

Inside Trauma



A word from the editor

The loss of a pet is often met with intense grief. It is normal to feel the stages of grief, as one would feel if it were someone they considered a loved one. Many pets become constants in one's life; therefore, the loss of a pet means the loss of a source of comfort, companionship, joy and unconditional love.

Often, one's sense of loss and pain is downplayed by others who do not have any pets. It is important not let anyone dictate your feelings regarding your pain over the loss of your companion. It is normal to feel pain, so don't deny yourself the pain, anger and guilt you may feel.

This summer edition of the Newsletter further discusses the challenges one may face after the loss of a pet. This will give you an insight into those natural responses one may feel after the death of a pet, and how to cope with one's grief.

Alana Sumic
Editor

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Grieving the traumatic loss of a pet

More than 5 million households in Australia have a pet however, despite treating them as a member of the family, our society doesn't have defined acceptable means for mourning them. As such, many people have reported not feeling comfortable to take time off work even though they felt they needed it. Losing an animal is a type of disenfranchised grief that is too often borne

in silence, which impedes the natural healing process and prolongs the grief response. Losing a pet may come from old age, however, it can be more traumatic



such as: a sudden car accident, violently killed by another animal - or worse by a human, witnessing the attack in progress and being unable to help, an incurable illness, or the owner has to make the difficult decision to euthanize their pet to end its suffering.

If the death was sudden and violent, the person was not prepared for the shock and may be overwhelmed with emotion. If this is the case, the individual may suffer from PTSD for which there are four indicators to look out for:

Re-living the traumatic event - unwanted and recurring memories, images and/or nightmares attached with emotional or physical reactions such as: sweating, heart palpitations or panic when the event is recalled.

Being overly alert or wound up – sleeping difficulties, irritability, lack of concentration, easily startled and constantly on the lookout for signs of danger.

Avoiding reminders of the event – deliberately avoiding activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings associated with the event, since they bring back painful memories.

Feeling emotionally numb – losing interest in day-to-day activities, feeling cut off and detached from friends and family, or feeling emotionally flat and numb.

If you experience these symptoms, contact the Trauma Centre of Australia on (03) 9205 9488, or Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Daniele Berard
Counselling Student

“Until one has loved an animal a part of one's soul remains unawakened.”

- Anatole France

“There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face”

- Bernard Williams

“Grief is the price we pay for love”

- Queen Elizabeth II



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Managing symptoms of grief

Our pets hold a special place in our hearts, as our loyal companions and beloved family members. So it's completely natural to grieve the loss of a pet, in much the same way as we grieve for humans. There are a range of emotions associated with grief: sadness, anger, denial, hopelessness. Grieving is a process, so allow yourself the time to work through your feelings. There is no right or wrong way to grieve; it's a very personal experience.



It can be helpful to seek support from those around you. Unfortunately, some people may try to minimise the validity of your grief, stemming from a lack of understanding about the importance of your pet in your life. This is called "disenfranchised grief", and it can add another dimension to the grieving process, with the need to justify or acknowledge your grief to those who do not understand. Reach out to those who will listen and empathise with you, such as family members and others with pets.

Looking after your physical health during this time is important. Grief can manifest in physical symptoms, making it hard to eat, sleep, or function on an everyday basis. Eating well and exercising, even just going for a walk, can work wonders for your health and ability to cope in this difficult time. If you are having trouble sleeping, try meditation or relaxation techniques. If your grief is all consuming, consider consulting a grief therapist for further support.

Madelyn Dabb
Postgraduate Counselling Student

"Grief is like the ocean; it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."

- Vicki Harrison

"How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

- Winnie the Pooh

"What we have once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes a part of us."

- Helen Keller



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Pet deaths: effects on people

The definition of “relationships” focuses on connections between humans and animals, which include: sexual, emotional and physical feelings and behaviours. The stronger our perception of connectedness, the greater the tie between the perceiver and receiver. No doubt mutual adoration can co-exist and the bond is strengthened by each other’s affection toward one another.

Much of what is being discussed will lead us to the conclusion of a relationship between humans. This is not necessarily the case; the same connections can also be had between pet owners and their pets. The love shared between owners and pets can be indescribable, yet observable.

The time that affection develops between owners and pets is often instant and quick. Nevertheless, whether it is short or long, the attachment connection and unconditional love is evident in both animal and humans. So when separation occurs or death calls upon us, trauma, grief, and loss play an important role in bringing us a phase of heart broken sadness.



Some individuals process this as fundamental trauma with signs of reflecting emotional and behavioural responses.

A. Emotional responses can include: tearfulness, insomnia, shock, anger, guilt, isolation, and depression.

B. Behavioural responses include: not being able to remove the pet’s possessions, withdrawing, wanting to sleep with the departed companion’s toys, etc.

Even fleeting suicidal ideation of wanting to be with the departed friend/pet.

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These challenges can be very debilitating. Guilt is often foremost and people reflect about what we could or should have done together.

Confronting the decision to euthanize is often traumatic; the pros and cons, can add a trauma component. Symptoms and suffering of animals can create additional layers. Obsessive thoughts, panic, and nightmares often affect people's ability to develop perspective and can contribute to mental health issues. Reactions of grief for pets can be complicated by other major losses, including family member death, loss of job, financial issues, etc. While all humans have their way of dealing with grief, pain, loss, and trauma, these same emotional responses are reflected with the departing of a pet.

Some people want to keep the departed alive through memories and immortalising. Funerals, pet cemeteries, ashes, journals, or planting a tree; all create picture memories. Each person's journey is personal.

Seek support; these are real feelings and emotions and can be dealt with an appropriate counsellor.



*Peter Horton
Psychologist*

Trauma and Psychology Interest Group:

Group:

Our next conference will be held in May in Melbourne.

Details to be

announced soon!

For enquiries please contact

Peter Horton

(03) 9205 9488



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Rainbow Bridge poem

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.



All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor. Those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent. His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

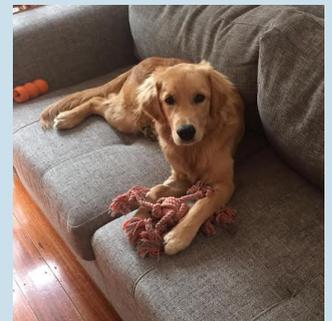
You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together....

Pets of the Trauma Centre



Magnus, the rescue cat—
9 years



Lenny, the golden retriever—
7 months



Izzy, the Australian shepherd
- 7 years



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