Grief Counseling in Veterinary Medicine

Michele Pich, MA, MS
Veterinary Grief Counselor & Instructor
University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine
3900 Delancey Street, Philadelphia PA 19104
mpich@vet.upenn.edu


ABSTRACT: This session will discuss the need for grief counseling in the veterinary setting. It will cover theoretical aspects of grieving, therapeutic modes of delivery of client support, and potential grief complications. Aggregated client usage data will be presented as part of the discussion.

Introduction
In veterinary medicine there are always at least 2 clients: the animal in need of medical care, and the owner that brings them in. There are many similarities in the loss of a pet and the loss of a human family member, in regard to the stages of grief. But, there are also some additional aspects to consider. Communication is the key to mitigating many of the difficulties of the grieving process. When a veterinarian communicates prognosis and treatment options well, and is aware of available grief support resources for clients, the process can be less adversarial, and more of a partnership.

Stages of Grief
Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified the stages of grief as denial, anger, depression, bargaining, and finally acceptance. Although this literature was initially designed to aid in dealing with human loss, much of it is relevant to the loss of a pet as well. Many people consider their pets to be a part of the family, so it makes sense that they experience many of the same emotions and feelings that people who have lost a human family member or friend experience.

If clients are in denial, they may not fully accept that their pet is terminally ill or even that the pet is deceased. They may continue to talk about their pets in the present tense and avoid people who may orient them to reality.

The anger stage of grieving is sometimes expressed as anger against oneself or anger against the one who gave the person bad news. Unfortunately, veterinarians are often on the receiving end of this anger. Some clients even yell or blame the veterinarian for their pet's death. Although no veterinarian should ever tolerate verbal abuse by clients, it can be helpful to understand that the anger expressed may actually represent anger about the pet's outcome and displacement of that anger onto the veterinarian.

Depression can be either chronic or acute. Often grieving veterinary clients feel an enormous amount of guilt for the outcome of their pet's care. In most cases, when there is a problem with a client’s pet, the client is able to remedy it with actions (e.g., pet is hungry, so feed it; pet is ill, so take it to the vet). In the
case of pet death, even if the outcome is that the pet is no longer suffering, the process of consciously accepting this often encounters a few roadblocks.

In the bargaining stage, clients sometimes brood over what they or someone else could have done differently to prevent the ultimate outcome of death. They often focus on the idea that, had a certain thing not been done, the loss would not have occurred. Eventually, most clients come to a point of acceptance in which they still miss and love the pet that has died but are able to remember and focus more on the good times with the pet.

**TYPES OF GRIEF**

**Anticipatory Grief**
Anticipatory grief occurs when a pet is aging or ill. The pet owner may experience many of the symptoms of grief after loss. Those going through anticipatory grief are often suffering from disenfranchised grief. Anticipatory grief has been described as "constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop" by several of the grief support clients at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine (Penn Vet). When pets or human family members are dying, the people in their lives may begin to disconnect emotionally from the ones dying as a way to prepare emotionally for life without them after they die. This may manifest as a pet owner sounding apathetic or angry at the pet for symptoms or aspects of the pet's illness or condition.

**Multiple losses and "Trigger Grief"**
Sometimes the loss of a pet can trigger a more intense grief reaction because the client associates it with the loss of another pet or a person that was important to the individual. Members of veterinary support groups say, for example, that caring for a pet with cancer might make them think about a time when their own parent was terminally ill. By being aware of this potential, veterinarians can better understand that complex emotions are involved in the decision-making and grieving processes. Empathizing with clients can help veterinarians better position themselves to educate clients about their options.

**Grief from Expected loss**
When a death is expected, mourning clients may experience many aspects of the grieving process when the pet is still alive through anticipatory grief. They may also have a more difficult time knowing exactly when is the right time to have a pet euthanized since they may have seen the pet make a partial or full recovery from extreme illness previously. There may be additional concerns about feeling the loss of community associated with frequent veterinary visits.

**Grief from Unexpected Loss**
Veterinarians who work in emergency settings are often charged with helping pet owners understand the severity of a pet’s medical condition, while encouraging them to make painful decisions regarding expensive medical treatments that may or may not save the pet. Emergency veterinarians also must deal with telling clients that euthanasia may be the best option for the pet while simultaneously building a rapport with a previously unfamiliar client. By paying attention to the client's words, tone of voice, and body language, the veterinarian can make a better connection with the client in a relatively short period of time, which allows improved decision-making collaboration between physician and client.

