

Canine help makes life better for Post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers

Brigid O'Connell Health reporter, Herald Sun Melbourne, February 28, 2015 9:00PM

Digger dog: IT TAKES just the slight quiver in Josh New's voice, or for the first tear to escape, for Lucky the dog to come running.

With his oversize paws on his master's chest, he licks away the tears as fast as they fall. If they continue, Lucky starts nibbling Josh's face to create some pain and bring him back to the moment.

Next the barking starts, and Josh must tell Lucky he is OK and settle his crying for the dog to stop. It's only then that the border collie-blue healer cross pup will jump off and shake his body to release the muscular tension that comes from carrying his owner's emotional energy.

Lucky the assistance dog has been a life saver for this young Digger and his family.

The 30-year-old man that Megan New married 10 years ago at age 19 is bearing the psychological toll of three frontline deployments to Afghanistan over four years.

"It broke my heart. My soldier came home broken," she said.



LUCKY arrived in December at just at the right time.

Things Josh had seen, conditions he endured and decisions that were made during his first deployment in 2009, when his son Kayden was 11 months old, first started the unravelling towards post-traumatic stress disorder.

"A lot of it happened in the first trip and I went back having tried to make it up, type thing," he said.

"It just built up over time, but it took four years for me to accept I had something wrong with me.

"We're all human. I don't think — no matter how much training you do — you can ever be truly prepared to see or deal with a lot of things you're exposed to."

Army life moved at a hectic pace. The father-of-two was overseas for more than eight months, back for three weeks to train other troops, then back overseas for another seven.

It was only when he moved units to Albury and the workload slowed, family time increased and he had more time to think, that he started sliding into darkness.

Every night Ms New would ensure the house was spotless, their two children were quiet and dinner was on the stove when her husband walked in the door from work.

"He was a different person every day," she said.

"I couldn't look at him until I'd worked out what mood he was in.





“As time went on, I just figured I had married a man who was angry, that I should be frightened of him.

“I saw him as a ticking time bomb. But because he was never physically abusive towards us, I just got on with it. I managed.”

The night of her birthday in 2013, his wife gave him an ultimatum. You get help or we leave. They feared for their safety. She yearned for a life where she could safely leave Josh at home alone while she pursued a career, or went to the shops.

Josh did get help. He spent three weeks in Ward 17, The Veterans’ Psychiatric Inpatient Unit at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital where he learnt coping strategies to help bring him out of the dark days.

And while that helped, the same noises and triggers were there when he returned home and Ms New knew she needed something else to help protect her husband. **She found Young Diggers.**

MAYBE Lucky’s power lies in him understanding that he himself got a second chance at life.

His pregnant mother was rescued from an outback station by the Young Diggers charity, which supports ex-serving personnel and their families, who bought the dog for \$50 from Gumtree.

Josh New was deployed to Afghanistan three times in four years.

Lucky earned his name from birth. There was a long pause between the sixth and seventh pups being born. They thought he may not have survived. But he did.

Lucky was first trained by inmates at Bathurst Correctional Centre, where he learnt commands and tolerance for all the daily living skills Josh would need.

Prisoner and dog went in lifts together. Lucky proved he could walk next to a trolley and not be startled when a can was dropped in, and he was tested on his unflinching ability to withstand the blast of cold air from an opened freezer door at the supermarket.

Lucky’s nickname in prison was Donkey. Inmates thought he looked dumb, but he probably had his smarts hidden.

The trainers and Young Diggers staff were concerned the pair didn’t have a connection, as Lucky always looked out at the world and not in at Josh.

But he proved his devotion on their second night together.

A screaming girl at a disability school they had visited that day triggered a panic attack.

Lucky is trained to help Josh when his anxiety increases.

As Josh spoke to his wife about it on the phone that night, Lucky stirred from his deep sleep, jumped on the bed and lay his head on his master’s chest to ask if he was OK.

“Straight away I knew he was going to be there and get me through those tough times. And he has.”

In just over two months together, Josh’s good days now out number the bad.

“I still struggle. Don’t get me wrong. Everyday is a battle.

“My wife feels a lot safer going to work, knowing that I have lucky here.



“I don’t go anywhere without him.”

Loud noises and too many people are still too much for Josh to handle. You will only see him in town in the early morning when it’s quiet. But the locals do see him now.

Josh New suffered post traumatic stress disorder when he returned from Afghanistan.

The pair visit the primary school and nursing home, showing off the many tricks Josh has taught him.

This dog can take socks off your feet, open and close cupboards, and even skittle over ten pin bowls with a ball.

“I can’t work. For me it’s about trying to create some self-worth for myself and give me something to do,” he said.

“I joined as a 21-year-old parachute rigger. I’m gutted. That’s the hardest part for me, the fact I had a career, I was a successful soldier, and all of a sudden that was gone.”

This Valentine’s Day, Josh got down on one knee and proposed — again — to Megan.

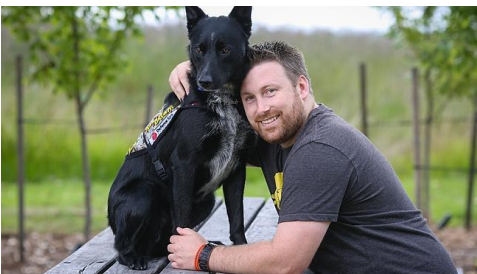
It was his way of saying thank you to the woman who had stood by him through the angry years.

They will renew their vows in October on their 10 year wedding anniversary.

He is working hard at repairing the relationship with his six-year-old son, and the pair go trout fishing. Special daddy time for three-year-old Alyssa is a hot chocolate together in town.

“Knowledge of what a mental illness is gives you strength and understanding,” she said.

“The man I married is not the same person, but that’s OK. I stay because he’s a good person. “He’s a kind and caring person, but he has a lot of struggles.”



And now the Mount Beauty area — a place Josh discovered when he drove up the mountains to end it all — have helped raise almost \$10,000 between its population of 2500 to train the first four dogs.

Josh wants to raise \$37,000 to train 15 dogs, and help keep other families together.

Young Diggers have got more than 100 young veterans waiting for a canine companion.

“I’ve seen so many guys lose their families because of it. If only they were able to get a dog sooner, who knows what could have happened,” he said.

“He’s the missing piece to our family.”

Donate to The Gift of Lucky: The Young Diggers Dog at

<https://www.mycase.com.au/page/87133/thegiftofluckytheyoungdiggersdog>. Anyone needing support can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14.