



A GRIEF NOTE ON...

# *Pet Bereavement*

Psychologists have long known that the level of suffering that pet owners endure after their pet dies can be as devastating as the death of a person. Similar to humans, each relationship with a pet is unique, therefore so is each grief process. It is normal and expected to grieve after any attachment relationship is severed, whether due to a sudden accident or prolonged illness. Grieving pet owners sustain physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and social changes as they adapt to the upheaval in their lives presented by the loss. As with grief for a human, these normal signs of grief gradually wane with time, and the griever eventually maintains a relationship of warm memories of the pet.

However, pet loss can be viewed as a type of “disenfranchised grief”. Disenfranchised grief results when a person experiences a grief reaction, yet there is minimal or absent social recognition that the person has a right to grieve or receive social support. While many people in our society are aware of and enjoy intense bonds with pets, many do not recognize the precious human/pet bond, therefore adequate support for the griever is often lacking. This leaves grievers alone in their suffering.

Due to the disenfranchisement, grievers rarely have any sort of public support associated with a funeral or memorial ceremony for their deceased pets. Funerals and burial rituals are important to offer an opportunity for social support, but also aid in the healing process for the bereaved.

Another difference between grieving a pet and a human is that pets cannot talk to us and are often likened to children, who are dependent on the protection and care of their parents/owners. Particularly in scenarios of long-term illness, pet owners can't converse with their pets about the pet's experience of their illness, their pain level, their life – and in terminal conditions, they may feel helpless watching their pet suffer. In pet death, euthanasia is often an option. While this may afford pet owners some means of comfort and sense of control over their pet's suffering, it can also be immensely difficult to navigate and painful to endure. After the death of the pet, the owner is more prone to guilt.

The staff of the Center have personal and professional experience with pet loss and are clinically sensitive to the impact it can have on human lives. We eagerly encourage all of our clients to address any struggles with pet illness or death in our counseling or groups. As with bereavement for deceased loved humans, our goal is to aid in facilitating a healthy grief process in any way we can.