

Rethink 'Service Animals,' Since Some Are Remarkable



By Erik Lief — March 23, 2018



A cardiac alert service dog (all photos via Google Images). [1]

Before the use of emotional support animals became subject to widespread abuse in order to game the system, many would attest that they were serving a helpful, mostly low-profile role for their owners.

When irked skeptics, however, started co-opting this practice so as to gain a similar "advantage" in public places or [while traveling](#) [2], doubt and cynicism began raining down on these particular pet owners. As a result, many with bonafide needs have been wrongly viewed as would-be scam artists.

So, in this climate of skepticism, it's worth noting that there's another legitimate class of animal helper quite worthy of our undiluted admiration: specially-trained service dogs that perform observable, often critical, tasks for their owner.

Both classes of assist animals provide care to some degree, which is certainly helpful. Yet before all of these animals get painted with the same cynical brush, it's worth noting how remarkable some of them can be. For instance, some service dogs can intervene and provide actual assistance when their owner is on the verge of physical collapse.

An eye-opening broadcast report aired this week about a service dog that guards its owner from a severe drop in blood pressure, and the falls that can result in a concussion or other serious injury. After watching [this feature](#) [3], it's hard not to reconsider your views on the entire subject of animals helping humans.

For years, Adele, a specially-trained cardiac alert service dog, served a Boston-area resident suffering from a rare heart condition called *acute malignant neurocardiogenic vasovagal syncope*, which made her faint frequently, if not daily. The woman, Marty Harris, said that she suffered dozens of concussions, and was told by her doctor that due to her uncommon situation "there's really nothing more that we can do for you."



However, Ms. Harris' life changed when she began working

with an animal training company called [Canine Partners for Life](#) [4], which paired her with a black Labrador that was able to pick up a drop in her owner's blood pressure using her sense of smell.

These type of "dogs detect minute changes in the odour, related to factors governed by the particular condition, and when they sense the change they alert the client to the impending, medical event," according to a British operation called [Medical Detection Dogs](#) [5]. (*How they sniff out this change is a story in itself.*) Those afflicted "often suffer severe and dangerous blackouts and our dogs can give them time to get to safety before they fall unconscious."

When Adele senses this change she alerts Ms. Harris by standing directly in front of her – and moving to remain in front of her if Ms. Harris moves – prompting her owner to immediately sit or lie down, wherever she may be. And in one remarkable instance when Ms. Harris fainted and began to fall, Adele, she recounted, moved into position underneath the stricken woman, with the Labrador using her stiffened torso to "catch" Ms. Harris' head and prevent it from hitting the ground.

These dogs are rigorously trained, with an emphasis on being extremely responsive to their owners while staying focused in order to avoid distractions. After suffering more than 30 concussions from falls before meeting Adele, in nine years together Ms. Harris reported fainting only twice.

It's fairly amazing to see what these extraordinarily trained animals can do, and how they can provide both hope and help for compromised individuals, when neither appears to be within reach.

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[1] <http://www.petguide.com/blog/dog/cardiac-alert-dog-documentary-heartwarming-love-story-video/>

[2] <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/airplane-mode/emotional-support-peacock-denied-flight-united-airlines->

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[3] <http://www.pbs.org/video/newshour-shares-1521665002/>

[4] <https://k94life.org/about/vision-mission/>

[5] <https://www.medicaldetectiondogs.org.uk/about-us/medical-alert-assistance-dogs/>