



Destigmatizing Loss: Responding to Clients Navigating the Loss of a Pet

Michelle Crossley, PhD, LMHC, NCC

Colleen Rolland, MA

Our why.



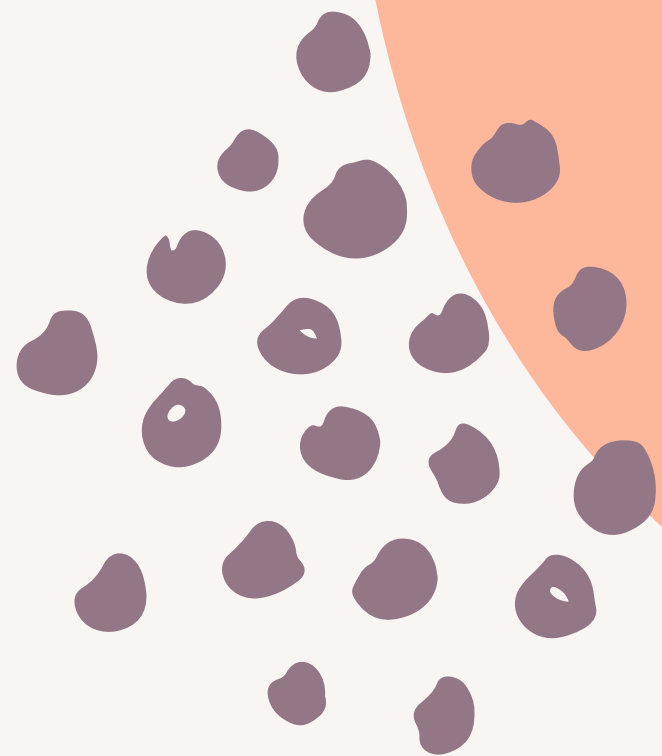
Defining Terms

- **Attachment**- an emotional bond to someone usually perceived as older or wiser (Stevenson-Hinde, 2007)
- **Human-animal bond**- the interaction that a human has with a non-human animal and the nature of the relationship between the human and animal (Beck & Katcher, 2003)
- **Companion animal**- pet; a domesticated animal that lives with a human caregiver
- **Grief**- the emotional response that is experienced in the early stages of bereavement (Podriazik, et al., 2000)
- **Bereavement**- a process of adjusting to the loss of a close individual due to death (Podriazik, et al., 2000)
- **Mourning**- the behavior of the bereaved individual and the community after death, which may include culturally accepted customs and rituals (Podriazik, et al., 2000)
- **Anthropomorphism**- ascribing human characteristics to companion animal/pet

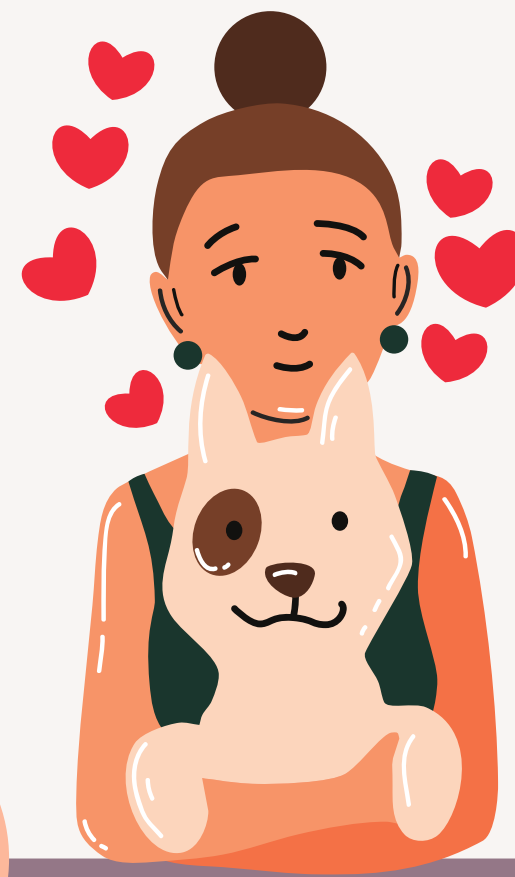
Disenfranchised Grief

"There is no grief like the grief that does not speak."

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



COVID-19



01

Quarantine & Isolation

Individuals were at home. Approximately 19% of the population in the US acquired a cat or dog during this time (ASPCA, 2021).

02

Attachment

Increase in time spent with companion animals leads to deeper/stronger relationships (Bussolari, et al., 2021).

