

Is Owner-Training an Assistance Dog Right for YOU?

An Assistance Dog (AD) is not right for everyone.

An AD is never to be considered a replacement for your medical team or your current human support. Is there a better 'tool' to manage your symptoms such as an 'Apple' watch?

An AD is to be considered an adjunct piece of the plan when it comes to managing your disability not a fix-it-all.

Read through these points, print it out. Make a mark next to the points that may concern you. Talk through it all with your family, friends and current supporting medical specialist.

Obtaining a pre-trained Assistance Animal (AA) from an organisation has many benefits such as:

- The dog has been trained under normalised emotional baselines then slowly introduced to behaviours associated with various disabilities.
- The dog is slowly introduced to the emotions attached to the behavioural changes associated with a disability (especially psychiatric ADs)
- The dog is puppy-raised and allowed to mature before going back to the organisation for intensive training at around the age of 12-15 months old.
- You have the backing & support from the organisation going forward.
- Replacement dogs may be available should you require.

Owner training an Assistance Animal.

Are you **READY** to bring an ADit into your life with your disability? Do you fully understand your disability and how you're already managing it? Training an assistance animal may exacerbate your symptoms further.

Can you care for a dog?

- Food, training your dog - ongoing throughout its lifetime, training gear, grooming, bedding, leashes, harnesses (gear),
- Veterinary expenses including unexpected expenses to rule out behavioural problems etc or accidents or when the dog eats a sock and it has an obstructed bowel!
- Exercise for your dog. Consider your dog breed and what it was originally bred for. EG. If you have a kelpie or an Aussie Shepherd or other working/herding breed, it will require considerably more exercise than a greyhound or a cavoodle. Are you physically up to the task of exercising your dog **EVERY** day for the rest of its life?
- Do you actually like and enjoy dogs? Sounds weird but if you can't manage all the undesirable behaviours that go with raising your own puppy or dog, an AD may not be the right disability aid for you.
- If you are starting with a puppy, how will you manage the dog's adolescence months? Many people reconsider their training path during this time as the adorable compliant little puppy you once had has turned into a 'devil-dog' ;-).



- Do you have friends or family that can take the dog if need be or if you are too unwell?
- Do you have other dogs or other animals in the home? Other pet dogs in the home may be the reason your AD in training will be a 'washout' and pick up all the bad behaviours your other dog(s) have. Can you manage the house and exercise or train your AD along with your pets? Established pet dogs can become jealous of a new dog or puppy being brought into the home especially when you'll be giving the AD in training a WHOLE lot more attention and time.
- Are the people living in your home or your friends supportive of you training your own AD? If you do not have support from these people, training your AD will be very challenging. Unintentional sabotage of your specific AD training can be a problem with other people in your home ie: others giving the dog/puppy lots of affection or treats and food when this should mainly be coming from YOU. People in your home or even friends may not take your training regime seriously or make fun of you or say you don't need an AD. How will you cope with this?
- Can you ethically retire your dog when it comes time? Many people find this decision very difficult and will put their own wants before the dog's needs.

How long does it take to train my dog?

- Owner training takes at least 2 years from a puppy if you're going to have a solid AD.
- Until your dog is approximately 2 years old, your dog is not considered an adult by most dog trainers. Even then, some dogs take longer to mature.
- You shouldn't rely on your young AD until it's over 2 years old & its brain is almost fully mature. This will also depend on what age your dog is when you begin AD training.
- Your 8 week old puppy is equivalent to a 9 month old baby however, the ageing process between a human and a canine is not linear and changes over the dog's life.
- It takes an average of 2 years to train any dog whether that be a puppy or an adult dog with no prior training.
- Even if you start with an 'adult' dog, it still takes a long time to train your dog in all situations and for you to learn new skills.
- As YOU are learning new skills while you train your dog, it will take you longer than a dog trainer at a training facility who can work with that dog 5 hours a day 5 days a week.

A new look at the dog ageing process

"Researchers found the first eight weeks of a dog's life is comparable to the first nine months of human infancy, but the ratio changes over time. The research used epigenetics, a process by which modifications occur in the genome, as a biological marker to study the ageing process.

Trey Ideker's laboratory at UC San Diego took blood samples from 104 dogs, mostly Labrador retrievers, ranging from four weeks to 16 years of age. The new formula is more complicated than the "multiply by seven" method. When dogs and humans experience similar physiological milestones, such as infancy, adolescence and ageing, the new formula provided reasonable estimates of equivalent ages. For example, by using the new formula, eight weeks in dogs roughly translates to nine months in humans, which corresponds to the infant stage in both puppies and babies. The expected lifespan of senior Labrador retrievers, 12 years, correctly translates to 70 years in humans, the worldwide average life expectancy”.

