

Psychiatric Service Dogs: ESA vs PSD

Is it an emotional support animal or a psychiatric service dog?

(read more about psychiatric service dogs at: [Service Dog Central](#) or join the [PSD list](#))

The difference between emotional support animals and service animals is threefold:

1. To have a service animal, a person must be so impaired as to have a disability. For example, needing glasses for poor vision is an impairment, but being unable to see with or without glasses is a disability. Having a mental illness is an impairment, but being unable to function on a minimal level because of a mental illness is a disability. Folks may have an emotional support animal due to a mental impairment if they are also otherwise disabled or elderly or they may have an emotional support animal because of a mental illness disability. Only those actually disabled by a psychiatric impairment would qualify to use a psychiatric service dog.
1. Service animals are task trained to actually do something which mitigates the person's disability. Their defined function is not to provide emotional support (affection on demand or a security blanket) but to do something the handler cannot do for themselves which allows that handler to overcome or ameliorate an inability to perform major life activities. Emotional support animals don't have to be trained, so long as they do not disturb neighbors or pose a threat to public safety.
1. A person with a disability has a right to be accompanied by a trained service dog which is assisting them in most public accommodations (places of business). A person with an impairment or a disability does not have a right to be accompanied by an emotional support animal unless individual state laws specifically grant this right, in which case it applies only in that state.

Some folks confuse Emotional Support Animals (ESAs) with Psychiatric Service Animals (PSAs). They think that "training" a dog to kiss on command or jump in their lap, or be hugged is a task qualifying the animal as a service animal. Real tasks for PSDs (psychiatric service dogs) include counterbalance/bracing for a handler dizzy from medication, waking the handler on the sound of an alarm when the handler is heavily medicated and sleeps through alarms, doing room searches or turning on lights for persons with PTSD, blocking persons in dissociative episodes from wandering into danger (i.e. traffic), leading a disoriented handler to a designated person or place, and so on.

If you look at the tasks just described (and those listed below), you will see that PSD tasks are actually very similar to tasks for persons with other disabilities. Guiding to a place and blocking from danger are common Guide Dog tasks. Signaling for an alarm is a common hearing dog task. Balancing/bracing and turning on lights are common Mobility Dog tasks. That's because they are

real service dog tasks for persons whose disability happens to be due to mental illness.

"I can't bend over to pick up dropped items like housekeys because my medication makes me so dizzy I fall down when I try. My dog was trained to pick up dropped items so I could get the things I needed without injuring myself in the process."

"I become confused and disoriented when I dissociate. I wander off and become lost and cannot find my way back home. My dog was trained to a) stop me from wandering by planting me someplace until the episode passed, or b) guide me home on command."

"I wander into traffic when I am disoriented. I fear becoming 'road pizza.' My dog was trained to block me from stepping in front of moving cars, or to block me automatically at each intersection."

"I pick at my skin and pull out my hair without noticing that I am doing it because of OCD. I do it to the point that I injure myself and bleed. My dog was trained to interrupt and redirect my picking behavior toward a less harmful behavior like grooming my dog."

"When I miss my medication I become violently ill. So ill that I cannot even rise to a seated position. I vomit uncontrollably. My dog was trained to bring me my medication and a juice box so I could take it even when I am in this condition. She was also trained to clear the vomit out of my airway so I don't choke, even if I pass out."

"I sleep so soundly because of the sedating effects of my medication that I will sleep through tornado sirens and smoke alarms. I fear I will die in my sleep if I do not respond to such emergencies. My dog was trained to respond upon hearing a siren or smoke alarm by climbing all over me, licking my face, pulling off the covers, and gripping my hand in her mouth and pulling me off the bed to wake me."

"I hallucinate that I smell smoke or see a stranger/scarab/dragon/etc. My dog was trained to notify me when there was smoke or a stranger so that I could tell whether what I sensed was real or a hallucination."

"I am terrified of entering my home and am easily startled and terrified by unidentified noises. My dog was trained to search my home upon entering and notify me if anyone was present. She was also trained to alert me whenever a person approached my home."

