

Assessing Which Clients Need More Emotional Support When Pets Die

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Several variables can help you predict which of your clients may have more intense grief responses when their companion animals die. This can be important information as cases involving intense grief can often require more of your understanding and time. The following “red flags” can alert you to clients who may benefit from referrals to grief support programs or mental health professionals for further counseling and ongoing support.

- Cases that involve young children. Parents often don't know how to talk with kids about death and may benefit from an expert's guidance.
- Clients who identify their companion animals as their children, best friends, or primary source of support.
- Clients who live alone and cannot identify other sources of emotional support.
- Clients who have invested significant amounts of time, energy, and money in their companion animals' treatment. After such intense emotional investment, people can interpret loss very personally and be devastated by their seeming lack of control over their pet's fate.
- Clients who have recently experienced other significant losses and/or stressors, like the death of a human family member, a major illness, divorce, loss of a job, a recent move, or even happier events like the birth of a child.
- Clients who symbolically link their pets to another person, relationship, or time in their lives. Symbolic links often develop from previous losses and grief that is still unresolved.
- Clients who over-anthropomorphize (assign human characteristics and/or meaning to) their pets, referring to them in extreme terms, as if they were human beings (eg. “my son,” “my closest friend,” “the one being I can't live without.”)
- Clients who may be clinically depressed or those who make references to suicide, homicide, abuse, or violence.



If clients meet two or more of these criteria, educate them about the emotional support services available in your area early in your relationship, rather than waiting until after their pet dies. Clinical experience shows grief counseling and emotional support can yield the greatest benefits for pet parents when they take place *before* the death of a companion animal.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com