(Tina Wang, Jianzhu Ma, Andrew N. Hogan, Samson Fong, Katherine Licon, Brian Tsui, Jason F. Kreisberg, Peter D. Adams, Anne-Ruxandra Carvunis, Danika L. Bannasch, Elaine A. Ostrander, Trey Ideker. 2020. 'Quantitative Translation of Dog-to-Human Aging by Conserved Remodeling of the DNA Methylome'. Cell Systems, Volume 11, Issue 2, 2020. Pages 176-185.e6)

Puppies & Adolescent dogs

- Many handlers experience a flare in their symptoms while raising a puppy. The puppy and adolescent phase is exhausting.
- It takes a lot of energy, time commitment and PATIENCE to raise both a puppy and an adolescent dog.
- Considering your disability, do you actually have the energy to put into this dog?
- Puppies and adolescent dogs CANNOT go everywhere with you. They may need to be left in your home alone. It can do a lot more harm than good to your dog.
- Often between the ages of 8 months to 18 months the dog burns out or develops bad habits and your tolerance of the dog diminishes which is not helpful for anybody especially your AD in training.

Managing Yourself & your ADit

- What is your plan if you need to go to the hospital or away? Where will your ADit stay?
- How will you manage your dog around other household dogs, your friend's 'friendly' dogs, other dogs in the park...
- You will NOT have an Assistance Dog until it is fully trained.
- How will you manage your dog while you manage your symptoms?
- If you're having a disability 'flare'?
- If you're training a psychiatric AD, what happens if you have a panic or anxiety 'attack' while you're out training your ADit? How will you keep your dog safe? Managing your dog in that particular moment.
- How will you exercise your dog if you're feeling unwell or your symptoms have escalated over a period of time?
- Do your symptoms impact your ability to raise a young dog or a dog in general?

Do your Due Diligence & remain objective

- Do your due diligence including researching and talking to other people who have trained their own AD.
- Be honest with yourself and your disability.



- Look into your own human supports who can help you through this in-training phase.
- 'Washout': Re-classifying an Assistance Dog in training or fully certified Assistance Dog to a 'pet dog' with no public access due to any number of issues that may arise for you or your dog.
- The 'washout' rate for owner-trainers and organisation trained or in training dogs is very high.
- Be realistic that your ADit has a 50/50 chance of washing out opposed to succeeding.
- Unfortunately many owner-trainers are not able to be objective with their ADits and are continuing to work their dogs in public places when they really should be re-classifying their own dogs. This is a bitter truth. Owner-trainers simply like the idea of not leaving their dog at home. This is not a good thing.
- What are the options for your ADit if it is 'washed out'? Will you keep the dog as a pet? Will you rehome the dog? Will you give the dog to a friend?
- Many dogs who are not 'fit' for public access work may continue to be a home-based assistance dog quite successfully.

Training Considerations

- You need access to other animals, children, public places and other dogs.
- You need access to public shops, transport and other places. You may only be training your dog for 10 to 15 minutes then going home.
- If you live rurally, how will you manage this?
- Do you have access to a car? Do you need someone else to help you get around?
- You will require regular training sessions from a professional trainer. Can you commit to this timewise and financially?
- Can you cope with people paying you a lot of attention in public? If you have anxiety issues, this may be more detrimental than helpful to you.
- Public Access with your dog may simply not be healthy for you.

Task Training Considerations

- Is the task you want to train your dog to perform really the best decision regarding your disability symptoms?
- Will the task your dog is going to perform be safe for your dog?
- What if the dog doesn't perform the 'trained task' when it's required?
- Dogs are very sensitive to emotional state changes in their humans. How will you manage this for your dog?
- If you are dealing with a psychiatric disability or illness, you may present with a variety of symptoms including: high levels of anxiety, stress, depression, exacerbated emotional peaks & troughs. Any of these emotions can be very stressful and confusing for any dog, especially a young dog. This may impact the development of your young dog.
- How will you teach your dog what is a 'normal' baseline emotional state so the dog can learn to interrupt your 'non-normal' anxiety state?
- Human anger may impact whether an AD is really the right disability aid for you.
- How will you respond to your young ADit coming into your space if you are feeling very strong emotions one way or the other?

- How will you keep your young dog mentally safe in an emotionally fluctuating environment?

Breed Selection

- Do you have an 'exotic' looking dog that will draw a HEAP of attention to you?
- Dogs with merle coats or very fluffy interesting fur or shepherds or giant breeds WILL draw A LOT more attention to you.
- Labradors or Golden retrievers are more widely accepted as ADs thanks to guide dogs.
- Even tiny dogs such as miniature or toy poodles, jack russells, fox terriers etc. draw unwanted attention. People may mock you for having a small breed dog as your Assistance Dog.
- Small dogs may make excellent medical alert dogs such as diabetic alert or Postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS) or similar.
- Have you researched an ethical dog breeder? Do not purchase just from Gumtree or Marketplace. Many of these puppies still come from puppy-mills & have not had the appropriate puppy raising environment to mould a prospective Assistance Animal (AA).
- Just because you've paid a lot of money for a 'well raised' puppy, does NOT guarantee that puppy will become a successful public access certified AA.

What are the elements of a Public Access Test (PAT)?

- General obedience.
- The dog's aptitude for working in public places. Does the dog inherently enjoy being out and about in any environment with the handler?
- The handler's ability to control, communicate effectively and ethically correct and reward the dog.
- Can the dog perform the trained tasks to mitigate the handler's symptoms effectively and reliably in ALL environments?

Stay Objective!

Many dogs are simply not suited to public access. Just because you WANT your dog to do this job, doesn't mean it's the right dog for the job.

TRAINING IS FOREVER.