Like many people in Uganda, Charles Watmon has difficulty living with the things he saw and did as a soldier. An unexpected friend now helps him shoulder the burden. That friend’s name is Ogen Rwot and she is a cute, friendly, caramel-colored dog. For a decade, Watmon fought on both sides of Uganda’s civil wars, first for the Lord’s Resistance Army, then for the Ugandan government. The experience was traumatic. To make matters worse, he learned that he was HIV positive toward the end of his time in the military, and soon lost his wife and his two children to AIDS. After the war ended, he suffered flashbacks and panic attacks. He even thought about suicide. Then he met Ogen Rwot, whose name means “Trust in the Lord.” She is a therapy dog, but Watmon sees her as more of a sister. She came to him from the Comfort Dog Project in northern Uganda where 7 out of every 10 people have been traumatically affected by war. The project is the brainchild of Francis Okello Oloya. Oloya was blinded for life when, at 12 years of age, he hit an unexploded bomb with his garden hoe, sending pieces of wood and metal into his eyes. He attended a boarding school where he had difficulty with many things. He especially hated having to ask his peers for help doing simple things like visiting the bathroom. That’s why he was so grateful when, in a miraculous turn of events, the school’s guard dogs began leading him to the bathroom instead. He formed a strong bond with them and now wants to help others in the war-torn area to do the same. Service dogs are common in many countries, but in Uganda, the animals are primarily used as guards. Most people fear dogs and would never invite a dog to sleep in their bed like Watmon does. They are seldom kept as pets, and almost never used for therapy. Watmon is one of a small but growing number of Ugandans who are being healed by these therapy dogs. According to research, dogs are good for our health. One study found that people over 65 who have a dog as a pet visit the doctor 30 percent less often than those who do not. Dogs also have been shown to reduce depression, PTSD symptoms, and anxiety. Another study found that dogs and humans merely looking into each other’s eyes caused the level of oxytocin, the “feel-good hormone”, to rise. And it didn’t just rise in the human research subjects. The dogs also showed higher levels of oxytocin, which suggests the healing relationship between dogs and humans is a two-way street.

Topher Brophy described himself as a self-absorbed narcissist. He played competitive sports obsessively to keep his mind off of his empty life. Then one day, Brophy hurt his back. Suddenly, he was forced to slow down and take a good hard look at his life. That is when it dawned on him – he only cared about himself. He decided he needed something to care for. He got himself a shaggy brown dog named Rosenberg. Suddenly, his focus shifted from himself to Rosenberg and his life began to take on new meaning. He brought Rosenberg with him everywhere. People often said that the two had an uncanny resemblance. Brophy thought it would be funny to see people’s reactions if he dressed Rosenberg in an outfit that matched his own. People loved seeing the two of them dressed like twins. And Brophy loved seeing that he was making other people happy. He took a few photos of himself and Rosenberg in matching outfits and posted them on the Internet. People went wild for the photos. He has nearly 200,000 followers on Instagram and he’s made a career out of posting photos of himself and his dog dressed alike. Brophy and Rosenberg aren’t the only human/dog couple that looks alike. Psychologists say that people are naturally drawn toward things that are similar to them. For this reason, many choose dogs that look like they do. The close bond between people and dogs originally started with wolves. The common belief is that one day, a hunter-gatherer found some wolf puppies and adopted them. Over time, humans used the wolves to help them hunt. So, humans kept the wolves around until they eventually evolved into dogs. However, some researchers now argue that humans didn’t domesticate wolves. Rather, it was the wolves who first approached humans. Bold and aggressive wolves who came close to humans would have been killed. But, the ones that were bold and friendly were tolerated. Over time, these friendly wolves started to look and act differently from their wild cousins. They became skillful at reading human gestures. And of course, living with humans gave the wolves a more constant food supply, something wild wolves had to work much harder to get. For humans, their new canine companions proved valuable. The wolves gave them a leg up during a hunt. They also served as a warning system, barking at strangers from other tribes. And they defended humans from large predators, like bears and mountain lions. It was a win-win situation for both species. So rather than humans adopting wolf puppies, perhaps it was the wolves that adopted us. And that makes us wonder: was it Brophy that adopted Rosenberg, or the other way around?