



# Support Partners: Canine Companions



Expanding Your Support  
Network to Include Your Dog

**S**upport Partners: Canine Companions is the newest component of *Support Partners*, an educational program that encourages a support-team approach to overcoming depression. *Support Partners* shows you how to create meaningful partnerships to get the practical and emotional support you may need to help improve your chances of becoming and staying well.

Your friends, family and your healthcare provider will most likely form the basis of your support network, becoming your “Support Partners.” But support can also come from unexpected places, like your dog. *Support Partners: Canine Companions* provides you with information on the potential benefits of having a dog and offers practical tips to help you expand your support network by incorporating your dog into the recovery process.

## What is Depression?

Depression is a real illness, like diabetes, which affects millions of people in a variety of ways. Depression includes a broad range of symptoms. If you experience several of the common symptoms of depression every day for a period of at least two weeks, it is recommended that you talk to your healthcare professional.

## Where to Begin

### *I think I may be depressed; what should I do?*

If you think you might be depressed, the first step towards getting better is to speak to a healthcare professional. You can speak with your primary care physician (PCP) about your options, including seeing a psychiatrist or psychologist. Like your PCP, a psychiatrist is a physician who specializes in prevention, diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. A psychologist is a healthcare professional that specializes in talk therapy.

In addition to help from a healthcare professional, support from family and friends can be crucial to recovery. Because depression can cause feelings of loneliness and isolation, having a Support Partner – someone you can lean on and be honest with – can make a real difference. A Support Partner can be anyone who wants to help a friend or loved one who experiences depression.

The *Support Partners* program includes three guidebooks – one for the person with depression, one for the person who wants to help and a third to be shared between them. The guidebooks are designed to help you and your Partner work together to create a strong support network. They provide information on the signs and symptoms of depression, ways to start a conversation about the illness and resources to help map out a wellness plan.

In addition, the guidebooks focus on the many different kinds of support that may be helpful for you. For instance, you might need a Support Partner who can offer emotional support, like a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen when you're feeling upset. Or you might prefer to receive more practical support, like help with cleaning your house or an exercise partner.

If you are new to *Support Partners*, the best place for you to begin is by downloading the *Support Partners* guidebooks, which you can find at [www.SupportPartnersProgram.com](http://www.SupportPartnersProgram.com).



## Depression Includes a Broad Range of Symptoms

### Common Symptoms of Depression

- Sadness throughout the day, nearly every day
- Loss of interest in or enjoyment of favorite activities
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Excessive or inappropriate feelings of guilt
- Trouble making decisions
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Bodily aches and pains
- Trouble concentrating
- Restlessness

## Expanding Your Network

Once you begin working with your doctor, family and friends to create a core support network, you may soon start to notice the benefits of having support in your life. Support can be found in many places, and it's important for you to start thinking of ways you can expand your network.

Pets, especially dogs, may offer one source of support that can provide a nice complement to the help you are already receiving from your Support Partners. Just like family and friends, pets can be important for someone who is feeling sad, lonely or depressed.

## Why Dogs?

Just as support from family and friends can be crucial to the recovery process, the love and support from one's dog can also be beneficial. For some people, dogs can offer a great source of unconditional love, loyalty and affection, similar to the positive aspects of human companionship. In fact, studies have shown that a dog may decrease feelings of loneliness and isolation, which may accompany depression.

In addition to loyalty and friendship, your dog can offer incentive to be more active, both physically and socially. Incorporating exercise into your daily routine and maintaining



social relationships can be important to recovery. In fact, both exercise and social support have been shown to provide therapeutic benefits to people with depression. Remember to talk with your healthcare professional before starting or changing an exercise program. Dogs may also help relieve stress. Additional research has shown that petting your dog has the potential to reduce your heart rate and lower your blood pressure, thus promoting relaxation.

Whether you are taking your dog on a walk, playing fetch in the backyard, making new friends at the local dog park or just snuggling on the couch, the benefits of having a dog may have a positive effect on your overall health and well-being.



## Below are Several Categories of Support Dogs That Can Help Someone With Depression:

**Pet** A pet dog can bring psychological benefits almost immediately by providing emotional support, companionship and encouraging exercise.

**Emotional Support Animal (ESA)** A legal classification referring to a pet dog that is owned by a person with a disability of any kind. Such dogs may or may not be trained and they are sometimes recommended by a healthcare provider such as a psychiatrist or psychologist. Under the Fair Housing Act, persons with disabilities, including mental health disabilities like depression, may keep an ESA, even in no-pets housing.

**Therapy Dog** A pet dog that is trained by its owner and certified by a professional Therapy Dog organization to provide comfort and cheer during brief visits with hospitalized patients, nursing home residents and other institutionalized persons. The role of a Therapy Dog is to increase emotional well-being, promote healing and improve quality-of-life for those visited, including the staff that cares for the patients.

**Psychiatric Service Dog (PSD)** A legal classification referring to a dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks that benefit its owner with a mental illness such as depression. Only those with a disability, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act, qualify for a PSD. Since PSDs are not pets in the legal sense, they are given public access rights when accompanied by their disabled owner in venues such as restaurants, airplanes, theaters, museums and on public transportation, similar to Guide Dogs, Hearing Dogs and Seizure Dogs. PSDs are highly trained to provide structured emotional support either through doing work or performing physical tasks for their disabled owners.

To learn about the requirements for training a PSD, please visit the Psychiatric Service Dog Society (PSDS) at [www.psychdog.org](http://www.psychdog.org).

## Different Levels of Support from Dogs

Now that you know some of the benefits your dog can provide you in the recovery process, it's time to think about how engaged you would like your dog to be. It may be that simply viewing your pet in a new way will help you to realize all that your dog has to offer. Or, perhaps you would feel better training your dog to provide structured support. Either way, it's helpful to understand your options.

## Ways Your Dog Can Help Your Recovery From Depression

Even if you are happy with the current level of support your pet dog provides, the following are some easy ways, according to the PSDS, to include your dog in your recovery:

### 1. Be active!

Walking, running and playing with your dog are great ways to work exercise into your daily routine. Remember to always consult with your physician before beginning any new exercise regimen.

### 2. Pet your dog

Petting your dog may take your mind off of things that are bothering you and help you relax.

### 3. Teach your dog a new trick

Creating a goal and achieving it may help increase your feelings of accomplishment and self-worth.

### 4. Take your dog to a dog park

Dog parks can be a great place for dogs and people to socialize with one another. Interacting with other people may diminish feelings of loneliness.

### 5. Enroll in a training class with your dog

Learning how to train your dog can be a real accomplishment that strengthens the human-animal bond. In addition, training classes offer yet another opportunity to meet new people.

### 6. Talk to your dog

Sometimes we all need someone we can talk to who will listen without judging us. In addition to your friends, family and your healthcare professional, a dog can offer a great ear when you're in need.

### 7. Make something for your dog

Taking on a project like baking treats, knitting clothing or building a doghouse can provide a sense of motivation and accomplishment.

### For the Support Partners ...

**If you are a Support Partner helping a friend or loved one manage their depression, the following are some ways you can include your dog in the support process:**

- Suggest that your friend take your dog on weekly walks to help them get fresh air and exercise
- If you have scheduled visits with your friend, bring your dog along for extra companionship
- Invite your friend to accompany you to the dog park

