

Pet Loss, Culture, and Coping: African American Experiences of Grief



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Which best describes your main role today?

Two learning objectives guide our time

01

Describe

Cultural factors influencing grief responses among African American adults following pet loss.

02

Apply

The Dual Process Model when supporting people from diverse backgrounds experiencing pet loss.

ACT I

Why this conversation is important

The meaning of pet loss—and the knowledge we build about it—depends on whose experiences are included.

Why African American experiences belong in the conversation

African American experiences make the pet-loss conversation more complete.

Underrepresentation narrows what the field can see. Grief is universal—but it is not universally experienced.

Grief theories are often taught as though they travel unchanged across contexts

Today we will ask what becomes visible when grief is examined through the lived experiences of African American adults grieving a companion animal.



How much grief education did your professional training include?

Four findings extend the pet-loss conversation

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------|--|
| 01 | Fear of empathic failure | Anticipated invalidation shaped whether grief felt safe to disclose. |
| 02 | Culturally shaped coping | Cultural scripts and responsibilities influenced how participants moved through grief. |
| 03 | Transitioning bonds | Connection could change form without being relinquished. |
| 04 | Grief inequities | Conditions and access could facilitate—or constrain—coping. |

STUDY CONTEXT

What 23 African American pet owners helped us to understand

Phenomenology centers meaning: how loss was lived, understood, and navigated.

The study was designed to understand experience, not estimate prevalence

Participants

- 23 African American/Black adults
- Pet loss experienced in adulthood
- Varied relationships and loss circumstances

Approach

- Qualitative phenomenological study
- Participant accounts interpreted thematically
- Dual Process Model used as a conceptual lens

Transferability—not statistical generalization—is the appropriate question

These findings illuminate meanings and experiences described by these 23 participants. They do not estimate how common any experience is among African American pet owners.

Ask: What might help me recognize, inquire about, or respond to a similar experience in my setting?

Eight themes traced grief across relationship, loss, coping, support, and growth

Familial bonds

Anticipatory grief

Disenfranchised grief

Grief confrontation

Grief avoidance

Post-loss support

Grief inequities

Spiritual & emotional growth

ACT II

Before the loss

For many participants, grief began with awareness of mortality—not at the moment of death.

Anticipatory grief entered through changes in the animal and changes in the caregiver's world

- Noticing decline made mortality newly visible
- Impermanence. Change.
- Willingness to love and lose.



What is one open-ended question you could ask someone noticing a pet's decline?

A useful question makes room for meaning without presuming the answer

“What changes have you been noticing, and what have those changes meant to you?”

Open language can surface fear, hope, responsibility, spiritual beliefs, and practical constraints.

ACT III

When grief meets the social world

Loss is lived internally—and negotiated in relationships, institutions, and communities.



What do you think “usually” gives a loss social legitimacy?

Disenfranchised grief is not only unrecognized grief—it is grief denied social permission

- The relationship may be minimized
- The intensity or duration may be judged
- Rituals, leave, and formal support may be absent
- The griever may learn to conceal what needs care

Social encouragement to replace

“I wasn't ready. I understand what their intentions were, but...I didn't feel like MJ could be replaced...”

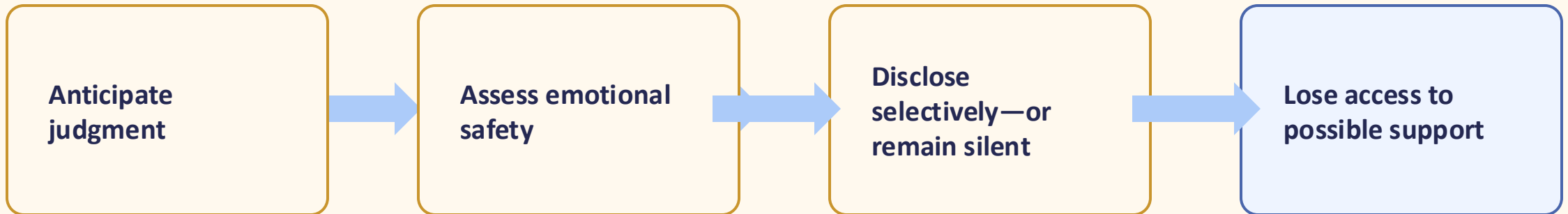
Well-intended replacement language can miss the uniqueness of the relationship and the griever's timing.

Fear of empathic failure

“It really makes you feel like you're some sort of psychopath because you love something...my grieving process for that was mostly done in secrecy.”

Before disclosing grief, participants often assessed whether others would respond empathically.

