

Companion Animal Loss and Disenfranchised Grief: What Grief Counselors Need to Know

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Abstract

An overwhelming majority of households have at least one companion animal. It is inevitable that they will have to deal with the death of their companion animal. This conceptual paper focuses on the human-animal bond, companion animal loss, disenfranchised grief, and grief counseling for companion animal loss.

Keywords: Companion animal loss, human-animal bond, disenfranchised grief, empathic failure, rituals, grief counseling

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades there has been a considerable increase in research focusing on animals, animal welfare, human-animal bonds, and companion animal loss and grief (Doka, 2002; Packman, Carmack, Katz, Carlos, Field, & Landers, 2014; Spain, O'Dwyer, & Moston, 2019). However, much remains to be seen regarding companion animal loss and disenfranchised grief (Marr, Kaufman, & Craig, 2022). This paper seeks to shed light on this area by looking at the disenfranchised grief that many suffer when they lose a companion animal. As Doka (2002) points out, "animals' roles are undervalued unless the animals are of direct use to people and society" (p. 251). It is this line of thought that undergirds the way in which many people think when it comes to the loss of a companion animal.

2. The Human-Animal Bond (HAB)

It is documented that society shifted from a hunter-gatherer way of life to a more agriculture type of living (Fine, 2025). This shift changed the way in which people interacted with animals (Marr et al., 2022). The shift went from animals used strictly for utilitarian purposes to that of companions (Turner, 2007). The domestication and socialization of animals was an interactive process of mutual cooperation and coevolution based on a shared need for shelter, food, and protection (Walsh, 2009, p. 463). Historically, anthropologists have traced human interactions with dogs to approximately 15,000-30,000 years (Fine, 2025). There is thought that certain wolves were chosen for domestication by humans based on their cooperative manner and their ability to communicate. The evolving trust between the two gradually developed over the years. At first, dogs viewed humans as a source of food, shelter, and water that later evolved into a reciprocal relationship between humans and canines (Fine, 2025, p. 4).

As Fine (2025) points out the science of understanding the human-animal connection made headway since the National Institutes of Health (NIH) workshop on health benefits of pets in 1987 (p.4). Interest in the human-animal connection has heightened over the past several decades because of mainstream media and press coverage of the impact of animals on humans' lives. The strength of the human-animal bond allowed companion animals to adopt roles as members of the family and provide significance to our lives (Fine, 2025, p. 5). Beck and Katcher (2003) suggest that sharing our lives with companion animals usually leaves people and animals feeling safer and brings stability into a person's life. Additionally, as discussed, the relationship between people and animals is natural and grounded in evolutionary development (Beck, 2014). An equally important point about the human-animal bond is that

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it is not a substitute for human companionship. It is one of many relationships that we can enjoy (Doka, 2002, p. 252).

3. Companion Animal Loss

Humans develop close emotional bonds with their companion animals. The inescapable loss of a companion animal can be a traumatizing experience and cause intense feelings of loss and grief. The closer a person is to their companion animal, the more intense and persisting grief responses become (Marr et al., 2022). As noted by Marr et al. (2022) grief can be so profound after the loss of a companion animal that it mirrors the loss experienced when we lose a human family member or a romantic partner (p. 462). Many people exhibit problematic symptoms following the death of a companion animal. These symptoms may include depression, sleeplessness, lack of appetite, and social isolation (Archer, 1994; Wrobel & Dye, 2003). Grief can also be felt by those who have lost a companion animal not through death. That is, the companion animal went missing (may have run away) or may have been stolen. There are also times when a person must relinquish their companion animal (e.g., financial reasons, moving, etc.). Lost companion animals and the relinquishing of companion animals can give rise to strong feelings of grief and loss just like losing a companion animal to death. Distress from the relinquishment of a companion animal in childhood can be felt in adult years after the relinquishment took place. This loss can be intensified when parents do not recognize the loss, and the child is not allowed to grieve the loss of the companion animal (Marr et al., 2022).

4. Disenfranchised Grief

As noted by Doka (2002) grief that has been disenfranchised is where a person is not afforded the right to grieve, their grief is not openly acknowledged, nor is it socially validated, nor is it publicly observed. Many times, companion animal loss is unacknowledged by others, not sanctioned by society as an important loss, and not seen as warranting social support (Cordaro, 2012). Thus, by society's norms the person's grief is not worthy of empathy and support (Packman et al., 2014). The lack of social support and legitimacy of the loss can lead to complicated or unresolved grief.