**Disenfranchised Grief**
Feeling alone in one's grieving is a very difficult place to be. Such feelings are common in older individuals and those who move around a lot or do not get out much. Many people feel that they are
completely alone once their pet dies. The experience of feeling that one does not have the right to grieve, also known as disenfranchised grief, can impede progress through the grieving process. Each society and culture has its own expectations for those who are grieving, and it is important to keep in mind the differences in cultural influence. Differences in religion, country of origin, age, and gender are a few of the things to keep in mind when trying to anticipate whether clients might experience disenfranchised grief. This may even happen when clients try to reach out for help in general (non-animal-specific) bereavement support groups. People might feel that they do not have the right to express their sorrow and difficulty with the loss of their pets when others are grieving the loss of their human family members because they feel that pet loss sounds less important given societal standards. Disenfranchisement of the griever can occur when the relationship was not recognized (e.g., due to attitudes about caring for a pet or failure to acknowledge it), which often happens with employers, friends, and family when a pet dies, or when the grieving person is excluded, either because of physical distance or lack of control or opportunity to grieve.

Although the death of a pet is sometimes considered an acceptable form of loss to grieve, grieving for pet loss from other causes is not always recognized by people outside the animal care world. Other forms of loss that are even less accepted by society as valid reasons to grieve, but that still cause a great deal of difficulty for those who experience them, are the loss of a pet through separation or divorce, military or housing displacement, and voluntary surrender of pets that cannot be suitably cared for. When a pet lover learns of the loss of a pet that was being cared for by an ex-spouse there may be increased feelings of guilt and questions of why the death occurred and whether it could have been prevented if he or she had been present.

COMPLICATING FACTORS

Financial Considerations
Most people do not like to think that money played a role in the treatment of a loved one. However, in reality, finances are often a consideration in deciding whether or not a pet should undergo major surgery or start an expensive treatment protocol, such as chemo-therapy or radiation therapy, especially when a client cannot be guaranteed that the treatment will have a successful outcome for the pet. This is why it is important to let clients know when different treatment options are available. Most clients would prefer to do something to help their pets, even if they cannot afford to do everything medically available. Even if the prognosis is worse for a pet that receives a stepped-down level of care, the truth is that providing palliative care and pain management is better than providing no care at all because the owner could not afford it. Discussing money, although uncomfortable, is a necessary part of veterinary care. It is better to discuss expected treatment cost estimates, and to update them as they evolve, to prevent surprises or feelings of unclear motivation. This is important for retention of clients.

Mental Health History
Depression and other grief symptoms are not always mutually exclusive. Clients with previous mental health concerns may be more affected by pet loss than those without a history of mental health problems. This history may not always be immediately apparent to the veterinarian. It is important to keep this in mind when working with difficult or seemingly irrational clients. Clients who have a history of depression or anxiety may be more likely to experience these feeling for a prolonged period when grieving significant loss, including loss of a pet. It is especially important to make sure that grieving veterinary clients are connected with sufficient support resources, whether it is a grief counselor, therapist, or, when appropriate, a psychiatrist.

Children and Loss
A child's first experience with death is often the passing of a family pet. Children may not be able to verbalize their feelings when their pet dies. A variety of children's books and workbooks are available to parents who are helping their children cope with the realities and grief associated with pet loss. For example, the book "I'll Always Love You" by Hans Wilhelm and the "I Miss My Pet" workbook from the organization Chance's Spot can be quite helpful. Websites such as http://www.veterinarywisdomforpetparents.com have a variety of useful resources for parents as well. Some parents and professionals feel that it is better for the children to be present during a euthanasia experience, whereas others feel that it is better to find other ways for children to be involved in the decision making and memorializing of a pet. In determining how to talk to a child about pet loss, one must consider the child's age and mental development level. For example, more detail will be given to a 10-year-old than to a 4-year-old. Children who are 3 or 4 years of age do not yet understand that death is permanent, whereas children aged 5 through 8 have a greater understanding of pet loss and will probably ask many more questions. Children aged 9 through 12 may talk most about the experience; teenagers may be more likely to internalize their pain in this loss. The veterinarian may be asked to advise parents on how to talk to their children. Ideally, parents should be as honest as possible with children about the death of their pet because this can prevent backtracking and misunderstandings in the future. They should try to avoid euphemisms such as "put to sleep" or "went away." Otherwise, children may grow to fear sleeping at night or be afraid that if a parent goes away on a business trip he or she may not return either. Also, parents should allow children to ask questions and find individualized ways to express their grief (e.g., through drawings, paintings, poems, collages, songs). In addition, when parents are open about their own grief and sadness, children can learn what it means to grieve in an appropriate way and can realize that they do not need to hide their own feelings of sadness. Parents should also make sure to allow themselves time to grieve without feeling the need to put on a brave face for someone else all of the time.

