“They’re More than Just a Dog”: Understanding the Profound Loss of a Service Dog

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CE Credit Message

https://forms.gle/vh4YDj8i7SwTyn8w5
Learning Objectives

1. To understand the unique relationship between a handler and their service dog
2. To explore various grief responses by service dog handlers at the time of retirement and/or death.
3. To understand the issues surrounding the immediate replacement of a service dog due to retirement or death.
4. To understand how continuing bonds expressions play a role in coping with grief.
Why is this research topic important?

Unique Relationship between partners and their service dogs

Dearth of research
Our Research

• Qualitative and quantitative

• Specifically focused on service dog partners’ experiences surrounding the loss of a service dog through retirement or death (over the past 5 years)

• The survey included demographic data, time since death or retirement, and questions surrounding the circumstances of the loss.
The Human Animal Attachment Measure (HAAM; Stewart, 2003)
The Pet Bereavement Questionnaire (PBQ; Hunt & Padilla, 2006)
The Centrality of Events Scale (CES; Bernsten, 2014)
The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS; Tenannt, et al., 2007)
Social Constraints Measure (SCS; Leport & Ituarte, 1999)
The Self-Compassion Scale—Short Form (SCS-SF; Raes, et al., 2011)
Continuing Bonds Interview— for those whose service dog had died (CBI; Field, et al., 2007)
What Our Research Findings Show

**Profound Grief -- PBQ Total Score (Pet Bereavement Questionnaire)**

Higher grief scores for those whose service dog died compared to those whose dog retired.

For all participants (death and retirement), grief scores comparable to other pet loss studies.

While the nuances of the types of losses associated with service dog retirement and death may be different than a companion animal loss, the magnitude of grief appears similar.

“I was surprised how much more emotional I am over a service dog than I have been over my pets. You know, I love my pet, I cry, I have hard time with it. But it's different, it's really hard to describe the difference. It's a little bit more than just a, I still don't like the word thing just because pets are not that either. But, um, I guess that's what I would say it's, it's more of losing a human than it is an animal.”

“Every time I thought I was somewhat healing or kind of, ...they would open back up because somebody would bring it up. And I'm like, Okay, how am I ever going to get over this?”
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Centrality of Event

The degree to which the memory of a traumatic life event forms a turning point in one’s life story and becomes a central component of one’s life identity.

“The thing that was interesting was realizing what he had done for me and the way in which he had made my life easier. I wasn't ever alone. I always had my dog. So if I dropped my phone, or I dropped, you know, my socks, right, I needed him to pick up something for me, I had that. And all of a sudden, when I didn't, I maybe realized that what I was lacking, that I maybe wasn't mentally prepared for as well as I maybe should have been.”
The Gift of Facing Anticipatory Grief

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Meaning Making

People desire to create meaning of negative events -- this coping strategy is a major component of healthy bereavement.

When someone is unable to effectively make meaning of a loss, that event’s centrality in the individual’s life narrative can adversely affect bereavement. Associated with heightened levels of distress rumination and negative thoughts following a loss.

Creating meaning can serve as a buffer against the effect of the loss’s centrality.

Given the nature of service dogs and the need for frequent and rapid replacement, and the potential lack of opportunity for emotional resolution, it is likely that many partners are not able to take the time needed to effectively make meaning of the loss.
“I'm not by nature, a very emotional person. And so I view and look at death, I think a lot different than a lot of people do, I realize, you know, part of nature, it happens, I, you know, I wish the best for everybody in their passing, because it's something we'll all have to deal with. And, you know, I'm grateful in the fact that her least passing was fairly quickly that it wasn't an elongated, painful thing. You know, that it was it was time for him to go and there wasn't, you know, a lot of suffering.”
Social Constraints and Disenfranchised Grief

Social Constraints is the extent to which a person doesn’t feel they can access their support system.

Social constraints fit under a larger umbrella of experiences commonly referred to as disenfranchised grief, or grief that is not socially acknowledged or valued (Doka, 2008).

Disenfranchised grief can complicate the process of bereavement (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006) and deepen negative emotional reactions.

Invalidation and a failure to understand the meaning of loss happens frequently for bereaved pet owners. Their support system may not validate the profound depth of their relationship.
“It’s hard to explain because people feel like “it’s just a dog”, but she wasn’t just a dog...because of her, I was able to do more things. She had to be walked. So I had to walk, you know, she had to go outside.”

“When you think about your close social support system is the death of your dog something you feel comfortable talking about with them?

