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# Grief for pets – Part 1: Overview and some false assumptions

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**ABSTRACT:** Dealing with clients' distress, especially at euthanasia, is a significant stressor for many veterinary nurses. However, few have had formal training in how pet loss affects clients, and how best to communicate with grieving clients. Moreover, many veterinary practices do not take a comprehensive approach to client care during animals' end-of-life phase. This article provides an overview of grief for pets and critiques some popular assumptions. A second article will outline practical ways to support clients.

## Introduction

In my experience at first-opinion, companion practices, veterinary personnel perform and assist with euthanasia approximately twice per full-time vet per week. Thus, excluding the animals that die naturally while in our care or are dead on arrival, veterinary nurses probably encounter at least 100 patient deaths annually. In addition to coping with their personal feelings at those times, nurses must often support bereaved owners.

Dealing with distressed clients, especially at euthanasia, is stressful. Many veterinary nurses feel this especially, because they have often formed a bond with the animal through nursing them. Moreover, they are often expected to provide what could be described as technical support in the euthanasia process and then to return to their many other tasks without time to debrief. If the workplace is not generally supportive, those demands are likely to contribute to compassion fatigue (Black, Winefield & Chur-Hansen 2011).

The bereaved clients are of course suffering too. It seems likely that similar numbers of people are newly mourning an animal companion as are newly mourning a close human companion – some two million a year in each case (Hewson, submitted). As with human bereavement (Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe

2007; SECOB 2013), there are probably socio-economic costs arising from pet bereavement because some owners take time off work (Burne-Jones 2013) or suffer health consequences (Peacock, Chur-Hansen & Winefield 2012; Watters, Ruff & Weyer Jamora 2013).

This article provides a brief overview of grief for pets and critiques some assumptions about clients' grief.

## Introduction to grief

Grief arises when a strong attachment bond is broken, typically by death but also when a pet disappears or must be relinquished. The attachment is more than emotional. It is a psychological bond that develops because the animal provides benefits similar to those of close human relationships, i.e. a sense of comfort and security, and reliable affection (Adams, Bonnett & Meek 1999; Sable 2013).

When the bond is broken – or, in some cases, when a person learns that the bond will soon be broken (e.g. in the case of pets with a terminal illness) – the person experiences behavioural, social, psychological and emotional reactions, known collectively as grief (Casarett, Kutner & Abrahm 2001). While often very distressing, these reactions are spontaneous, normal and, usually, adaptive.

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### Anticipatory grief

Grief that begins while the animal is still alive is called *anticipatory grief* (Dawson 2010; Shanan 2011). Like grief generally, anticipatory grief can make the present seem unreal. That may lead some clients to withhold consent for timely euthanasia. Such cases are extremely stressful for many vets (Batchelor & McKeegan 2012) and for nurses who often have more contact with the suffering animals (if in-patients). Those situations may be avoided if vets and nurses know how to name and normalise anticipatory grief to clients (to be discussed in Part 2).

### The course of grief

Whether it starts in advance of loss or afterwards, grief does not occur in neat emotional stages. It is better understood as a process by which the bereaved comes to accept the absence of the individual concerned, and adapts to life without them. The associated feelings (e.g. numbness, guilt, anger) typically recur until adaptation has occurred (La Jeunesse 2012). It is normal for some clients to maintain a psychological bond with a dead pet (e.g. through photographs and rituals) and, in many cases, this may be comforting to them (Dawson 2010; Packman, Carmack & Ronen 2012).

As with human bereavement (Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe 2005), most grieving clients probably adapt without the need for expert intervention. However, it seems likely that some 10% may experience a prolonged grief reaction with maladaptive coping behaviours and adverse health reactions (Adrian, Deliramich & Frueh 2009). This is known as *complicated grief* and affects about 10% of those mourning a human bereavement (McCallum & Bryant 2013).

### Difficulties faced by grieving clients

Although grief following human and pet bereavements is broadly similar (Adams *et al.* 1999; La Jeunesse 2012), our grieving clients face four particular difficulties:

1. **Lack of societal support:** There is no collective support for expressing grief for a dead pet. This is true of some other deaths, such as miscarriage, and grief in such cases is termed 'disenfranchised' because it has no

socially accepted outlet, such as a funeral service (Adams *et al.* 1999; Chur-Hansen 2010). The reasons for this, in the case of pet loss (Hewson, submitted), include lack of agreement about the value of animal life (Fraser 2008) and societal unease about death and grief generally.