03

Return to "Normal"

Anxieties about leaving pets at home (Sicurella, 2021). 24% of people showed concern about how pets will respond; 27% believe they will suffer emotionally upon returning to work (Halpin, 2021).

Types of Loss

death

*lost/
missing*

removal

relinquish

routine

*natural
disaster*

*divorce/
custody*

support

Human Animal Bond



01

Ice Age

Guards and companions around primitive encampments.
Ridding granaries of pests.

02

Human Roles

Companions, best friends, security, and protections.
"Fur-kids".
Emotional support.

03

Improve Social Relationships

Going for walks, going to dog parks, pet-friendly establishments, etc.
Provide routine.

Attachment

- Individuals do form attachments to companion animals (Barton Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007).
- Varying levels of attachment lead to varying levels of grief (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Eckerd, et al., 2016)
- Attachment styles and expressions of grief for a pet (Blazina, 2011)
 - *Avoidant*: less likely to discuss the loss and attempt to separate emotionally from the experience.
 - *Anxious*: will intensely pine for the lost loved one and show the most outward signs of searching for the continued connection.
 - *Secure*: work through the loss better than the other two styles though may have problems developmentally realizing that the lost loved one is no longer present to meet their needs.



Attachment & Loss

The Grieving Process



The Grieving Process

Kubler-Ross

Denial
Anger
Bargaining
Depression
Acceptance

Worden

Accept
Acknowledge
Adjust
Reinvest

Sife

Shock, disbelief, denial
Anger, alienation,
distancing
Guilt
Depression
Resolution

Blue Cross (UK)

Anticipatory grief
Responsibility grief
Anger & bargaining
Depression, reflection,
& loneliness
New beginnings
Acceptance & hope

Pet Loss Considerations

Resolving Grief with Support



Bond & Attachment

01

Relationship

Acknowledging the relationship.

Ask questions to better understand the bond.

02

Attachment

Type of attachment.

Role of the pet.

03

Guilt

Type of loss.

Dialectic of responsibility.





Types of Loss

Missing and Lost Pets

Longing for reunification.

Considerations for natural disasters.

Rehome/Relinquish

Ability to care.

Change in housing.

Routine

Return to work.

Physical activity.

Anticipatory

Starts the grief response.

Complications of hope.

Additional Considerations

Spiritual and cultural practices of the client

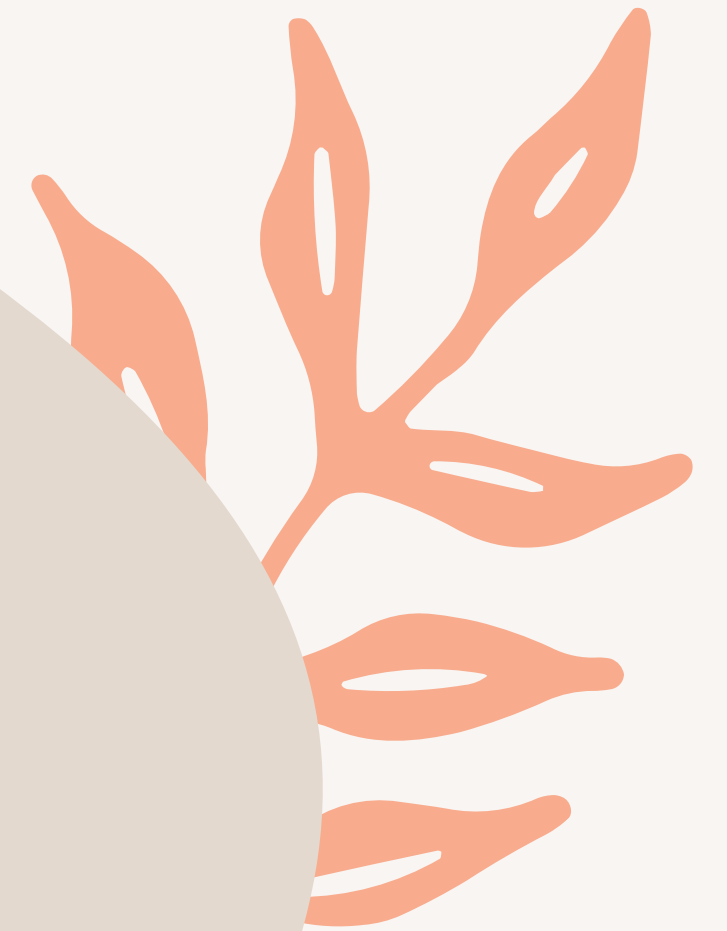
Age of the client

Type of pet



Euthanasia

from Greek: eu 'well, good' + thanatos 'death'

