Support for Bereaved Owners of Pets

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**TOPIC.** The bond that exists between people and their pets and its impact on physical and mental health.

**PURPOSE.** To review the current literature and explore the clinical implications of bereavement related to pets.

**SOURCES.** A comprehensive review of the bereavement, veterinarian, and agricultural literature related to attitudes and response patterns to pet and animal death.

**CONCLUSIONS.** The death or loss of a beloved pet can be a life-changing event.

**Search terms:** Bereavement and pet owners

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It is important to provide an environment of acceptance and understanding for bereaved pet owners to enhance efforts toward adaptive grief and bereavement and promote adaptive coping and reinvestment in life.

The bond that exists between people and their pets can have subsequent impact on physical and mental health (Jaroleman, 1998; Kellehear, 1997; Quackenbush, 1985; Stallones, 1994; Stephens & Hill, 1993). The loss or death of a cherished pet creates a grief reaction that is in many ways comparable to that of the loss of a family member. The need for attachment is common to both humans and animals. It is a multifaceted drive that begins with infant bonding and becomes more diversified and generalized throughout the lifespan. It has become clear that humans and their pets are significant attachment figures for each other (Cowles, 1980; Jaroleman; Meyers, 2000; Ryneearson, 1978). Professionally, however, this fact has yet to be integrated into protocols for grief and bereavement.

The 1990s reflected a significant increase in pets as "dependents of choice," with more than 60% of homes in the United States reporting animal companions (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992); families spent more than $8.5 billion annually on pet food (Mogelonsky, 1995) and more than $5 billion a year on veterinary services (Crispell, 1991). Additionally, family pets take on a role and personality of their own within the family structure and are sorely missed and grieved when they go missing or their life otherwise ends. Companion animals provide support, love, and loyalty, which may be beyond empirical measure.

Because of these immense contributions, the death, loss, or theft of a beloved animal results in the end of a special relationship and can be one of the most difficult times in a person's life (Stephens & Hill, 1993; Tufts
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University, 2002; University of California, Davis, 2002). The contemporary era has seen an increase in families who choose not to have children, and in individuals who reject conventional intimacy but embrace deep relationships with the animals they care for. Frequently, the “dependents” in these family units are dogs, cats, and other domesticated animals.

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Unfortunately, the loss of a pet is not recognized consistently by friends, acquaintances, or colleagues as a significant or authentic occasion for bereavement. Despite the critical role that pets represent in the lives of so many, few studies have examined the impact of the bereavement process on the life of the owner of a pet that is missing or found dead.

This article examines the current literature surrounding the concept of bereavement related to pets that are missing or found dead, explores the clinical implications of such bereavement, and suggests therapeutic strategies for providing support and assistance to the bereaved.

Case Study

Rick, a 40-year-old male, arrived home after a grueling day at work. As he walked into the house, his sixth sense told him something was wrong. However, looking around the house, he could not seem to grasp what was amiss. As his dog, Bo, greeted him with an unusual whimper, Rick realized that Bo should not be greeting him at the door at all because he and Annie, the other dog in the family, were kept behind a gate in the kitchen, which was their “house” during the day.

Rick suddenly realized that Annie, the usual jumper and tail-wagger, was not greeting him. Another survey of the kitchen revealed glass everywhere from the shattered double-paned window—jagged shards all over the blanket on which Bo and Annie would relax during the day. A simple rock had caused this destruction and provided entry for unknown aggressors. Panic-stricken, Rick began running through the house, calling for Annie, worried that she might be injured, locked in a closet, or worse, dead. As tears streamed down his face, accompanied by shortness of breath from panic, Rick reached the dreadful determination that Annie was gone: the apparent target of an unusual string of recent dog robberies in the town where they lived. Annie, apparently wrapped in the blanket from her own bed, was stolen and taken to another home.

For Rick, the next 48 hours were filled with inconsolable grief, crying jags, and several episodes of exhaustion, collapsing onto the floor. Still, there was no relief for this devastated pet owner—the “dad” of Annie, the man who should have protected his “little girl” from such a horrific circumstance. The guilt, the what-ifs of second guessing, and thoughts of how to even begin to live in a house with constant reminders of his lost pet were enough virtually to drive this otherwise educated and professional man to the brink of madness.