2. **Guilt following euthanasia:** Around 50% of owners who have their animals euthanased are likely to feel guilt for this (Adams, Bonnett & Meek 2000; Morris 2012), and empirical evidence suggests that the actual percentage may be higher. Contributing factors include doubt over whether euthanasia was the right decision, and how the veterinary surgeon (or nurse, potentially) broke the bad news (Adams *et al.* 2000; Shaw & Lagoni 2007; Dawson 2010).
3. **Animals that are a link to other significant relationships or experiences:** An animal's death may trigger added grief for a deceased family member (e.g. spouse, child), or from previous, painful events, such as childhood sexual abuse (Taylor & Breen 2013).
4. **Frequency of bereavement:** Because most companion animal species have much shorter lifespans than we do, their owners experience grief and bereavement relatively frequently.

The above factors may make a client's grief seem like an over-reaction. This can make others uncomfortable, in part because of societal unease around strong displays of feeling. The result may be trivialising remarks ('It was only a dog!', 'Why don't you just get another one?') (Morley & Fook 2005; Burne-Jones 2013), creating further distress. Fear of this leads some bereaved clients to take time off work (Burne-Jones 2013) or to become socially isolated.

Without professional training, and clients' consent, it is impossible to know all the factors that explain a client's grief, or what their particular grief-support needs might be. It is also unethical to presume about them (Relf, Machin & Archer 2010), in part because, despite our experience and intuition, we lack the training and tools to assess clients correctly. However, an understanding of factors that are within the purview of a practice (e.g. how to break bad news) can help minimise their potential adverse contribution to a client's grief (Adams *et al.* 2000; Shaw & Lagoni 2007).

### Factors affecting grief for pets

In addition to the particular difficulties that pet owners face, their grief is shaped by personal and demographic factors and situational factors.

#### Personal and demographic factors

Personal and demographic factors are largely beyond our influence. Examples include personality (Lee & Surething 2013), attachment style (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer & Shaver 2011), social support, age and styles of response to loss (Relf, Machin & Archer 2010).

#### Situational factors

Situational factors include how bad news is broken – whether personnel, especially the vet, spoke words of comfort and validation (Adams *et al.* 2000; Shaw & Lagoni 2007) – and the circumstances of the death.

When an animal dies a sudden or unexpected death (e.g. pulmonary thromboembolism, animal attacks, road accidents, anaesthetic incidents), we often have had no opportunity to prepare the owner. We may also have little time to spend with them because the cases are emergencies that have to be fitted in. However, grief following a natural death is no less painful than that following a euthanasia and may be worse in many emergency cases, especially if the death was accidental (Adams *et al.* 2000; McCutcheon & Fleming 2001; Planchon *et al.* 2002). It is as important to support those clients, therefore, as to support clients whose animals we euthanase. Failure to do so may create an avoidable further burden for the grieving owner. A later article will introduce ways to minimise the adverse effects of situational factors on clients' grief.

### Assumptions about clients' grief

Having outlined why clients grieve, this article concludes by critiquing some common assumptions.

Due to insufficient training and over-reliance on experience and intuition, it is natural to make assumptions about our clients' grief or support needs. However, in many cases the assumptions are unfounded.

For example:

- **Emotional disclosure/counselling:** Some veterinary practices emphasise helplines and counselling, and these can be assumed to be the best approaches. However, bereaved clients who have a controlled response to loss – focused on keeping feelings under control and continuing to act normally – may be particularly unlikely to want to discuss their experience (Relf *et al.* 2010). Veterinary practices that use this approach across the board may be under-serving this client cohort, who may be more likely to use and benefit from a written guide to grief with information about self-help resources (Relf *et al.* 2010). Moreover, while talking may help assuage owners' distress in the moment, a critical review of human bereavement research found no evidence that 'emotional disclosure facilitates adjustment to loss in normal bereavement' or has any value if used as a routine, universal intervention (Stroebe *et al.* 2005). Research is needed to elucidate the benefits and best role of counselling for grieving pet owners.
- **Social support:** It is natural to assume that, if someone is living with others, they are better placed to cope with pet loss than those living alone. However, this does not necessarily follow. Carmack (1985) found pet loss was disruptive to families, and researchers in human bereavement note that others in the household will also be coming to terms with the death and they may not, therefore, be able to support each other (Stroebe *et al.* 2005). Moreover, in veterinary practice, we often do not see all the family members who may be affected by an animal's death. They may have a different coping style from the representative who visits us, and have mixed emotions towards each other in regard to the pet. All this may make the death harder for some of them to cope with than if they lived alone.
- **Elderly vs. younger pet owner:** Another example is the assumption that the elderly bereaved pet owner may cope less well than a younger one, especially if the older person lives alone. A retrospective study of 103 bereaved owners in Canada found that 'younger owners experienced significantly greater anger/hostility and despair than

elderly owners' (McCutcheon & Fleming 2001).

