



# Notes from the Consultant's Corner

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## I Feel Stuck...How Do I Help a Grieving Client?

The relationship we have with our pets is unlike any other in our lives. Our pets are precious companions that give us an unconditional love even at our weakest moments in life. This love is pure, constant, unwavering, and difficult to find in other relationships. When your clients share such deep bonds with their pets, they will naturally experience strong emotions of grief upon the death of their beloved companions.

### Demystifying the Grief Process

Although society is slow to recognize the death of a companion animal as a valid loss, the grief pet owners feel is very real, and can be overwhelming. Their responses to pet loss are often as emotional as the grief responses accompanying the loss of a human friend or family member. Bereaved pet owners report disruptions in their lives, work roles, and other relationships due to their feelings of grief.

Grief is one of the most natural and normal emotions there is; yet it is one of the most misunderstood. Because grief often involves very painful and difficult feelings, most of us think that grief is wrong or "crazy" in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. Grief is a healthy psychological response that requires expression and acknowledgement. Attempts to suppress feelings of grief can sometimes actually prolong the healing process.

If you feel a discomfort with grief, it can create a barrier in supporting your clients. Many of the responses you have learned throughout your life have likely stemmed from a misunderstanding of the grief process and may reinforce the notion that grief is unnatural and should be avoided and expressed only in private.

### What to Expect From Your Client's Grief

There is no set time frame for grieving. Normal grief can last anywhere from weeks and months to years. All people grieve in their own way and in their own time. Normal grief however, does lessen in intensity over time.

As your clients grieve, they may have a variety of reactions. Although grief responses can differ from one person to another, there are many predictable expressions of grief. These responses can occur on physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and even spiritual levels. Following is a brief list of symptoms you may see in your clients (this is a short list and does not include all responses you may see):

- **Physical:** crying, sobbing, numbness, appetite disturbances or other physical discomforts, dizziness, sleeping disturbances, and sudden illness
- **Emotional:** shock, sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, fear, loneliness, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feeling overwhelmed, feeling hopeless and helpless or a desire to blame others
- **Intellectual:** denial, confusion, an inability to concentrate, erratic thoughts, intellectualizing about the loss, hallucinations (such as hearing the pet in the middle of the night)

- **Social:** wanting to withdraw from others or feeling a need to reach out to others
- **Spiritual:** anger at "God" or a higher power, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, searching for meaning in a loved one's death

### Tips for Supporting Grieving Pet Owners

The most effective way to support a grieving client is to normalize their grief and let them know that you are there to listen and support. Grief education and support is comforting and reassuring for your clients. The following are some simple suggestions for supporting your clients:

#### DO:

- Do send a condolence card, note, or offer a token of memorial (ClayPaws® prints, flowers, donation to an animal charity).
- Do listen and normalize the person's grief, as well as any guilt they might feel.
- Do use the pet's name and correct gender in your conversations and create opportunities for your client to talk and reminisce.
- Do give clients permission to grieve in their own unique way and on their own time.
- Do encourage clients to memorialize and honor their deceased pets.
- Do encourage clients to seek support from friends, family, co-workers, their spiritual community, etc.

#### DON'T:

- Don't encourage the more unhealthy responses to pet loss, such as stoicism and avoidance, by telling people to stay busy or to keep their minds on something else.
- Don't encourage immediate replacement of the deceased pet.
- Don't minimize the griever's pain by using clichés like "Count your blessings" or "You still have other pets."
- Don't encourage negative coping strategies or sudden changes such as turning to alcohol or moving to a new location.
- Don't put grief on a time schedule or expect it to disappear overnight (*It's "been three months now. Shouldn't you be over this by now?"*).
- Don't impose your own religious/spiritual beliefs (*"She's in heaven right now and God is looking over her"*).

If you do not allow your own discomfort with grief to prevent you from providing support to your clients, you will feel less clumsy in talking with your clients and you will be much more effective in dealing with their emotions. One of the leading causes of client dissatisfaction with their veterinarians is a perceived "indifference" to the death of a family pet. This a profound time in a client's life and it is essential that you respond appropriately and skillfully. Skilled emotional support makes your job easier and gives your pet hospital an outstanding reputation in your community, as well.

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