Neimeyer and Jordan (2002) discussed empathic failure as the interpersonal process that contributes to disenfranchised grief. The concept of empathic failure in the context of disenfranchised grief is where the failure of one person to understand the meaning and experience of another person takes place. In terms of disenfranchised grief there is a social element that hinders the growth of empathic support for bereaved individuals (Doka, 2002, Packman et al., 2014). Neimeyer and Jordan (2002) discuss empathic failure on four systemic levels. Their supposition can be used to apply to companion animal loss to better understand the experience of empathic failure. On the individual level or self with the self, bereaved companion animal owners experience empathic failure by denying or minimizing their grief. On the next level, self with family, families disregard the feelings of the bereaved individual within the family unit. Thereby, the families of bereaved companion animal owners may fail to provide empathy by minimizing the importance of the deceased companion animal (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). The next level, self with the larger community, a vast level of empathic failure accounts for the inequality between the depth of the grief a bereaved companion animal owner experiences and how the community feels about the loss of companion animals. An example of this may be when a person first loses their companion animal and is conflicted about calling out for work because the organization's policies do not take into consideration the loss of a companion animal. The last level, self with transcendent reality suggests a spiritual disenfranchisement. That is, a clergy member not showing empathy or validation over the loss of a companion animal leaving the bereft individual to feel invalidated. Further complications on this level come when a bereaved companion animal owner is left to reconcile the companion animal's afterlife within various religious institutions (Cordaro, 2012).

Disenfranchised bereaved companion animal owners perceive their grief as unimportant and inappropriate (Attig, 2004). When people do not sanction an individual's right to grieve over the loss of a companion animal, grief reactions like depression and anger can become problematic and become complicated (Turner, 2003). Since empathy and social support are crucial for a bereaved individual, if family and friends do not exhibit the necessary support to aid healing, the bereaved individual can seek out grief counseling where they will feel supported and where they will be connected to community resources (Cordaro, 2012).

5. Grief Counseling for Companion Animal Loss

The first step in grief counseling for those who lost companion animals is to validate the individual's loss and the right to grieve. It is imperative that grief counselors convey a nonjudgemental stance regarding the client's loss

(Cordaro, 2012). Counselors should learn the name of the client's animal and not refer to the animal as "the cat" or "the dog" (Doka, 2002). Counselors should use the name of the animal throughout sessions with the client. Counselors working with bereaved companion animal owners should let the clients be "the experts" on themselves. It is important to focus on the subjective meaning of the client's experience (Cordaro, 2012, Doka 2002). Suggesting important resources like support groups are essential in the healing process for some experiencing companion animal loss. Those facing more complicated grief may be best served by individual counseling (Doka, 2002). It is of immense importance that a counselor understands the depth of the emotional bond the person had with the companion animal, the role the companion animal played in the individual's life, and the individual's social support system (Cordaro, 2012).

Counselors should address the loss of a companion animal as they would with any other significant loss. Taking an accurate case history helps to facilitate the meaning that the companion animal held in the client's life. The case history should include details about the loss, response to the loss by others in the client's life, and other variables that may affect the client's grief (Doka, 2002). Counselors may find it useful to utilize a range of interventive approaches, including the creation of personal rituals to commemorate the deceased companion animal (Doka, 2002).

The role of personal rituals can be so important to those grieving the loss of a companion animal. This is because rituals are often denied to disenfranchised grievers. Doka (2002) outlines four types of rituals: rituals of continuity, rituals of transition, rituals of reconciliation, and rituals of affirmation. The question becomes – which type of ritual(s) would be most helpful to the grieving client? Rituals of continuity focus on acknowledging the ongoing presence or impact of the death (Doka, 2002). An example of this type of ritual might be lighting a candle on meaningful days like the birthday of the companion animal or the day the companion animal died. Rituals of transition look to mark a change or movement since the loss experience (Doka, 2002). An example of this type of ritual may be where a client scatters the ashes of the deceased companion animal. Rituals of reconciliation allow grievers the opportunity to complete some unfinished business and/or offer or accept forgiveness (Doka, 2002). If the client had to euthanize their companion animal, they may be looking for forgiveness. Designing a ritual with your client that will resolve any guilty feelings associated with euthanizing the companion animal can be an enormously powerful tool in the therapeutic process. The last ritual is that of affirmation. Rituals of affirmation are intended to affirm the loss and to say thank you for the legacies they received from their companion animal (Doka, 2002). Rituals of affirmation afford the client an opportunity to affirm the unique essence of the companion animal being memorialized. Creating a collage of pictures of the companion animal is an example of a ritual of affirmation. Rituals can help enfranchise the disenfranchised griever and serve to validate grief and allow opportunities for catharsis (Doka, 2002).

6. Conclusion

Companion animals are important members of the family. It is paramount that counselors arm themselves with strategies to help the bereaved deal with this significant loss. As Cordaro (2012) contends, bereaved companion animal owners are likely to suffer in silence in their disenfranchised grief making them extremely vulnerable to intensified grief reactions, a lack of social support, and complicated grief (p. 291). Counselors can intervene by providing grief counseling, recommending resources like self-help groups, and providing ideas for rituals to commemorate the companion animal. Counselors who acknowledge the client's loss as legitimate, the more likely the client will be able to begin to accept the loss and feel understood. Legitimizing the grief and empathizing with the client may also influence the tone of the broader society in that the grief that comes from companion animal loss is a normative process to be valued and not disenfranchised (Cordaro, 2012).

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