



It's All My Fault! Dealing with Clients Who Feel Guilty

by Dana Durrance, M.A.

Guilt is the critical inner voice that judges our actions, thoughts, and feelings. Guilt is a particularly insidious emotion because it can block our ability to grieve a death in the way that we need to. Guilt can complicate your clients' grieving processes because they can get "stuck" on past events to the point where they cannot move forward.

When clients love their pets, they expect themselves to be perfect for them. This sets up an impossible standard to live by. Pets, like children, are seen as totally dependent on people for their well-being. Thus, clients expect themselves to be able to control every aspect of their pet's lives and protect them from all harm. The problem of course, is that no one is perfect nor can they control life events such as disease and accidents.

Guilt can be justified or unjustified. Justified guilt comes from actions that may have precipitated a pet's death (such as walking a dog off leash who is then hit by a car.) Unjustified guilt comes when a client believes that small, insignificant situations or circumstances have somehow caused the pet's death (believing that a dog's cancer was caused by having him sleep in the hallway instead of in the owner's bed.) Whether the guilt is justified or not, it is important to remember that guilt can haunt your clients for a very long time unless they address it directly and deal with it in active ways.



Common Precipitants of Client Guilt

- Accidental deaths (car accidents from walking dogs off leash or fence gates left open, poisoning from household chemicals or plants)
- Unexpected illnesses such as cancer or major organ failure
- Euthanasia or electing to stop treatment
- Inability to afford veterinary services

Ways to Deal with Clients who Feel Guilty

Whether the guilt is justified or not, you cannot make your clients' guilty feelings go away no matter what you say. In fact, if you try to talk someone out of feeling guilty, this can often backfire and only strengthen their resolve. The better way to approach the situation is to acknowledge their remorse and help them create opportunities for working through their guilt.

You can also reassure clients that you do not judge them or think badly of them. Clients often wonder how their actions have affected your opinion of them. They may feel embarrassed or ashamed and you can emphasize the love they have for their pet and that you still think of them as a caring and good person. This also helps you remember to separate the person from the person's behavior. You may not always agree with your clients' behavior, but you can still care about and support that person. →

(Cont.)

What You Can Say

When your clients express feelings of guilt, try one or more of these responses.

- “I can see that this mistake is making you feel very guilty. However, I believe that you truly loved your dog and never intended to bring any harm to him.”
- “It’s clear to me how much you loved your cat and feel guilty about not finding the tumor sooner. In your head you know that there is no way that you could have known, but your heart is having trouble believing it.”
- “I know how much you love your dog and you feel guilty about not being able to afford the surgery. However, your ability to pay for the surgery has nothing to do with how much you love him. We all need to live in the real world and your finances don’t represent your love for him.”

What Clients Can Try

If you have clients who feel guilty, suggest they:

- write a letter telling their pet all the things they feel guilty about, apologizing for what they feel they did wrong
- do something worthwhile in honor of the pet. Give some time or money to benefit animals and do so with the knowledge that this may reconcile what they feel guilty about
- educate other pet owners about how a pet’s accidental death could be avoided in the future (e.g. sending out flyers in the neighborhood about the dangers of walking a dog off leash)
- “ask” the pet for forgiveness. Most people believe that their pets would be very forgiving and would not hold a grudge. Clients must find a way to forgive themselves. Remind clients that there is no earthly way for them to be perfect.
- do something “difficult,” yet positive in honor of the pet. An example might be giving up smoking in honor of a pet. The act of self-sacrifice may give the client a way to feel that they can “atone” for their actions.
- try to keep a balanced perspective. When people feel guilty about something, it is very hard to remember the good they have done. Clients need to make a conscious choice to remember the positive things. Tell them to take out a sheet of paper...on one side write down all the things that they feel guilty about with their pet. On the other side, write down all the things they have done that were positive and good for their pet (you can help them with this part.) This will help the client remember their good qualities and the times when they did come through for their pet.
- realize that the past cannot be changed. Encourage clients to focus on their future actions and invest their energy in how they want to move forward. This will help them get “unstuck” in their grief process.

No matter what clients are feeling guilty about, it is important to remind them that they are not perfect. Help them to understand that they have been living with an impossible standard and that it is never possible to control all life events such as accidents and the random occurrence of disease. Once they accept the fact that they are not expected to be perfect, it is easier for their intellect to reason with their heart.

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