While most handlers will tell you that they receive some emotional support from their service animal, regardless of their disability, that support or companionship is a bonus and not a justification for the animal being a service animal. It's fine to teach your dog to kiss on command or to jump into your lap, but it is not fine to claim those tricks alone make him/her a service dog.

"I can't go out alone because of social phobia; my dog makes me feel safe enough to go out to the grocery store and other places I need to go." This describes an emotional support animal, not a psychiatric service animal.

How can you tell the difference between emotional support and psychiatric tasks? Take emotion out of the equation by asking yourself what a robot might do to help you overcome a barrier to performing major life activities. Next ask yourself if a dog might be able to do the same thing. Then

ask if a dog could be trained to do that thing.

Sometimes folks want emotional support so they look for a list of service dog tasks to try to justify their ESA as a PSD. This is the backwards way to select tasks and usually results in tasks which will not hold up in court. The courts have told us that tasks must: 1) be trained and not a natural behavior of the dog, 2) must mitigate the person's disability, 3) must be needed by that specific handler. Some examples that don't hold water:

medication reminders for someone who could just as easily check a clock or set a watch alarm
carrying medication for a person who could carry their own medication in a purse or pocket
retrieving a newspaper for someone who doesn't subscribe to a newspaper
public access for a handler whose dog's only task is to wake them, when the person doesn't fall asleep in public (which a person with narcolepsy might actually need help in managing, but most folks would not)

a dog who provides encouragement or affection so a person can take a test or visit a store
an attack dog to protect a victim of assault (see also IAADP's article on PTSD)

Please note that a dog which becomes upset when the handler is upset is not "alerting" to the handler's upset. He is responding to it and doing so in an emotionally unstable way. A psychiatric service dog should be extremely stable and not be drawn into their handler's emotional state, but rather remain calm, thinking, and working in spite of their handler's upset. Vomiting, trying to drag the handler away, and acting up are all indications of emotional distress in the dog. A therapist who joins the disabled person in "freaking out" is not professional, and neither is a service dog who does so. A person in emotional distress needs a solid rock to think clearly for them and guide and help them, be that a therapist or doctor, or service dog. They do not need someone "freaking out" or overly empathizing with them. Remember that the number one reason dogs bite is out of fear not aggression. A dog put into a situation that it is emotionally unable to handle is at risk of biting, something which can result in the dog being declared vicious and put down.

Here are some quotes from US Department of Justice (DOJ) officials on the subject of emotional support animals vs service animals. Note that the DOJ is the federal agency responsible for enforcing title III of the ADA (which is what gives public access rights to persons using service animals).

The way we look at it is what the regulation says is that a service animal is an animal that's trained to provide services for a person. So something that is just a pet is not, and we try to be broad, because there could be a whole range of services that an animal can be trained to provide, but it has to be trained to do it and it has to be doing services. Because there has been a great deal of misunderstanding and we are told by a number of guide dog users around the country of abuses that are occurring and a backlash that's happening to people with service animals because of it. When we do the regulations that I'm talking about in the fall, we're going to ask questions about this issue and be specific about this. Should emotional support animals be covered by the ADA? Should they be required to be in restaurants? Should they be required to be in public transportation? In our view, they're not covered now unless they are providing a service to the person.*

John Wodatch, Chief, Disability Rights Section, Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Justice
(from July 17, 2001 conference)

"An emotional support animal is not going to be a service animal under the ADA unless it does meet the task training requirement."

Phillip L. Breen, Special Legal Counsel, Disability Rights Section, Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Justice
(from April 16, 2002 conference)

"Generally speaking, if we're talking about therapy, comfort, emotional support animals -- and I think those typically are used interchangeably. Those are not going to be service animals under the ADA because they haven't been trained to -- remember that three-part -- that definition, they haven't been trained to do work or perform a task for the benefit of an individual with a disability. Typically, comfort, emotional support animals by their very presence certainly performs a valuable service, but it's an innate ability. It's their mere presence. It doesn't reach the level of having been trained to do work or perform tasks."

Sally Conway, Disability Rights Section, Office of Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Justice
(from April 29, 2004 conference)