



## **TRANSITIONING TO A NEW PILOT DOG**

Transitioning to a successor Pilot Dog can be an emotional, exciting, and at times, difficult adjustment. This lesson includes:

- Everyone's experience of this transition is different
- Stages of grief and loss
- How training may differ from your previous experiences

### **Everyone's Experience of Transition is Different**

Regardless of how many previous dogs you have had, you will go through some form of transition. Your previous dog may have served many roles in your life; he was a companion, was there for you at all hours of the day, and represented independence.

Every individual's transition from one dog to another is a different experience. You may have retired your dog due to old age, a medical condition, a change in pace, or for a multitude of other reasons. You have had to make decisions about whether to return your dog, give your dog to another individual, or you may have experienced your dog passing away. The transition to a successor dog can generate many questions and emotions. For example:

- How will my previous dog adjust to my successor dog?
- What if I call my successor dog by my previous dog's name?
- Will my previous dog feel guilty or sad when I bring the successor dog home?
- Why doesn't my successor dog act the same way as my retired dog?

These are questions that you may ask yourself before and during your transition. Dogs are animals that live in the present moment; they do not experience emotions the way that humans experience emotions. If you call your successor dog by the wrong name, he will not think poorly of you. If you are transitioning your previous dog into retirement, the dog may become excited when you get out the harness for your successor dog; however, this does not mean your previous dog is jealous of your successor dog. Pilot Dogs instructors and staff members can discuss any concerns you have, but they cannot fully understand the experience that you

are going through. It may be very helpful to discuss your experiences with your fellow graduates.

### **Stages of Grief and Loss**

You may already be familiar with the five stages of grief developed by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. During your transition, you may identify with one or more of these stages. They are not experienced in any particular order, and it is possible to revisit different stages as well. The five stages and ways they may be experienced are:

- Denial - Denying or not recognizing the need to retire your dog
- Anger - Frustration with the experience of retiring a dog
- Bargaining - Asking yourself questions such as, “What if I had taken him to the vet sooner?”
- Depression - Sadness over your loss
- Acceptance - Coping with the loss of the relationship with your dog as part of your life

Coming to Pilot Dogs or meeting your successor dog may bring back some emotions that you felt you had already processed. This is a natural part of your transition.

### **How Training May Differ from Your Previous Experiences**

You may have gotten to the point with your previous dog where you felt your work was automatic. You felt as though your dog could “read your mind.” This can make the transition to your successor dog challenging and emotional. You may compare your successor dog to your former dog, which is a natural part of the process. Each dog is an individual, and they each have their own unique characteristics.

The training processes, commands, and procedures may have changed since your last training. Your instructor will teach you the specific methods used to train your successor dog. It is important to maintain consistency with this training when developing a new, unique relationship with your dog. Your dedication, effort, and patience will help you and your successor dog become a seasoned team within 6 months to a year.