Fear of empathic failure can shape disclosure before invalidation occurs



Recognition depends on what support communicates—not only who offers it

Responses that may close the door

- “It was only a pet”
- “You can always get another one”
- Comparing or ranking losses

Responses that may open it

- Name the relationship as described
- Ask what the loss means
- Witnessing and not fixing



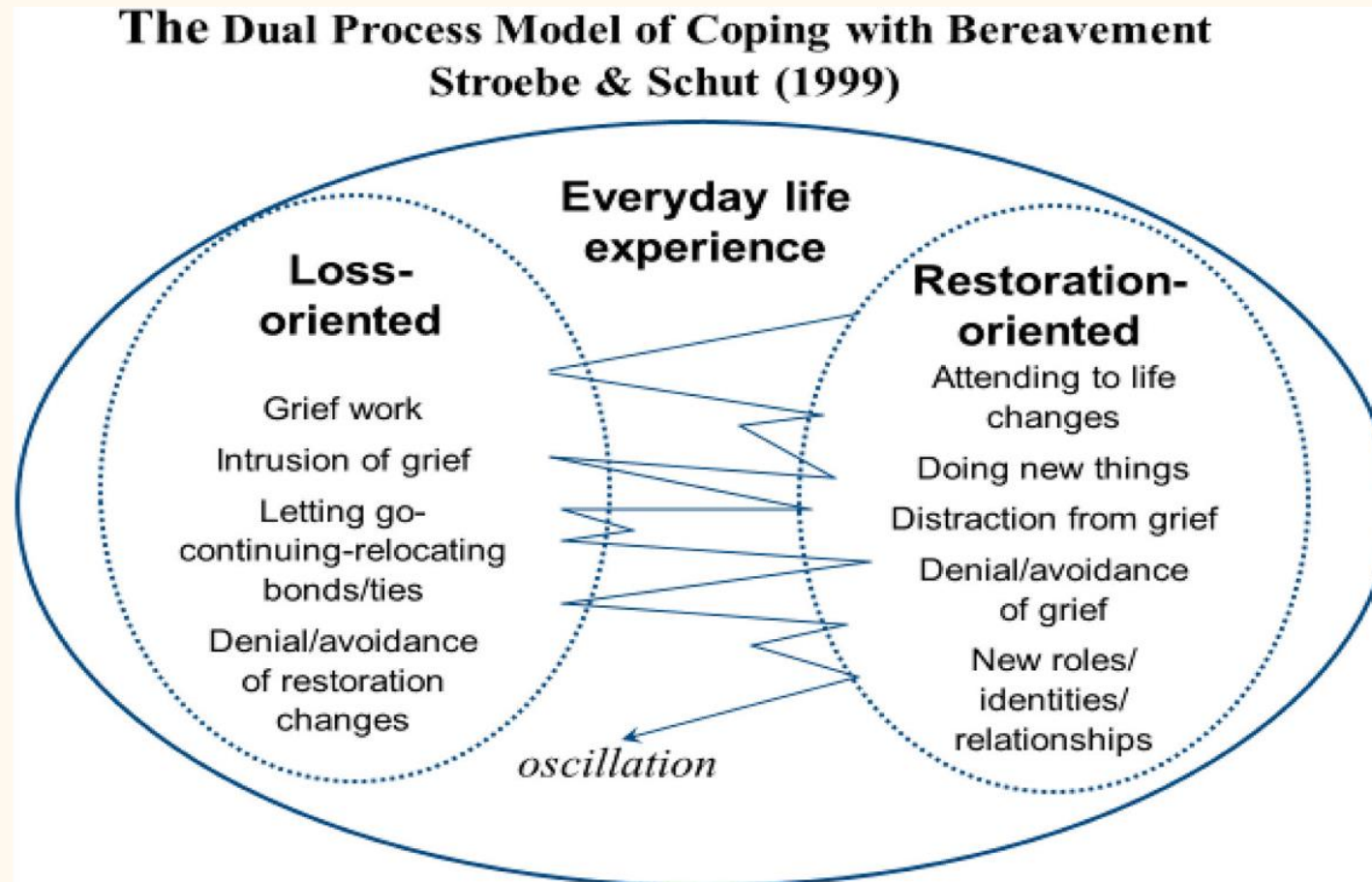
When someone grieves privately, what can we conclude?