“No, you’re probably the first person I talked to about it.”
Predictors of Grief

Retirement Cohort
- Social constraints and centrality of the event feelings predicted grief

Death Cohort
- Only centrality of the event feelings predicted grief
Continuing Bonds (CB)
Coping Strategies of Bereaved Partners

Coping strategies by which people remain emotionally connected to the object of their loss.

Top three endorsed CB expressions for the study: fond memories, reminiscing, use of deceased pet’s belongings

An overall tendency to experience CB as more comforting than distressing

CB experiences are unique and individual. While some people adopt several forms of CB immediately upon death, others may develop them later, or not at all.

CB experiences often change over time. Importantly, it is not whether a person experiences CB that is most critical, but the degree of comfort or distress experienced from a particular kind of connection.
“I put two shelves in the corner to put everything from her ashes into a heart I had made, near her favorite toys and picture frames and stuff. So I think that gave me a sense of closure, and also knowing that she's there, like, nearby.”

“Mary (puppy trainer) sent me pictures the first night. She knew [my dog], from the beginning. So she was comfortable with that. The next day she sent me pictures of my dog running around.”
Differences Between Death and Retirement Transitions

Death Loss:
- May happen unexpectedly or as an anticipated loss
- May leave limited time to prepare for the transition to new service dog

Retirement loss:
- May provide more time to prepare for loss-- yet also more time to dread impending losses
- May include four main types of transitions:
  - Staying in the handler's home
  - Rehoming to the puppy raiser
  - Rehoming to a stranger
  - Rehoming to a trusted family member or friend
Ambiguous Losses Associated with Service Dog retirement

Unlike a death loss, retirement losses can sometimes be harder to pinpoint and may appear as multiple, less concrete (ambiguous) losses.

“She was with me all the time. So it’s just kind of habit. You know, it’s like when you look for the child in the backseat, you know, it wasn’t it was just automatic the way we lived. So I think part of that her transitioning to retirement kind of set me up for some of that loss.”

“Yes, I mean, there was an awful lot of loss other than the loss of them. Being able to do things with me and not being able to take him, and you can see in his face that he wants to go on. So I mean, that’s the hardest thing is that, like, I take him for short walks and several long walks, because he still has the he now has the drive and stuff, but he can’t physically do something.”
Some clients encounter the loss of multiple dogs over their lifetime. Depending on their level of needs, they may have limited time to grieve each loss.

“You just can't prepare for it. No matter how much you know that you're doing what’s best for your dog. You just can’t prepare for it. So, and as a result, I messed up my relationship with my second dog. Because I compared them. And physically they couldn’t have been more different. My first was the purebred golden retriever. My second was a black lab. And I thought that would help me make the transition. And it didn't, right. I wasn’t prepared for how much I would say, “Why are you doing this?” “Carol didn't do it.” “Do it this way.” “Carol did it like this.” “Why aren't you sitting here? When I said “sit”, Carol would sit, you know, I kept comparing no matter what she did.”
Dental hygiene and the necessity of teeth to perform activities of daily living

"Because if he doesn't have teeth, how's he supposed to pick things up? How's he supposed to open the freezer for me? How's he supposed to hold a credit card in his mouth with no teeth?"

How might the “trained working dog” mentality appear as stoicism

"But what actually turned out to be was that he had ripped his leg. But my vet didn't know because he was such a stoic dog; he didn't make any noise when my vet was manipulating his leg the way a regular dog would."

"He was still trying to do those things that he knew that he needed to be he was staying out of my way. And you know, when I would get my scooter it kind of clicks when it starts to move. And he would immediately go to stand up. And it was heart wrenching to see him going to that effort knowing how difficult it was for him to get up. But he knew in his head that that's what he should do."
How do you know when it’s time for retirement or for letting go?

- Is your dog keeping up with you?
- Is your dog falling behind continuously?
- Is your dog just getting a little lazy and trying to have more of a leisurely stroll and they’re not keeping up for that moment?
- Does your dog start out okay, but after about two or three blocks, starts to lag behind?