Pets Missing or Found Dead

The untimely death or disappearance of a pet can be disturbing, particularly under tragic circumstances (killed by a vehicle, killed by another animal, abuse/violence, stolen, or missing). It can prompt tremendous guilt (“What did I or did I not do that could have prevented the death or loss of my pet?”) and intensify the disorientation related to the grieving process.

When a pet is missing, the conundrum of interrupted grief can ensue. What is the appropriate length of time before an owner decides that the beloved pet must be dead? Is it better to hope the pet is alive and with someone else or does this provide fear that the pet will be mistreated or abused in that other location?
A review of the scholarly literature reflects that grief reactions following the disappearance or death of a cherished pet have been noted in the media, explored in case studies by psychiatrists (Keddie, 1977), and documented via surveys of veterinarians’ offices (Stuart, Thrush, & Rickus, 1989) and by experienced therapists who provide grief counseling (Carmack, 1985; Sharkin & Bahrick, 1990; Weissman, 1990-1991). The loss of a pet, whether the pet is missing or found dead, can have a significant impact on an individual or a family (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Gosse, 1994; Stephens & Hill, 1993; Tufts University, 2002; University of California, Davis, 2002).

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However, despite these anecdotal reports, there remains a paucity of research related to grief reactions after the death of a pet, and even less literature surrounding the issue of grief after the disappearance or loss of a pet (Adams, Bonnett, & Meek, 2000; Archer & Winchester, 1994). This gap suggests the reinforcement of the societal bent toward trivializing bereavement of an animal. However, since grief surrounding a pet missing or found dead is significant and affects people severely, it is an area in which healthcare and counseling professionals will be challenged to provide comprehensive assessment and intervention.

Each pet represents a different role and level of loss to each family. Based on the age of the animal, the nature and intensity of the relationship with each family member, and the circumstances of the death, grief reactions may vary widely.

The grief process can be further complicated and intensified by the nature of the circumstances surrounding the loss of a pet. Did the pet owners find their pet dead? in the final stages of death? suffering? Did the pet owners have to make the decision to euthanize the beloved pet? Many people refer to this as putting a pet “to sleep.” This terminology is suggestive of the denial that can be related to having to end the life of a cherished companion. Moreover, it opens up many opportunities for guilt (“Did I do the right thing?”) and second-guessing (“Was it time? Did I make the decision too quickly or did I wait too long? Did my pet suffer? Did my pet suffer because I was unable to let go?”). In other circumstances, when a pet is stolen by a stranger or by an angry partner, there may be old, underlying trauma that compounds the loss with exacerbated affective symptoms in the bereaved.

For example, Alfred returned to his car in a shopping center parking lot to discover that someone had broken into the car and stolen his beautiful Labrador retriever. Afterward, Alfred was so distraught, he consistently and mistakenly referred to the missing dog by the name of his adoptive mother, who took him in after his mother abandoned him. Alfred was going through a crisis at the time of the theft, trying to come to terms with having been given up for adoption, despite knowing his birth mother and her other children. Having this female pet stolen away without warning clearly affected Alfred profoundly and on many levels.

Promoting Adaptive Grief and Bereavement

During interactions with the bereaved pet owner, sensitivity and normalization are of utmost importance in establishing a therapeutic relationship. Regardless of the therapist’s views or beliefs, statements such as “since it was a cat/dog,” or any minimization of the severity of the loss in the light of the decedent being an animal vs. a human can be catastrophic and damaging. The lack of a social and professional sanction for the bereavement of a pet’s loss can complicate or derail grief and adaptive coping.

The first and most important step in providing care and support to the bereaved owner of a lost pet is providing a foundation of acceptance and normalization for
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experiencing significant grief and loss issues related to an animal. This may give the bereaved license to explore the emotional significance of the bond they shared, thereby initiating some of the difficult yet necessary work of integrating a loss. Unfortunately, many bereaved owners may be fearful of embarrassment or rejection for feeling such overwhelming loss when it was “just” a dog or a cat.