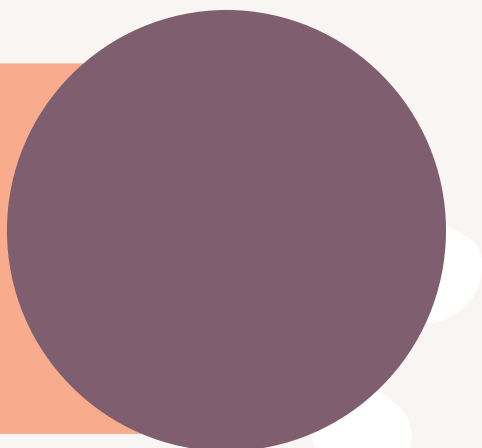
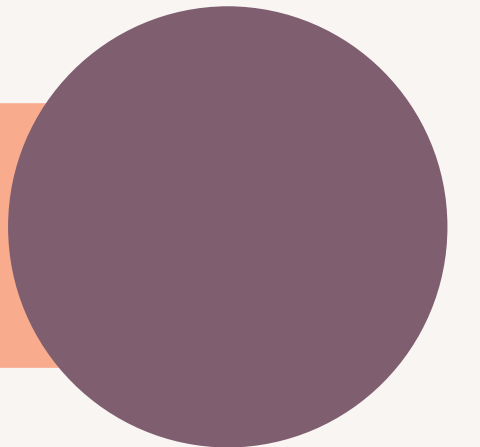
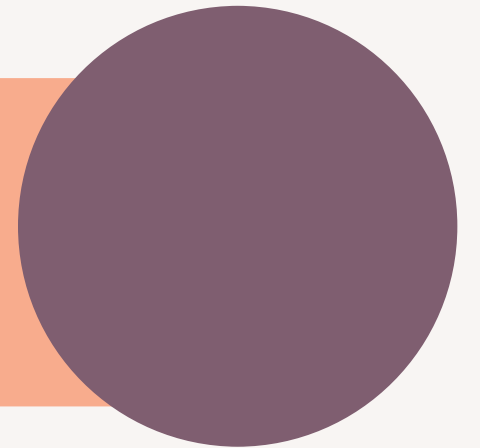


Talking about Euthanasia

Displaced anger: at self, at veterinary staff

Choosing when is the "right" time

Review expectations and possible limitations





Interventions



CBT

Address thoughts,
feelings, and behaviors
related to grief.

Reframe experience.

Narrative Approaches

Letter writing.

Therapeutic storytelling.

Bibliotherapy.

Group Counseling

Normalization of the
experience.

Varying modalities.

Trauma Focused

Manner and cause of
death.

Replaying images.



Resolution

Client honors the lost relationship

Continuing bonds

Considerations of future pet relationships



Self-Care



Relationship

Therapeutic relationship.

Relationship with companion animals.

Countertransference

Animal rights.

Values and beliefs about the human animal bond.


Processing Grief

Use of supervision.

Disclosing grief with clients.

