



Veterinary Wisdom®

for practice teams

The Good, the Bad, and the Holidays

Laurel Lagoni, M.S.

It's the holiday season and, for Emma and thousands like her, it comes with a mixed bag of emotions. On one hand, the holidays bring excitement and celebrations with family and friends. Yet, this year, it also triggers feelings of loneliness and regret. You see, in mid-November, Emma's beloved cat Sandy was euthanized.

Many people who lose pets around the holidays have a more complicated grief response, feeling depressed, anxious, or guilty, despite the festivities of the season. These feelings, during a traditionally happy time, can be confusing if clients don't understand *why* they are experiencing them. As a member of a veterinary practice team, you can provide valuable support for clients during the holidays if you keep the following tips in mind:

Educate clients about normal grief and remind them that they may need more support than usual, simply because their loss occurred during the holiday season. It's normal for people who are grieving to feel sad, depressed, irritable, foggy-headed, and fatigued, regardless of what is going on around them. These feelings are to be expected!

Encourage you clients to share their feelings and memories with understanding friends and family who support them. And, remind them that the great paradox of grieving is that talking openly about emotions, rather than trying to suppress them, actually helps the healing process progress. Ignoring memories and feelings or pushing grief away often makes it more powerful, more unpredictable, and much more difficult to manage.

Help clients feel more empowered by encouraging them to accept the fact that they have lost someone dear to them and that they must now allow their grief to be present. If your clients don't believe they have friends and family members who will support them, refer them to a qualified veterinary grief counselor in your area or online. You can find information about normal grief, as well as a current list of pet loss counseling resources at www.veterinarywisdomforpetparents.com

Suggest ways your clients might honor the memories of their pets, like creating an annual holiday ritual or memorial as a tribute to their pets. In fact, committing to an annual ritual of giving during the holidays is one of the most positive and effective ways to deal with grief. Examples might include an annual

donation in their pet's name to an animal-related charity or pet loss support program. If your clinic has a fund to help those who can't afford treatment for their own pets, you might suggest that, as well.

If you're willing to provide deeper support for clients, you might take your grief education effort one step further, teaching clients about what experts call "anniversary grief." "Anniversary grief" reactions occur during the days and weeks leading up to, as well as following, the anniversary of a loss. If clients experience anniversary reactions, their thoughts and emotions are similar to those they experienced when their pets died. These sensations may get "triggered" each time the same date, or even the same time of year, rolls around. "Anniversary" reactions can be even more distressing if clients aren't consciously aware of the links between their feelings and the deaths of their pets.

During anniversary reactions to pet loss, clients might experience:

- sad memories, feelings of grief, or anxious thoughts similar to those they had while their pets were ill or dying
- the arousal of more intense emotions like fear, guilt, helplessness, or depression, especially if some part of the grieving process seems unresolved
- the avoidance of events, places, and people still associated with a pet's death, like the street where a dog was hit by a car or your veterinary clinic, where their pets were euthanized.

Researchers say anniversary reactions may occur due to the way traumatic experiences are stored in human memory. Along with details like where people were, who they were with, and what they were doing, memory also contains information about the *threat* or *danger* inherent in an experience. Those memories of danger instinctively prompt humans to seek safety and protection, often by avoiding the place, or even the people, associated with loss.

Since you don't want you clients to avoid your veterinary clinic, it may be in your best interests, as well as your clients', to enlighten them about this phenomena. When people become consciously aware of why they may be reluctant to revisit your clinic, they can reassure themselves that they are not actually re-experiencing their pets' deaths, but simply remembering the distress they felt at that time. And, when you've handled their original loss with sensitivity and thoughtfulness, they'll also remember that they can trust you to support them through the tough experiences with their pets.

Download a client hand-out about "anniversary grief" at www.veterinarywisdomforpetparents.com