



NEWSLETTER #6

BEING DEPENDENT ON A SERVICE DOG VS. CODEPENDENCY IN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SERVICE DOG:

Before we begin, we would like you to understand that the information presented in today's newsletter is a collection of information of viewpoints from various trainers, handlers, and service dog community advocates and not only the viewpoint of Pup-Cessories Crafts. The subject matter of this newsletter has been a controversial topic recently with many different viewpoints within the service dog community and discussion boards/groups online.

Let's start by defining the terms "Dependent" and "Codependent".

According to "Merriam-Webster" through a google search:

- Dependent - relying on another for support. Requiring someone or something for financial, emotional, or other support. Unable to do without.
- Codependent - a psychological condition or a relationship in which a person manifesting low self-esteem and a strong desire for approval has an unhealthy attachment to another often controlling or manipulative person.

What does dependency on a Service Dog look like?

This is a natural aspect of having a service dog, where the individual relies on the dog for specific tasks or support related to their disability or condition. It is a symbiotic relationship where the dog assists the person in their daily life activities. It is normal for an individual to be dependent on their service dog. This is the primary reasons for someone to need one, to gain more independence so they do not have to rely on others for care. Understandably, the service dog also depends on the handler for food, medical care, and to meet its mental and physical needs.

What does a codependent relationship with a Service Dog look like?

This occurs when the individual becomes overly reliant on the service dog for emotional needs beyond its training or purpose. The person may use the dog as their sole source of comfort, companionship, or emotional regulation, neglecting or not seeking other forms of support like developing a relationship with a counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist for emotional guidance and how to cope with emotions. Codependency can have a negative or harmful impact on the dog's health as well, sometimes causing anxious and unsettling behaviors that can be quite relatable to the handler. Imagine a service dog being just as stressed or more so than its handler.

Steps for maintaining a healthy relationship with your service dog:

- 1. Professional Guidance:** Work closely with a professional trainer or therapist to establish healthy boundaries and behaviors with your service dog. This can also help prevent separation anxiety on both sides.
- 2. Maintain Independence:** While relying on your service dog for specific tasks, make sure to cultivate other forms of support and relationships in your life to prevent over-reliance on the dog. You never know when or if something could happen to your service dog, so developing a network of support as a backup is advisable! They may not be as fast or accurate as a service dog, but it's still important to have other means of support.

This scenario is different for everyone as we understand that everyone's needs and requirements for their service dog is different.

3. **Regular Training and Interaction:** Continuously engage in training sessions and activities with your service dog to reinforce their role and continue to build their confidence can help to balance the relationship.
4. **Self-Care Practices:** Practice self-care activities (within your comfort level) independent of your service dog to maintain emotional well-being and reduce the risk of codependency. Create boundaries by developing routines that both involve and do not involve your service dog. Even if it's only in the home for your safety or with a family member, friend or temporary caretaker.

Can a Dog Develop a Codependent Relationship with their Handler?

Yes.

Dogs can develop codependent relationships with their handlers. Especially if specific reactions or behaviors are encouraged and rewarded that are a result of or rooted in the handler's emotional state. Codependency with their handlers can lead to a nervous dog when the owner is not with them and can have an impact on their confidence level while working. Confidence in performing their tasks as trained is a staple trait for a service dog to possess. Stress also causes high cortisol levels that can last for days on end, even developing what's called trigger stacking and can form reactivity behaviors.

Here are some steps to address Codependency in a Dog-Owner relationship:

1. **Establish Boundaries:** Set clear boundaries with your dog, ensuring they have space for independence and activities that don't solely revolve around your emotional needs. Puzzle toys, baby gates or play areas created to promote self-soothing and the ability to engage in activities without always needing the handler to always give them something to do can help.

2. **Training and Socialization:** Engage in regular training sessions and socialization activities to build your dog's confidence and independence.
3. **Professional Support:** Seek guidance from a professional dog trainer or behaviorist to address any codependent behaviors your dog may be displaying to create and establish a healthier dynamic between dog and handler.
4. **Diversify Interactions:** Encourage varied interactions with other people and animals to prevent exclusive reliance on you as the sole source of comfort and security.

Signs to be on the lookout for that may be contributing to a codependent relationship.

1. **Excessive Reliance:** Relying solely on the service dog for emotional support, companionship, and comfort, neglecting or avoiding human relationships and other forms of support.
2. **Over-attachment:** Constantly seeking the presence of the service dog for reassurance or emotional regulation. Exhibiting distress when separated from the dog.
3. **Lack of Boundaries:** Allowing the service dog to invade personal space, dictate all activities, or dominate interactions to an extent that disrupts normal functioning.
4. **Emotional Dependency:** Using the service dog as the primary source of emotional fulfillment, investing excessively in the dog's needs while neglecting one's own well-being.

How to work on reducing or correcting a codependent relationship with a service dog:

1. **Professional Guidance:** Seek guidance from a therapist or counselor specializing in human-animal relationships to address underlying emotional issues and establish healthier dynamics. We know we keep saying this, but remember, service dogs are a part of a handler's treatment, so stopping any form of medical care once a service dog is obtained is highly unadvised.

2. **Behavioral Training:** Engage in behavioral training sessions with your service dog to reinforce appropriate boundaries and behaviors, promoting healthy interaction patterns.
3. **Social Support:** Actively develop a network of relationships with friends, family, or support groups to diversify your sources of emotional support to reduce the level of emotional dependence on the service dog. It has been shown that regular social interactions can help improve a handler's mental state and improve their mood.
4. **Self-Reflection:** Reflect on your emotional needs and motivations for the codependent relationship with the service dog, working towards enhancing your self-awareness and autonomy.
5. **Balanced Care:** Ensure the service dog receives proper care, attention, and training while maintaining a balanced relationship that respects both the dog's role and your own well-being. A service dog needs a life outside of work the same way a person does to maintain a positive and healthy emotional state.

By recognizing the signs of codependency and taking proactive steps to address them, you can foster a healthier and more balanced relationship with your service dog.

It is extremely important to empower yourself as an individual and know that your disability does not define who you are as a person. When it comes to a service dog, it still is up to the handler to decide what is best for themselves and no one should tell the handler otherwise. It is entirely up to the handler and/or anyone the handler trusts and empowers with their wellbeing like family members, friends, trainers, or medical professionals to possibly determine if an unhealthy relationship may be starting to occur. If you are unsure if there may be a certain level of codependency within your relationship with your service dog, seek the advice of a medical professional and/or professional trainer that specializes in service dogs.

Remember, you are strong. You are powerful. You are amazing!