- Is your dog starting to have a hard time getting up? How is your dog’s energy level?
- Is your dog waking up more times than not and limping in the morning?
- Is your dog having selective hearing that they historically haven’t demonstrated?
- Does it appear that your dog is needing a little longer to think about how to respond to commands?
# Quality of Life Scale
*(The HHHHMMM Scale)*

Pet caregivers can use this Quality of Life Scale to determine the success of Pawsipce care. Score patients using a scale of: 0 to 10 (10 being ideal).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Criterion</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>HURT</strong> – Adequate pain control &amp; breathing ability is of top concern and outweighs all others. Is the pet’s pain well managed? Can the pet breathe properly? Is oxygen supplementation necessary?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>HUNGER</strong> – Is the pet eating enough? Does hand feeding help? Does the pet need a feeding tube?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>HYDRATION</strong> – Is the pet dehydrated? For patients not drinking enough, use subcutaneous fluids daily to supplement fluid intake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>HYGIENE</strong> – The pet should be brushed and cleaned, particularly after eliminations. Avoid pressure sores with soft bedding and keep all wounds clean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>HAPPINESS</strong> – Does the pet express joy and interest? Is the pet responsive to family, toys, etc.? Is the pet depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid? Can the pet’s bed be moved to be close to family activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>MOBILITY</strong> – Can the pet get up without assistance? Does the pet need human or mechanical help (e.g., a cart)? Does the pet feel like going for a walk? Is the pet having seizures or stumbling? (Some caregivers feel euthanasia is preferable to amputation, but an animal with limited mobility yet still alert and responsive can have a good quality of life as long as caregivers are committed to helping the pet.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>MORE GOOD DAYS THAN BAD</strong> – When bad days outnumber good days, quality of life might be too compromised. When a healthy human-animal bond is no longer possible, the caregiver must be made aware that the end is near. The decision for euthanasia needs to be made if the pet is suffering. If death comes peacefully and painlessly, that is okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10</td>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>A total over 35 points represents acceptable life quality to continue with pet hospice (Pawsipce).</em></td>
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### QUALITY OF LIFE SCALE
(The HSMZ Scale)

**WHEN SHOULD I PUT MY DOG DOWN?**

The QOL scale, created by Alice Villalobos, will help pet caregivers decide whether to continue their pet’s end of life care. Bring this to your vet to talk about your pet’s quality of life and discuss ways to improve your pet’s score if needed. A score of 0 is poor quality of life, and a score of 10 indicates an ideal quality of life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QOL Factor</th>
<th>Score 0-10</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HURT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adequate pain control and breathing ability are of top concern. If your dog can’t breathe properly, nothing else matters. Can you provide oxygen supplementation if necessary? Is their breathing labored? Is your dog’s pain well-managed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HUNGER</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Is your dog able to eat enough nutritious food? Are you able to hand-feed if needed? Does your dog need a feeding tube? Are you able to blend food when necessary and find foods that are nutritious that they will eat?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HYDRATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Is your dog dehydrated (skin slowly retracts after being pinched)? Is your dog drinking enough (10 ml per pound per day)? Are you willing to administer subcutaneous fluids if needed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HYGIENE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Are you able to perform proper grooming for your pet? (brushing, cleaning after eliminations, keeping them free of parasites, cleaning the coat and wounds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HAPPINESS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Does your dog express joy and interest? Is your pet responsive to family toys, etc.? Is your dog depressed, lonely, anxious, bored or afraid? Can your dog’s bed be moved to be close to family activities? Do you provide routine fun time that the pet enjoys?</td>
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<td><strong>MOBILITY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Does your dog feel like going for a walk? Is your pet having seizures or stumbling? Can your dog get up without assistance? Can you provide mechanical help (e.g., a cart) if needed? Are you willing to move your pet to different locations and change their position at least every two hours if they are immobile? (must provide soft bedding) Note: Some caregivers feel that euthanasia is preferable to amputation, but an animal with limited mobility who is still alert and responsive can have a good quality of life as long as the family is committed to helping their dog.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MORE GOOD DAYS THAN BAD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Are there more “bad” days, where the pet seems to be “tuned off” to life? Do more days include things like vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, frustration, falling down, seizures, etc.? When bad days outnumber good days, the quality of life might be too compromised. When a healthy human-animal bond is no longer possible, the end is near. The decision for euthanasia needs to be made if your dog is suffering. It is ideal when a dog’s passing comes peacefully and painlessly.</td>
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**TOTAL**

* A total over 35 points represents acceptable quality life to continue with dog hospice. A total of 70 is a perfect score.

Original concept, Oncology Outlook, by Dr. Alice Villalobos, Quality of Life Scale Helps Make Final Call, VPN, 09/2004.
Thank you for your time and engagement with our presentation!

CE Exit Survey

Questions?