- **'I know my clients and they don't all need mention of grief or grief support':** It is true that most clients will come to terms with the death of their pet. However, typically, we know little of their lives as a whole or what other grief a pet's death may trigger. Thus we cannot tell how a given death will affect them.

An example, to my knowledge, was someone who had had many animal companions euthanased but, in the most recent case, the animal was her last link to her deceased spouse and had subsequently helped her to cope with cancer. Family members indicated that this client was not expecting to be so distressed (neither were they expecting this of her) but had indicated that she would never disclose that or her earlier history to her veterinary practice or ask for support. However, the family members felt that she might have accepted information about grieving and a list of different support resources. Apparently those had not been offered and neither had there been any outreach in the weeks since the animal had been euthanased.

The apparent management of that last case is common, in my experience. It falls short of this National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommendation to medical personnel after human bereavement: 'Family members and carers should be made aware of, and have easy access to, sources of local information, advice and support *designed to meet their own needs*' (my italics) (NICE 2004). That report likewise noted that many bereaved people 'have virtually no contact with professionals, leading to professionals making erroneous assumptions about their coping and often leaving families and carers unaware of additional resources, services or sources of support' (NICE 2004). The same probably applies in veterinary practices, where personnel assume that 'we know our clients'. It is therefore important to ensure that every client is offered information about the diverse resources now available, so that each can decide which one is right for them, as can their family members.

### Concluding remarks

This article has provided a brief summary of the complexity of grief for pets, and

highlighted some assumptions about bereaved clients. While most will adapt to the loss of their pet, normalisation and practical guidance from us are important so that our clients do not suffer unnecessarily. We cannot tell accurately who would benefit from particular support unless we have assessed their coping style and risk factors (Chur-Hansen 2010; Relf *et al.* 2010).

However, we are not human healthcare professionals and there are no valid grief assessment tools for assessing the support needs of grieving owners. Thus, a pragmatic approach in line with NICE (2004) is to provide full information to each bereaved client at the outset. The goal here would be to validate their grief, 'signpost' them through it, and ensure they and family members know of the wide range of support resources available.

The second article in this series will outline the practicalities of managing this and other situational factors so as to support grieving clients without risking compassion fatigue. [vni](#)

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## NEWS REVIEW by Jean Turner

### Interest in Scottie dogs skyrocket!



▲ Kennel Club Picture Library / Nick Ridley

Interest in Scottish Terriers, the breed which made a starring appearance in the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony in Glasgow in July, increased dramatically in just one day, with searches for the breed on the Kennel Club's Find a Puppy service going up nearly sevenfold in 24 hours. Online searches for puppies of the native Scottish breed increased from 93 on Tuesday 22 July to 607 on Wednesday 23 July. This figure is dramatically higher than on the same date last year, which saw only 80 searches for the breed.

Caroline Kisko, Kennel Club Secretary, said:

*Despite its charm and lovely nature, the Scottish Terrier is one of the lesser-known breeds of pedigree dog, with only 339 puppies being registered with the Kennel Club in the first half of 2014. If you compare this with a more popular breed, such as the Labrador, which had nearly 18,000 puppy registrations in the first half of the year, you can see*

*how much some breeds are suffering simply because people don't know they exist. We are glad that the interest in the breed has been so tremendous, both on social media and the Find a Puppy service, and we hope that they continue to keep the nation's attention.*

The Scottish Terrier, like many native British breeds of dog, has seen a decline in popularity over the past ten years as more people choose so-called 'handbag dogs', such as the Chihuahua, and more exotic, foreign breeds such as the Pug and French Bulldog, which are surging in popularity.

Those wishing to find out more about the breed can visit the Breed Information Centre on the Kennel Club website ([www.thekennelclub.org.uk](http://www.thekennelclub.org.uk)) or come along to Discover Dogs in London on 8–9 November to meet the Scottish Terriers and find space to experts about the breed. Visit [www.discoverdogs.org.uk](http://www.discoverdogs.org.uk) for more information.