WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. (WLFI) – Jody Mitchell-Heath takes her service dog Ella almost everywhere she goes. Before Ella there was Fin, but he’s retired now.

“They will maul me just try to bring me back down to where I’m more focused on them and more grounded,” Mitchell-Heath said.

Mitchell-Heath has post traumatic stress disorder and hearing loss after serving in the military. She said her PTSD can be triggered no matter where she is, and it’s good to have her dog by her side.
“Just seeing Taps on TV, or if I'm flipping through the channels and see the reality show about Afghanistan,” Mitchell-Heath said of some things that will trigger her PTSD.

There's been little research on dogs and their effect on veterans with PTSD like Mitchell-Heath. Purdue Assistant Professor Dr. Marguerite O’Haire received a one-year grant in April to lead a study on the subject.

“You hear every now and again of wonderful stories, but there hasn’t actually been any systematic study where we look at, are [veterans’] physiological stress levels lower, are their standardized measures of their symptoms reducing when they have their dog,” O’Haire said. “Things that make the difference for insurance and make the difference for health care actually haven’t been studied.”

O’Haire is focusing on post 9/11 veterans with PTSD or a traumatic brain injury. She said veterans have told her how they think the dogs help them, so that's what she will study.

“Some suggested areas are less nightmares, less symptomatology of PTSD, more social connections, less social anxieties,” O’Haire said. “There are a number of areas we're looking at, and we chose those areas because people think this is where the changes are.”

Mitchell-Heath knows how her service dogs have helped her. She hopes this study can help more people get the care she has.

O’Haire expects to have her report done by the spring of 2016.