ACT IV

Living with the loss

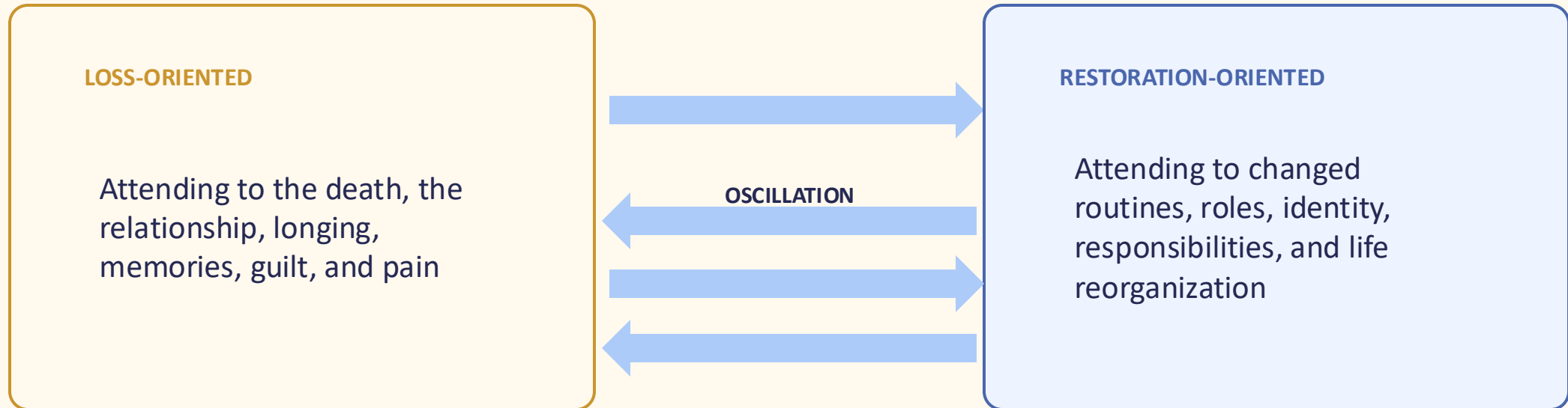
The Dual Process Model helps us notice movement, function, and changing demands over time.

The Dual Process Model situates oscillation within everyday life



Stroebe & Schut (1999)

Coping involves movement between two kinds of demands



Grief Confrontation: Participants confronted the loss through emotion, belief, memory, and ritual

Grief confrontation

- Guilt and regret
- Belief in a pet afterlife
- Rituals and memorialization

Also...

- Emotional activations
- Privacy preferences
- Connection and closure

Grief Avoidance appeared as protection, action, distance, and reorganization

Grief avoidance

- Attachment anxiety
- Learned compartmentalization
- Avoidance of euthanasia

Also...

- “Push through” could protect functioning
- Distance could reduce immediate pain
- Meaning and flexibility remain central

Memorialization can preserve connection—and create unexpected activations



The same photo, ashes, collar, or digital memory may comfort on one day and overwhelm on another. Meaning can change over time.

Transitioning bonds names change without implying abandonment



- Letting go of belongings or declining ashes could be intentional adaptation
- Continuity may reside in memory, values, identity, or changed practice
- The absence of visible memorial objects does not prove the absence of connection

Oscillation may be visible in ordinary, uneven days

MON

**Looked
through photos**

TUE

**Focused on
work**

WED

**Avoided the
empty room**

THU

**Shared a
memory**

FRI

**Changed a
caregiving
routine**

ACT V

Post-Loss Social Support

Support helps when it recognizes the bond, fits the person, and is actually accessible.

Support was complicated and culturally influenced

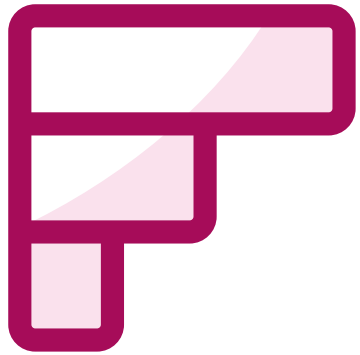
- Culturally specific support
- Access
- Veterinarian support



Veterinary decision-making can hold love, responsibility, and uncertainty at once

The question is rarely only “What is the medical choice?” It may also be “What does this choice say about my love, duty, and readiness to let go?”





What do you think most determines whether grief support feels useful? Please rank.

Culturally specific support

“They feel like I feel, but they don't look like me, right? So with that being said, it's like...I felt uncomfortable. I shared my story. And I never returned.”

Shared loss experience did not automatically create cultural safety or belonging.

Grief inequities describe unequal conditions for coping

01

Cumulative grief

A pet death may occur alongside human losses and chronic strain.

02

Recurring pet loss

Multiple losses can reactivate prior grief and reshape expectations.

03

Situational distress

Work, finances, housing, access, and caregiving demands affect available choices.

Grief inequities are also layered and intersecting

“Well...in our community, because we see so much. Hurt. Death. Sometimes people take for granted that, a dog or a cat or a bird or whatever you love is just a pet. I don’t look at it that way...I don’t look at them as a pet because they’re not a pet. They’re my friend.”

Participant description of how multiple losses, life circumstances, and systemic challenges could compound grief—while the bond itself still required recognition.

From grief inequities to grief equity

Grief is universal, but the social, cultural, relational, and structural ways people experience grief are not.

Grief equity recognizes the importance of equitable access to validation, support, and bereavement resources across diverse communities.