**Pet Loss and Older Adults**

Many older adults are on fixed incomes and struggle to provide the best life they can for the pets they love while battling the burden of rising medical bills of their own and the limits of Social Security or pensions in the face of inflation. Older adults are particularly at risk of complications in grieving and disenfranchisement of their grief. Pets are often the only living family members that some senior citizens have, so the care of animal companions of older adults is of particular importance. In addition, pets can serve as a form of physical therapy for older adults due to the tactile stimulation of petting and caring for an animal.

**VETERINARY RESOURCES**

Resources available to veterinarians include the support of a veterinary grief counselor. At Penn Vet, counseling appointments are available for individuals, couples, and families, and there are support groups for those grieving the loss or impending loss of a pet. In addition, a Pet Grief Support Hotline that is staffed by trained veterinary students and overseen by Penn Vet's veterinary grief counselor has recently been launched.

**Support Groups**

A useful support tool for veterinarians is referral of grieving clients to veterinary support groups. One way for grieving pet owners to combat the loneliness associated with pet loss is to confront the disenfranchised grief by surrounding themselves with others going through something similar. Some support groups focus on helping the pet owner be the best caretaker for a sick or aging pet, such as Cleo's Caregivers Group at Penn Vet. This group addresses issues such as logistical planning, the importance of self-care, available resources, and the need to reach out for support. Other groups focus
on helping pet owners deal with all of the emotions and life changes associated with losing a pet. During a 2-year period from April 2010 to March 2012, 104 clients experiencing pet loss attended the Pet Grief Loss Support Group at Penn Vet, not including those who attended only Cleo's Caregivers' Group or participated only in individual counseling. Of those 104 clients, approximately 65% were female. These clients were grieving for 121 different pets; approximately 66% of these pets were dogs, 29% were cats, 2% were birds, 2% were rabbits, and 1% were rats. Group meetings included between 3 and 22 clients, and individual clients attended a mean of 2.74 meetings.

**Individual Grief Support Sessions**
Some clients experiencing the difficulties of pet loss prefer individual counseling sessions. As with support groups, some clients meet once or twice with the counselor, whereas others meet regularly for a while until they get used to the idea of living their lives without their pet physically by their side each day. The individual's contact with veterinary grief support can take the form of in-person sessions, telephone discussions, or email communications.

**Lectures, Seminars, and Workshops**
The University of Pennsylvania offers grief support lectures as part of its free Animal Lovers Lecture Series. The topics of these lectures include ruptures in the human-animal bond, grieving, healing, considering a new pet, and reaching out for support. In addition, the grief counselor also provides lectures to veterinary staff at Penn Vet and other veterinary offices on competent client communication, compassion fatigue, and end-of-life decision making, including euthanasia options.

**HEALING THROUGH PET LOSS**
**Finding Meaning**
If clients can find meaning in the loss of their pet, it may be easier for them to reach a place of acceptance and healing. Sometimes pet owners can find meaning by having their pet participate in research studies while the pet is alive or by donating the pet's body to support research and learning. Finding meaning when talking with a veterinary client can help prevent miscommunications and can aid in connecting with the client as a partner instead of an adversary. Some clients prefer to use thought journals or become actively involved in causes related to the illness or issues of the pet they are grieving, such as canine cancer research. Others have used online blogging as an avenue of expression and healing from their loss. During the grieving period, clients are likely to call the veterinarian and ask detailed questions about their pet's care. Although this may be alarming or concerning to some veterinarians, it is often part of the healing process for the clients and may help them to make sense of their tragic loss.

**Memorializing a Pet**
Some veterinary offices offer mementos to clients whose pets have died, such as an ink or clay imprint of the pet's paw. This is a nice way to express to clients that their pet was an individual. Most pet owners prefer to have their pets cremated. Some pet owners select a group cremation in which the pet's ashes are not returned but may be spread at a local pet cemetery with ashes of other pets that have died. Some prefer to have the ashes returned to them, and others choose to take the body home and bury it without cremation. This latter option is not as common in recent years because of sanitary concerns, legal restrictions, and the limited options for relocating remains if the owner moves to another property.
There are many ways of memorializing a pet that veterinarians can suggest to grieving pet owners. Moira Anderson Allen suggests creating a picture book or photo tribute, painting a portrait of the pet, or writing an online tribute.

Many owners find closure in the loss of a pet by donating to a cause related to the pet. The donation may be in the form of money to a pet memorial fund, veterinary research study, or organization, or in the form of supplies to a local animal shelter, and provides a sense of purpose that can help ease the pain of those who struggle with losing a pet. Regardless of whether the donation is a one-time gift or a routine established for holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries, it can help clients find meaning, help others, and create positive feelings regarding their deceased loved one.

REFERENCES

Available upon request.