References

- American Veterinary Medical Association. (2018). AVMA pet ownership and demographics sourcebook. (2017-2018 ed.). American Veterinary Medical Association: Schaumburg, IL.
- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. (26, May 2021). ASPCA pandemic pet ownership survey memo. ASPCA. <https://aspca.app.box.com/s/v4t7yrwalwk39mf71a857ivqoxnv2x3d>
- Applebaum, J. W., Tomlinson, C. A., Matijczak, A., McDonald, S., & Zsembik, B. A. (2020). The concerns, difficulties, and stressors of caring for pets during COVID-19: Results from a large survey of U.S. pet owners. *Animals*, 10(10), 1882-1896.
- Attig, T. (2004). Disenfranchised grief revisited: Discounting hope and love. *OMEGA: Journal of Death & Dying*, 49(3), 197-215.
- Barton-Ross, C. & Baron-Sorenson, J. (2007). *Pet loss and human emotion* (2nd ed.). Routledge: New York, NY.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Sadness and depression*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bussolari, C., Currin-McCulloch, J., Packman, W., Kogan, L., & Erdman, P. (2021). "I couldn't have asked for a better quarantine partner!": Experiences with companion dogs during Covid-19. *Animals*, 11, 330-344.
- Case, T. (5, May 2021). 'Pet anxiety is real': More employers willing to allow pandemic-pets when staff return to the office. Digiday Media. <https://digiday.com/media/pet-anxiety-is-real-more-employers-willing-to-allow-pandemic-pets-when-staff-return-to-the-office/>
- Cordaro, M. (2012). Pet loss and disenfranchised grief: Implications for mental health professionals. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 34(4), 285-294.
- Doka, K. J. (2008). Disenfranchised grief in historical and cultural perspective. In M. S. Stroebe, R. O. Hansson, H. Schut, & W. Stroebe (Eds.), *Handbook of bereavement research and practice: Advances in theory and intervention* (pp. 223–240). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14498-011>
- Eckerd, L. M., Barnett, J. E., & Jett-David, L. (2016). Grief following pet and human loss: Closeness is key. *Death Studies*, 40(5), 275-282. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2016.1139014>
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Podrazik, D., Shackford, S, Becker, L., & Heckert, T. (2000). The death of a pet: Implications for loss and bereavement across the lifespan. *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss*, 3, 364-395.
- Sicurella, S. (22, July 2021). You adopted a pandemic pet. Now you're going back to the office. What next? National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/22/1016522446/you-adopted-a-pandemic-pet-now-youre-going-back-to-the-office-what-next>
- Sife, W. (2014). *The loss of a pet: A guide to coping with the grieving process when a pet dies* (4th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing, Inc.



**Thank you for your interest
and attention.**

Contact us with any questions!

Michelle Crossley/mcrossley@ric.edu
Colleen Rolland/colleen@aplb.org

Meaning Making of Pet Loss

Results from my Research



Findings

Lived experiences of individuals who have grieved/are grieving the loss of a pet?

Internal Process

Stages of grief
Continuing the bond
Aware of absence
Self-improvement

Bond

Nature of relationship
Human attributes
Other meanings

Social Influence

View/lack of support
Pets are replaceable
Sharing in safe spaces

Social Influence

Research Question 3: What are the similarities and differences in how one's worldview shapes mourning over the death of a companion animal as described by a multicultural sample of grieving pet owners?



(Negative) Social Influence

Advice Givers

- Negative support system=lack of understanding
- Synthesis:
 - This type of death can be trivialized by close others
 - Influenced by dominant and cultural views, values, teachings, experiences, and perceptions
- Participant Quote:
 - "oh let's go shopping-you'll get over anything, you know get a pair of shoes, it'll be good." (P2)

(Negative) Social Influence

Coercion

- Fear of lack of understanding from others causes grieving the loss alone
- Synthesis:
 - Lack of support=disenfranchised grief
 - Experience of grief responses are based on observations of others or understanding of how people respond to negative events
- Participant Quote:
 - "...so they didn't really get it so I didn't really tell them a lot. I don't generally talk a lot about my um, when I get depressed. I figure I have to deal with it myself so I go inside myself to find my answers." (P2)

(Positive) Social Influence

Positive Support

- Positive support creates an avenue for healing
- Outpouring of support from others
- Synthesis:
 - Perception of positive support can alleviate symptoms of grief
 - Positive support can allow individuals to openly and spontaneously express their grief
- Participant Quotes:
 - "People who knew her-they were hurt too. Because many people were calling and saying 'oh, what happened to [companion animal]?" (P1)
 - "...is awesome in that she steps up in those situations. I don't expect it-you know we talked so much about the moment and the time to do it." (P5)



(Mixed) Social Influence

Selective

- Sharing of information is influenced by perceived support
- Synthesis:
 - Perception of lack of support may leave the bereaved embarrassed to share
 - Hiding the death=psychological distance between deceased and survivors
 - Risk of shame
- Participant Quotes:
 - “for the people who I thought understood, how you could be attached to a pet, I talked a lot about it. But for people, most people who were around me who didn’t have pets, couldn’t care less.” (P2)
 - “wasn’t comfortable but told everyone” (P3)



(Positive) Social Influence

Unfiltered

- Open discussion and sharing of the loss
- Positive support=unfiltered sharing
- Synthesis:
 - People rarely grieve in isolation
- Participant Quote:
 - "...I felt like he was a really loved dog, an awesome dog, and people would want to know." (P3)

Social Influence

- Overall Findings:
 - One's worldview affects sharing of this important loss
 - Although one may feel uncomfortable sharing this pain, they may still share the experience with others
 - Grieving alone causes a form of disenfranchised grief
 - Not all workplaces are open to allowing grievance time after this type of loss
 - The perception of positive support will aid the bereaved in healing from loss