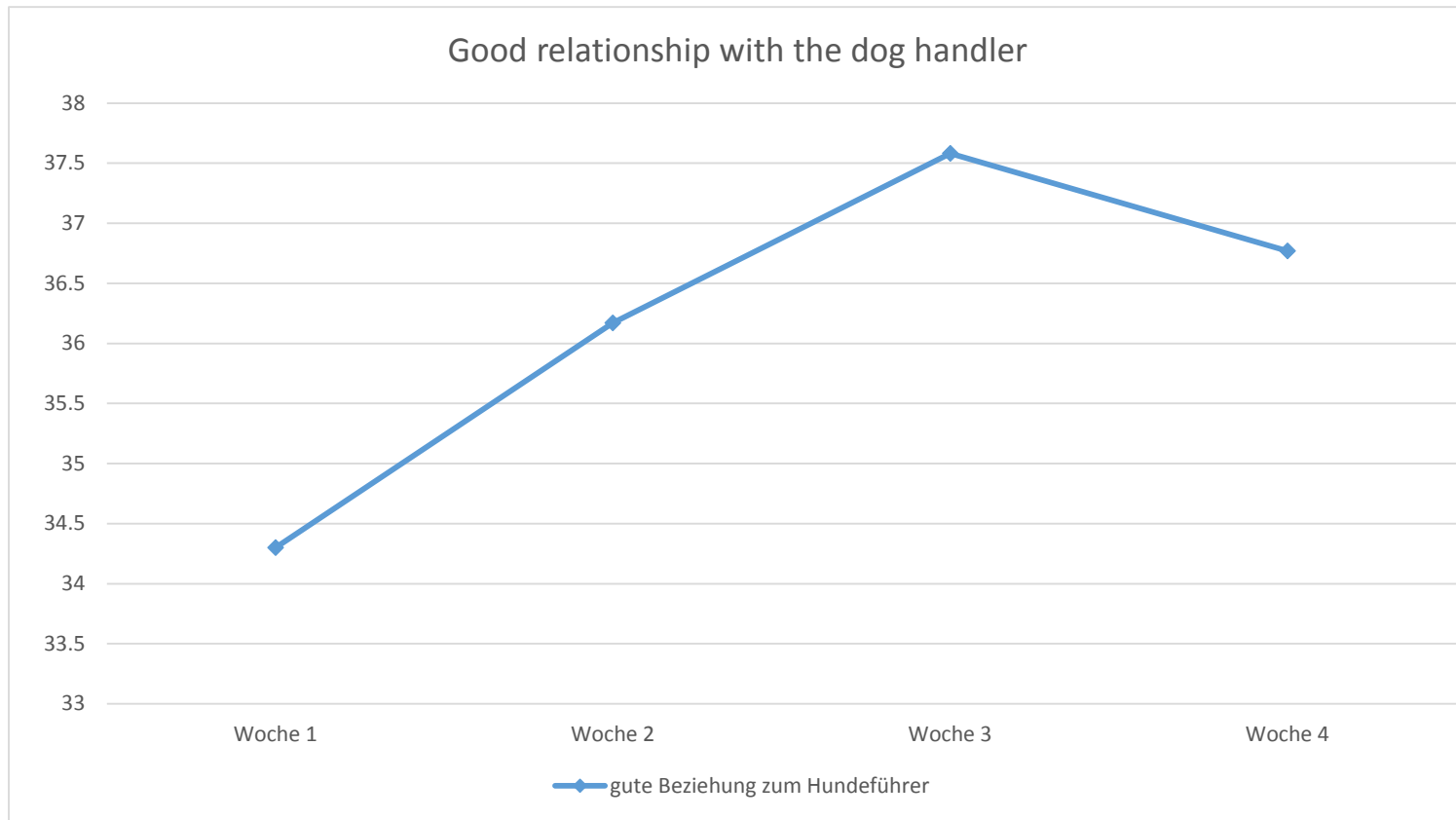
Stimulants





Relationship with the Dog Handler

Good relationship with the dog handler on the day after (1-4), significant improvement (t1-4), and also less problems in regard to contact with the dog





*"My interaction with the dog made me find more
peace and quiet.*

*In addition, I regained the confidence not to do
everything wrong time and time again.*

The dog handler is a very even-tempered person.

*His calmness passed on to me, and he never asked me
something I did not want to answer.*

*He got fully involved with me and
always stood by my side.*

I am very grateful to him!"



*"The dog
accepted me the way I am.*

There was no need for me to pretend.

*Personally, I had the feeling not to be under observation
and*

I also was not under pressure to make everything perfect.

*I was **relaxed** and in full command of my situation and*

I was sure that there was nobody evaluating me.

*And most importantly: I was in no way **AFRAID** of the
person opposite!*

(for the very first time in a very long time)."



*"The dog has had its effects on me in different ways.
From **physical closeness**, which I could no longer accept
from other human beings, to **communication** with the dog,
which knew exactly how I was feeling.
For the first time, there was a basis of trust again between
me and another creature."*



*"I slept much better after the day of therapy. The dog's attention made me **bring down** my **need for security**. And I could **open up** for the walk which I **enjoyed** as much as nothing in a long time."*



*"I came and was immediately at home.
I am feeling well and safe when the dog is close by.
It is a **comforting** feeling to have the dog with me.
It gives me back a "joie de vivre".
I have not felt in a very long time.
My illness and my problems are being pushed well back.
I am feeling safe and protected."*



*"I am feeling **completely relaxed** and as if there were no problems or something else.*

*I even **laughed more often** and simply let myself go.*

The feeling of being happy was overwhelming; I had not experienced something like that in a very long time.

It is simply indescribable."



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