



To Be Of Service

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ABSTRACT

The documentary film *To Be Of Service*, released in 2019, intricately weaves the narratives of US military veterans who grapple with the emotional scars of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury (MI) and the indispensable role played by the service dogs who help them heal. Through poignant firsthand accounts, these veterans articulate the emotional and physical toll exacted by wartime experiences, revealing a profound sense of brokenness, isolation, and unpreparedness for civilian life. This documentary is a testament to the dedication and sacrifices of military service members and offers an emotional exploration of the profound consequences of war. It illuminates the struggles and triumphs of veterans through the deep connections forged with their loyal service dogs and the transformative impact they have on veterans' quality of life. The financial challenges associated with acquiring a service dog emerge as a pressing issue, underscoring the necessity for heightened public awareness and support for veterans' transitional needs.

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In the emotionally evocative documentary, *To Be Of Service*, director Josh Aronson skillfully unravels the intricate tapestry of US military veterans' lives affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury (MI) and the highly trained service dogs that help them reconnect with their families, friends, and communities. The film intimately explores the less perceptible yet profoundly impactful emotional scars that hinder veterans' reintegration into civilian life. Aronson has made several films that explore the complexity and diversity of the human experience. He is known for his adept storytelling in the documentary genre, offering viewers a glimpse of the extraordinary challenges of the human experience in our diverse society. He brings his expertise to bear on the moving narratives of veterans, many of whom have survived combat.

Approximately 500,000 service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan were diagnosed with PTSD (Reisman, 2016), indicating the need for effective treatment for this potentially debilitating psychiatric disorder (Eth, 2023). PTSD is a mental health condition that may develop in individuals who have undergone or observed traumatic events (Eth, 2023). The impact of such experiences can be emotionally and physically damaging and affect various aspects of mental, physical, social, or spiritual well-being. Conventional treatment for PTSD utilizes psychotherapy and medications to help ease symptoms but can be augmented by pairing veterans with service dogs. *To Be Of Service* does not merely chronicle the struggles of living with the traumatic experiences of war; it also captures the transformative power of the profound connections forged between veterans and their highly trained service dogs. This poignant exploration offers viewers not just a glimpse into the challenges faced by those who have served but is also a compelling testament to resilience, hope, and the unwavering bond between veterans and the dogs that serve them.

This film navigates the historical evidence of PTSD, prevalent in ancient literature and contemporary world history, revealing the enduring toll of war on those who return from combat. Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Air Force veterans invite viewers into the intimate recesses of their lives, sharing stories illuminating the profound changes caused by their combat experiences. The invisible scars of PTSD inflict a heavy emotional burden, leading to feelings of fear, isolation, misery, suicidal thoughts, and challenges in interpersonal relationships. However, amidst the struggles, the film offers a glimpse into the unexpected hope and purpose veterans discover after being paired with a service dog. The symbiotic relationship forged through extensive training becomes a source of unconditional love and mutual dependence, reminiscent of bonds formed during military service.

"*To Be Of Service*" underscores the often overlooked emotional struggle with MI, a profound consequence of engaging in actions conflicting with one's moral beliefs

(Koenig et al., 2019). The film provides a heartrending account of the life-altering impact of MI, as one veteran shares about his wounds not inflicted by combat but by the harrowing atrocities he witnessed. This invisible injury, intertwined with PTSD, can plunge veterans into profound emotional and physical distress, necessitating comprehensive treatment. Service dogs can have a transformative effect by improving veteran functioning, family relationships, and quality of life with their partners (McCall et al., 2020). Veterans paired with these companions exhibit reduced PTSD symptoms, enhanced functionality, and an overall improvement in well-being (Richerson et al., 2023; Shiroff et al., 2023; Woodward et al., 2021). This documentary adeptly showcases how the veterans' relationships with their service dogs become a cornerstone in coping with both PTSD and MI, improving their quality of life, reducing medication dependence, and instilling a sense of hope for the future.

While veterans express a more positive outlook after receiving a service dog, the film candidly addresses the challenges of prioritizing the relationship with the animal over other personal connections. Integrating a service dog into the family unit becomes vital to the veteran's healing, requiring commitment and adaptation. The documentary navigates the evolving dynamics, emphasizing the priority placed on the bond between veteran and animal and the potential adjustments to family structures. It highlights the perseverance of veterans who consistently apply their training, leading to newfound independence and the reclamation of abilities lost before obtaining their service dogs. In essence, *To Be Of Service* is not just a documentary; it is a powerful narrative that encapsulates the multifaceted journey of veterans, shedding light on their struggles, triumphs, and the unyielding resilience found in the profound connections established with their loyal service dogs.

"*To Be Of Service* stands as an emotional testament to the unwavering commitment and sacrifices of military service members. The interviews with veterans reveal their remarkable willingness to share the raw experiences of war and emphasize the profound impact of these experiences on their lives. The film captures the paradox of individuals who, while committed to doing good for others, return home to confront a reality marked by feelings of brokenness, isolation, and unpreparedness for civilian life. The film invites viewers to witness the effects of the shocking atrocities of war that have irrevocably altered the lives of veterans. In doing so, it prompts profound questions about our shared humanity and how one reconciles the dichotomy of good and evil that exists within human beings, especially when confronted with the unspeakable crimes witnessed during combat.

The bravery of these men and women is both sobering and inspiring. They lay bare their darkest and most desperate moments, offering a raw and unfiltered perspective on the toll of war. However, woven into these narratives is a thread

of hope and healing intricately tied to the profound bonds they form with their service dogs. The storytelling becomes a cathartic experience and a medium through which the veterans not only share the trauma they endured but also reflect on how service animals significantly enhance their lives. The film, therefore, becomes not just a cinematic experience but a profound exploration of the human spirit's capacity to find solace and hope, even in the aftermath of the most harrowing experiences.

The toll of war is immeasurable, with its highest cost borne by the brave men and women who selflessly serve to better our world. Despite returning with enduring physical and emotional scars that shape the remainder of their lives, many veterans express a resolute willingness to endure it all again for the greater good. Regrettably, the shadows of emotional pain and suffering can activate suicidal thoughts, as expressed by some of the veterans in the film. A staggering 6,146 cases of suicide were documented in 2020 (US Department of Veterans Affairs & Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, 2022). This alarming reality underscores the urgent need to intensify efforts to support our nation's veterans.

"To Be Of Service" calls attention to the effects of PTSD and MI as well as the burden placed on veterans for the cost of their service dogs. This financial strain has the potential to deprive numerous veterans of the therapeutic benefits that service dogs can provide. I strongly recommend *To Be Of Service* to a broad audience to foster public awareness and support for military veterans needing financial assistance for their service dogs. This documentary sheds light on veterans' challenges and is a compelling advocacy tool. By skillfully weaving personal narratives and expert interviews, the filmmakers successfully emphasize the vital role service dogs play in the lives of veterans. Endorsing and promoting this documentary can contribute to a broader societal understanding of the challenges faced by military veterans and, in turn, encourage government leaders entrusted with decisions regarding the price of war to consider the profound needs of veterans upon their return home. Adequate funding and support are not just moral imperatives; they are the foundation upon which the healing journey of these courageous warriors rests. Only through a collective commitment to understanding, empathy, and tangible action can we, as a society, begin to repay the immeasurable debt owed to those who have sacrificed so much in service to our nation.

NOTE

For more information about the filmmakers, related resources, and scheduling a screening, visit <http://www.tobeofservicefilm.com/>.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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