

# Grief and loss

Following an Irish Hospice Foundation workshop on pet loss earlier this year, Orla Keegan of the Irish Hospice Foundation Bereavement Resource Centre, Annie Kilmartin of Solace Pet Bereavement, and Veterinary Surgeon, Angela Hickey, came together to focus on the issues associated with pet loss from a number of different perspectives

If bereavement is the state of losing a valued relationship through death, grief is the full response to bereavement. Strong attachments are built with pets and the relationship provides a sense of emotional security, safety and constancy. Over years, domestic animals cultivate kindness and compassion in their human families. Strong bonds develop and strong consequences follow when a death occurs.

While grief does not follow set steps, it often has characteristics that most of us would recognise, for example, feeling numb or disbelieving, pining, feeling confused, guilty, angry or simply sad. Grieving is active, something that we do. It may help to consider that there are 'tasks' involved. The first of these is recognising that the animal has died and acknowledging the feeling of shock and realisation that often goes with this acknowledgement. This is helped by seeing or touching the dead body, having a chance to say 'goodbye' and receiving the body or cremated remains back for burial, rituals etc.

A further task is processing the pain of separation, of loss. There may be even more scope for regret and guilt with a pet, due to having to make a decision to euthanase, or if a person feels responsible for the death. This emotional upset can be hard, both to experience and to watch in others. Reassurance that these feelings are 'normal' can be a great relief to the bereaved pet owner.

An ongoing element of grief is adjustment. The loss of someone, or something important, presents the challenge

of developing new pathways in the world. For example, think of the changes to the routines of a person whose dog has died: daily walking, feeding and playing routines go by the wayside. Grief can be complex: the death of an animal may be simply what it first appears, the loss of a trusted companion. On examination, however, the loss can have further meanings. The dead animal may have represented the living link to a different life – to a time when a husband was alive, to childhood, to sickness, to health. A person's response to the loss of a pet can even surprise themselves.

The ultimate task of grieving may be to have a place for the pet in the life story of the individual or the family, where the good and fun and special aspects are woven in. Photos, videos, paintings, poems, stories and memorials are all ways to remember the good times and validate what has been lost.

## HIDDEN LOSS

'Disenfranchised grief' has recently been described as a form of grieving that cuts people off from the very contact they need. If grief is not recognised, then it is not supported. The nature of the relationship may not be understood and the loss of a pet can go unrecognised. Sympathy from others may be short lived. The owner can be left to feel an oddity, an outsider and alone. On top of all this, there are no shared rituals or ways of mourning for an animal friend. The rules are not clear. It is vital that the

vet and vet staff do not further disenfranchise the client's grief by an inability to address and validate what they are going through.

Often hidden and unacknowledged is the grief experienced by veterinary staff at the deaths of their patients and due to the demand on them to carry out euthanasia. There is little discussion amongst vets of the emotional consequences of this work. Staff build up close relationships with many of the pets they treat and each loss has its effect.

### WHAT HELPS IN GRIEF?

Grieving is a natural response to great loss. Natural networks and sensitive companionship is the first line of support. Support in bereavement does not equate to recommending a bereavement counsellor. For the bereaved client, talking and sharing with veterinary staff, friends or other pet owners can help in validating the place of the pet in their family story. Similarly, devising a ritual or memorial can help in saying goodbye – for example, a burial, framing a photograph or planting a shrub. 'Others' help in two ways, by being a social support or shoulder to cry on and by allowing the bereaved person to think out loud, develop their story of what has happened, of who was lost and what they meant. Vet staff can be a special resource to the bereaved person as they may have been caring for the pet all of its life and can, therefore, relate to and share in the depth of the loss.

Take time to talk about, and understand, what the animal meant to the individual and to the family. It may be the first experience of death for children and young children have a poor understanding of the permanence of death, but still may be deeply upset. Advise parents that children be allowed to grieve and to be involved. Parents may need to reassure them that they were not to blame for the death and may also need to deal with general questions about dying and fears for parents or family members. Age appropriate, honest and supportive answers are required. Information such as leaflets, books, and websites help people to find out more about what they are going through and what aspects may have been shared by others.

### VETERINARY ACTION

Taking time to explain what is happening regarding deteriorating health in an animal companion is fundamental. When given a poor prognosis, clients will go through anticipatory grief at the impending loss of their pet and need to be assured that you and your staff understand what they are going through, are aware of their needs, and will help them to help their pet. Some people may need guidance in making decisions and these consultations take time and skill.

The veterinary role at these times is one of guardian, anticipating future regrets a person may have and attempting to avoid them – for example choices around the timing of euthanasia, where it should happen, who should be present, and what will happen afterwards. In emergency cases, give adequate pain control and allow time alone

with the pet for goodbyes. If the animal is dead on arrival, arrange the body in a natural way on a blanket or fleece and give the client an opportunity to stroke it and say goodbye.

Make appointments for euthanasia at a time when the practice may be quieter. For emergency euthanasia or sudden death, try to keep the client away from public areas of the practice. Give clients the option to talk to the pet and say their goodbyes before you begin, explaining how quickly the animal may lose consciousness. Talk them through all aspects of the procedure as you go along. Practical issues for sensitive consideration include how the person is going to get home if on their own, and always discuss disposal of the pet's body and the arrangement for settling accounts prior to the euthanasia. A phone call later after the euthanasia to check how the client is doing can be beneficial. A short note or card expressing sympathy from all at the practice can be a personal gesture much appreciated by pet owners and goes a long way towards validating their sorrow. Make sure no vaccine reminders or other communications bearing the deceased pet's name are sent out in error and that all staff members are informed of the euthanasia.

Throughout the practice, have leaflets about pet loss available, or websites that can be given to people suffering loss. Also, display some material on your practice noticeboard so that all pet owners will realise it is 'normal' to grieve for their pet.

Calling the owner to advise that the cremated ashes of their pet are ready for collection can be a sensitive time. Clients who have been well supported in their grief will be more able to accept a new companion into their lives and continue to attend the vet practice that supported them.

### LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

The roles of those involved in veterinary practice are increasingly complex. While technical, diagnostic and treatment skills are necessarily to the forefront, the interpersonal, communication and emotional aspects of the job also need to be acknowledged. Vets and nurses need to be prepared to deal with anger and blame as well as a client's sadness, guilt, despair or depression. Taking time to acknowledge the importance, and impact, of this aspect of the work on veterinary staff is the first step to reducing the associated stress.

At staff meetings, review recent deaths/euthanasias and client responses. Encourage staff to speak about how this impacted on them. Also, discuss and consider how to handle situations that went 'badly' in a different way in the future. Be willing to admit and show that you are also affected by a death or euthanasia of a pet and the grief of the client. Clients and staff will appreciate you all the more and will feel their own depth of feeling validated.

*On April 29, a 'Pet Loss' workshop will be convened by Annie Kilmartin and Orla Keegan at the Irish Hospice Foundation. For more information visit: [www.solacepbc.com](http://www.solacepbc.com)*