ACT VI

Spiritual and emotional growth

Growth did not erase pain; it changed what some participants carried forward.

Growth appeared through faith, relationship, and transformation

01 Faith and resilience

Prayer and spiritual belief provided comfort, strength, and purpose.

02 Growth in human connections

Receiving support sometimes became a responsibility to support others.

03 Spiritual connection and transformation

The bond widened appreciation for animals, life, and stewardship.

Faith and resilience

“I prayed for my pet’s healing, and I talked to God through every stage of the loss.”

For some participants, faith offered language and relationship through uncertainty and grief.

ACT VI REFLECTION

Can grief and growth exist in the same space?

Unmute and share your personal or professional experiences

Jordan, Trina, and Jonathan

The task is not to decide who is grieving correctly.
It is to notice context, history, function,
relationship, and access.



Jonathan belongs to a family system—not only a household

Jordan is a 50-year-old African American woman who has been with Trina for many years; they married 18 months ago. Both women are African American and around the same age.

They adopted Jonathan, a Shih Tzu, as a puppy 15 years ago. Jordan named him for her brother, who died in a car accident when Jordan was 18.

Jordan's elderly mother calls Jonathan her "grand-dog," and Jordan's sister, Sarah, cares for him when the couple travels. Trina is estranged from her family of origin but is close to Jordan's family.

A medical crisis brings the decision to a head

Jonathan has progressive myxomatous mitral valve disease. After an acute episode of labored breathing, he is stabilized, but the veterinarian explains that his congestive heart failure is advancing and his quality of life is declining.

The veterinarian recommends euthanasia. Jordan believes it is time. Trina agrees with the decision.

Jordan and Trina agree on the decision—but not on how to face it

Trina draws a boundary

- No involvement in the euthanasia
- No details about timing
- No discussion of Jonathan's body or ashes
- No conversation afterward

Jordan proceeds alone

- Wants to grieve with her partner
- Feels abandoned and resentful
- Grieves privately in their shared home
- Eventually seeks help

What becomes visible when we ask about context?

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|---|
| 01 | Meaning | What does Jonathan represent within Jordan's life and family history? |
| 02 | Coping | What loss- and restoration-oriented demands are present for each partner? |
| 03 | Relationship | How are privacy, cohabitation, and different coping rhythms colliding? |
| 04 | Culture & access | What should be explored without presuming that shared race means shared grieving? |

A responsive next step validates both grief and relational complexity

Possible language

- “Tell me what Jonathan has meant in your family.”
- “What did you need from Trina during the decision?”
- “What might Trina’s distance be protecting?”

Avoid assuming

- One partner cared more
- Avoidance means absence of grief
- Shared race means shared coping
- Keeping ashes measures attachment

Four ideas to carry into your work

1. Anticipated invalidation can silence grief before support is sought.
2. Coping must be interpreted within cultural, relational, and material context.
3. A bond can transition without being relinquished.
4. Affirming support must be both respectful and accessible.

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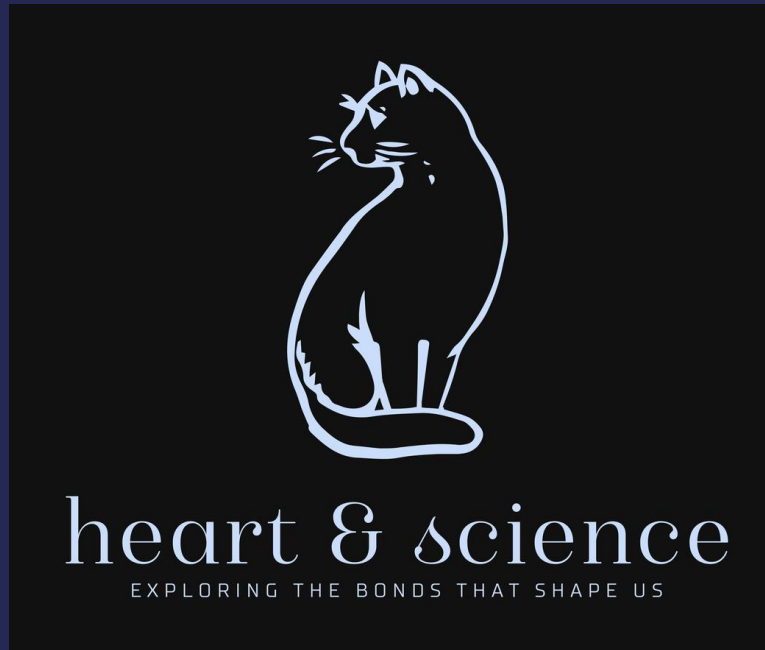
Grief, Equity, & Human-Animal

Connection



Questions & reflection

What will you listen for differently after today?



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