In a 1984 study, Quackenbush and Glickman conducted retrospective interviews with owners to examine their reactions to the serious illness or death of their pet. Results reflected a significant impact on the pet owners. Ninety-three percent reported some disruption in their daily routines; sleep and dietary patterns became erratic; nightmares were predominant; and, overall, social activities diminished for 70% of those surveyed. This was described as staying at home more often, talking less, isolating themselves from other people, and spending a great deal of time thinking about and longing for their deceased or missing pet. Forty-five percent of study subjects missed from 1 to 3 days of work, using sick days or vacation time, and they complained about their colleagues’ insensitivity to their feelings. Uncontrollable crying, talking mournfully to the dead animal, and panic related to accepting the reality of the loss, are typical reactions of bereaved pet owners (Adams et al., 2000; Jaroleman, 1998; Quackenbush & Glickman, Meyers, 2000). Reactions can range from total denial of their pet’s death to a sad acceptance that their “friend” was no longer in pain (Stephens & Hill, 1993).

Guilt is often a prevailing factor, since many bereaved pet owners feel they have failed to do something to protect or prevent such an untimely death or loss. In general, it is clear that the behavior of pet owners at the time of their animals’ death appears to mimic in many ways the stages or phases that have been described as characteristic of bereavement after human death (Clements, 2001; Clements, Benasutti, & Henry, 2001; Clements & Henry, 2001, 2002; DeRanieri, Clements, & Henry, 2002; Doka, 1989; Kübler-Ross, 1980; Meyers, 2000). Interventions are usually geared toward solving the immediate or persistent problems occurring in a bereaved owner’s life as a result of the death of their animal. The loss or death of a pet, and the surrounding traumatic events, can unbalance existing social roles and family relationships, and can result in the disruption of dyadic relationships between the owner and other significant people (spouse, children, and colleagues). If one applies Averill’s (1968) concept that grief and mourning are concurrent and interactive processes, the bereavement following a pet’s death appears to represent a behavioral manifestation of the disequilibrium in the social system composed of owner and animal.

It is important for the therapist to provide not only support but also education about the grief process to let the bereaved know that the shock, numbness, searching, yearning, and disorientation are all appropriate and necessary parts of the grieving process, and that maybe this can lead to reorganization, which involves returning to a “normal life” without the presence of the pet. Although the memory never goes away, and there may always be some level of sadness, there can come a time when it is decreasingly painful when the deceased pet is discussed or thought about. Concentration returns, and sleep and dietary patterns begin to normalize.

Specific Interventions

Interventions should be geared toward acceptance of the loss, understanding the changes that have occurred as a result of the loss, and exploration and identification of adaptive methods of reinvesting in life without the lost pet. The following interventions can provide a sense of closure and offer a way to “give back” to the pet community while enhancing the lives of other animals in memory of the owner’s lost pet.

- Obtain a “wish list” from a local animal shelter. Invite friends and family to a gathering, and ask each person to bring at least one item on the wish list. (This is also an opportunity to surround oneself with support or to memorialize the deceased pet). Donate these items to the shelter in memory of the deceased pet.
- Plant a tree or flower garden in memory of the deceased pet. This is a living memorial to the animal.
Write a letter expressing not only feelings related to the loss, but also all the thoughts and feelings related to life with the beloved companion, including the funny stories, the moments the pet understood when no one else did, the times of sadness and pain, the times the pet simply sat quietly and lovingly by one’s side, and the times when the pet knew the owner was sick and nursed him/her back to health in its own special way. This is also an opportunity to express gratitude for all the beauty these incredible friends bring to one’s life.

Volunteer at the local animal shelter.

When ready, adopt another pet from the local animal shelter. The unconditional love and joy pets bring to people are immeasurable. This also gives an animal a second chance at life.

Write in a stream-of-consciousness style about your life with the pet. Allow unedited, uncensored expression.

Before going to sleep at night, admire a photograph of the beloved pet and ask for a dream in which to say a proper farewell. Record your dreams until you’ve experienced one that is satisfying.

If inclined toward group work, join a support group for humans coping with animal loss.

Hold a memorial for the pet and invite the animal friends of the deceased. Feed them all special food to mark the occasion.

Gather memories of the animal from other humans in the pet’s life, and create a scrapbook with photos and stories.

Conclusion

The death or loss of a beloved pet can be a life-changing event. The impact will vary for owners across a wide continuum of response patterns. However, these responses are often similar to those occurring after the loss of a human family member or companion. It is important to provide an environment of acceptance and understanding for bereaved pet owners to enhance efforts toward adaptive grief and bereavement and promote adaptive coping and reinvestment in life.

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References


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