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Tracy Levesque is a paramedic in Ottawa and the owner and handler of Max, a therapy dog that helps with PTSD.

What it's like ... to train Max, a therapy dog for paramedics

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Max was nine weeks old when I picked him up. I took him away from a litter of five sisters and four brothers, and there was no whining. He was an intelligent, curious, confident puppy. I turned on the radio and he watched me carefully. He watched me roll down the window. If he heard a noise outside, he would look. I knew pretty much on the drive home that he was special.

Before I got him, I hadn't thought of having a therapy dog. When I got home I said to my husband, "I've never done therapy-dog work, but this dog should be doing that."

Therapy dogs have to pass a tough series of tests. They are tested for fear of loud noises. A crowd of people with walkers, canes and wheelchairs will come toward the dog at the same time. Examiners are looking at temperament. If there's any fear or aggression, they automatically fail. They put food on a chair and you have to walk by it a couple of times. The dog can't try to eat it. At no time can you pull on his leash.

A therapy dog has to be more than friendly. A friendly dog can be afraid of buses, not like to be in crowds or not like men as much as women. A friendly dog will take the cookie off the plate. For a therapy dog, it's a combination of obedience, temperament and personality.

During an average day, we'll start the morning with a briefing at headquarters, where there are between 20 and 25 people. I keep Max on the leash if someone in the room doesn't like dogs or is allergic. If not, I ask permission to have him off the leash, and Max works the room. He has some favourites. One medic brings him a banana every morning, another brings him a pretty nice-size milk bone and another gives him rice cakes. If people favour Max, he favours them back.

After the morning debrief we head to the garage. While I do my check, he lies by the car and garage staff, equipment-control people, and janitors come over to say hi. Max has a relationship with almost everyone. Then we head out. Mostly I respond to calls like other paramedics. He's in a clip-in system in the car. When we get a call, it takes 20 seconds to clip him in, and away we go. During the day, if there is no call, I may stop at the emergency department where he's got quite a following among the nurses, doctors and clerks.

If a paramedic has had a tough call, say a child suicide, they can ask for peer support. We have a peer-support team with about 20 members who are available 24/7. In addition, if the paramedics want, they can ask for Max.

While the paramedics do their paperwork after the call, Max goes in the room and chills with them. Or they can play with Max. They can have as much time as they want with him. It's usually 30 to 45 minutes. Then they are ready to talk with one of the peer-support workers, and Max and I go back on the road.

We've had two deaths in the paramedicine service this year. When that happened, Max and I were off the road for two days seeing people as they came in and out at the hospitals and the bases. We have some leeway to react to situations as they come up.

I have been here a long time and people used to tell me about calls that were tough. Now I get very little of that. When I see the medics, it's always about Max. It's interesting how Max has actually protected me from vicarious trauma. When I hear about those calls, obviously I have empathy, but I am usually not directly involved.

Tracy Levesque is a paramedic in Ottawa and the owner and handler of [Max](#), a therapy dog that helps with PTSD.

As told to Andreas Laupacis

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