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Interacting with the General Public

by Veronica Morris, PhD

It often happens that members of the general public ask us questions about our disability or our service dogs. I've found that having some memorized responses handy really helps out. That way you don't have to think each time you are asked a question. From these stock responses you can craft an answer to pretty much any question.

You don't have to answer exactly the same question that the person asks you. They are asking a question because they are interested in service dogs and want to know more. If you answer a slightly different question, they often won't realize that you didn't answer their question. For example, to a whole bunch of questions about service dogs you can respond with a list of various things service dogs can do. Just mention what your service dog does in that list, and you're probably answering their question!

The most important thing to remember is people are not asking questions because they are trying to be mean. Usually they don't know any better and are excited about seeing a service dog. I know it doesn't always feel like that—especially with some of the more intrusive questions. But really people just don't realize what they are doing isn't the nicest way to interact. If you are polite to them, they will be open to learning more about service dogs and the proper etiquette, and therefore nicer to you and other service dogs in the future. They will also be more likely to help you in the future if you have an access challenge or a medical emergency.

Here are some common questions and suggestions for how to handle them.

"What kind of dog is that?"

I always respond to this question with my dog's breed. About half the time people are asking about the breed, and half the time they are asking if it is a service dog. So I start with the more innocuous one first.

"Is that a guide dog?"

If I am in a public access challenge situation (in other words when I am talking with a gatekeeper) I answer "Yes, he is a service dog." They only want to hear the "yes", and then you are politely correcting their language. If it is a member of the general public I say "No, he is a service dog."

"Are you a puppy raiser, or are you training that dog?"

If your dog is a service dog in training, it is fine to say "Yes." You don't have to explain that you are training or raising the dog for yourself. If you are comfortable saying so, you can say "Yes, I'm training him for me."

If you have a full service dog, you can say "No, he's for me" and I find adding "I'm the one with the disability" on the end helps people to get it. If you say the dog is for you, often they are very confused and will ask "What for?". If you add the "I'm the one with a disability" on the end, the disability word usually gets them to remember they're not supposed to ask people about their disabilities.

"What is the dog for?"/"What is your disability?"

If you don't want to reveal anything about your disability, you can respond with a list of things service dogs can do like "Service dogs can help out with many things—they can alert to sounds, seizures, migraines, panic attacks and other mental illness, retrieve dropped items for people with mobility impairments, and so on."

You can also say "I'd rather not discuss my disability" or "He helps with my disability."

If you are comfortable revealing a little more information, if your dog does alert work you can say "My dog warns me before I get sick" or "He is a medical alert dog." If your dog responds to your mental illness, you can say your dog is a medical response dog. If they press for more information, you can say you'd rather not discuss your disability.

Some of us for personal reasons have decided to be more open about our mental illness. I am one of those people, as I find not being ashamed of my mental illness helps others to not be ashamed about it either. Self-acceptance leads to tolerance and acceptance from others. I've now revealed my disability to many people and almost always I get either a neutral or very positive response. My response is "He alerts to my panic attacks and bipolar mood swings". If you have a perception disorder you might say "She is for hallucination discernment." I've been out with a friend when she says this and very rarely does anyone react negatively.

"Do you have seizures/diabetes?"

People seem to have heard of these types of service dogs fairly frequently, as this is a pretty common question. If you don't want to reveal the nature of your disability, you can say "I have something similar where I get sick with no warning." Or you can just say "No", or even respond with the nature of your disability if you feel comfortable doing so.

"You don't look disabled!"

The best response to this is "Thank you" with a smile. If you get defensive when people say this, it rarely turns out to be a good encounter, so keeping it short, sweet, and positive is a great way to get the person to hear what they said and think about it. If you feel like adding anything else you can say "Not all disabilities are visible."

"How long do you get to keep the dog?"

If you have a service dog in training and don't want to reveal anything about your disability you can say "It usually takes about 1–2 years to train a service dog."

If you have a full service dog, you can say "I get to keep him for life!". When I had a retired service dog at home, if I was in a chatty mood I'd usually tell the person that my retired service dog is at home taking a nap. Sometimes I would exaggerate and say she's watching TV or enjoying hogging the couch. People like to hear that the dog stays with you for life.

"What school/program are you with?"

My stock response is "I am training him (or did the training) myself." The flyer I hand out (more on that later) has my trainer's contact information, so I usually direct them to that information if they seem interested in dog training.

If you don't want to reveal that your dog is owner-trained or that you are in the process of owner-training you can say "I hired a wonderful trainer to train her" (yes, you can say this when you yourself are a wonderful trainer!) or "We are working with a wonderful trainer." Or you can say "Service dogs can be trained by many different schools, organizations, private trainers, and even the disabled handler herself!"

Other helpful hints

Something I think a lot of people forget is that not only can you memorize answers to these types of questions, but you can also memorize the body language that goes with them. If you want to get people to go away faster, turn your head away and use body language to make that clear. If you just stand there looking at the person like you expect a response, you will get drawn into a conversation. That's fine if you want it, but if you don't, it's good to practice using your body language to politely tell people that the conversation isn't going to be a long one. It's best to role play using these answers and various types of body language with a friend or family member so that this sort of stuff becomes second nature. You can also hang out with other SD teams in your area and watch how they interact with the general public.

The thing that has been the most helpful to me in interacting with the general public has been the creation of a flyer about my service dog. Whenever anyone asks pretty much any question about my dog, I offer them a flyer. The flyer has information on service dog etiquette as well as information about my service dog. I have saved Sabrina's flyer which I made when I was not comfortable revealing my disability to anyone. You can see it here:

<https://app.box.com/shared/qe956unssp>

I also have Ollie's flyer, in which I reveal my diagnosis to anyone who reads the flyer. You can see it here:

<http://www.box.net/shared/gtqqmk084x>

There are lots of flyers online. PSDP has a FAQ flyer (link below), and many [other flyers](#) are available. Many

members of our listserv have created flyers of their own, too.

[2015 PSDP flyer](#)

One final point is that sometimes you are stuck somewhere with people around who are really interested in your service dog. This happens to me frequently when in the train station, for example. If people keep asking you questions and you are not in the mood to interact with people, you can do a quick run-through of your tricks. It is a good way to sort-of interact with other people while not doing so directly. It also keeps you focused on your dog, which reduces anxiety for me, and can show people some of the cool things service dogs can do. I often have Ollie pick up his leash and/or a flyer. I have him shake my feet or hands, do fun turns where he swings his bum around while keeping his front end still, have him lift his feet when I lift my feet, do leg weaves, etc. Then when my train comes I hop on and tell people "goodbye" (this is very important so they don't then sit next to you!) as I find an empty seat.

I hope this helps, and please don't hesitate to contact PSDP if you would like to learn more!

Psychiatric Service Dogs Partners' purpose is to promote the mental health of people using service dogs for psychiatric disabilities by educating, advocating, providing expertise, facilitating peer support, and promoting responsible service dog training and handling.

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