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## Coping with Animal Companion Loss Across the Age Continuum

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Eleven-year-old Grant cried the night before his dog, Duke, was euthanized. He insisted that his family give Duke a bath and that he and Duke sleep together as they had so many other times. Grant said, "I was sad when Duke died because I loved him. He'd been my dog my whole life" (G. Stevens, personal communication, December 18, 2006). The following day Grant stated, "This is the first day of my life without Duke" (M. Stevens, personal communication, December 13, 2006).

"The first day of my life without my loved animal" is experienced by people of all ages. The age does not matter—the relationship does. Society has changed (e.g., family structures and relationships, geographical distances between family, accelerating work and family responsibilities) resulting in animal companions having increasing important roles in peoples' lives (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). People take care of their animal companions and they take care of the people—providing support, being our companions, nurturing people through illnesses, and helping people to manage stress. Larry, who is happily retired, described his dog, Sophie, as his "constant companion and soulmate" (L. Anderson, personal communication, January 6, 2007).

This unmistakable interdependence of animal companionship is prominent in people's lives. The love is deep, as is the subsequent grief at their death. Across the life span this grief can be as profound, if not more so, than that for a human (Carmack, 2003). As with other types of grief, there is no one way that children, adolescents, adults and elders cope with the death of a beloved animal. There is a spectrum of responses just as there is of coping strategies. Across all ages, complicated grief responses occur in which clients need immediate and ongoing professional interventions (Lagoni, Butler, & Hetts, 1994; Ross, 2005; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998). Children, often overlooked as mourners, grieve the loss of pets as their best friends, confidantes, ever-present playmates and siblings (Carmack, 2003; Ross, 2005; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998). Caleb, remembering when he was 7, described his dog, Rio, as both a protector and "companion who played with me like an older brother" (C. Banks, personal communication, December 29, 2006). When others are unkind, children's pets love them unconditionally. Children tell their animals whatever secrets are in their hearts, never feeling laughed at or judged.

Four-year-old Abby goes outside with Biscuit, her Dalmatian, every morning and sings to him. It means a lot to Abby because, for her, Biscuit enjoys it and thinks he is the only one deserving of the performance (M. Stevens, personal communication, December 13, 2006). For 8-year-old Clay, his cat, Yzma, comes to him when he is lonely or when his brothers do not want to play with him (C. Stevens, personal communication, December 18, 2006). Abby's Beta fish, Bananas, guards her room at night, keeping her safe and preventing her from being lonely (M. Stevens, personal communication, December 13, 2006). The species do not matter—the relationship does.

Children's grief can be experienced in a variety of ways. Some children's grief can seem like that of adults—unfamiliar, frightening and intense with feelings of self-blame, anger and sorrow (Carmack, 2003). It is not unusual for children to grieve as much for an animal as they do for a family member such as a grandparent. There are excellent resources for parents and others who care about and want to help (Goldman, 2000; Milani, 1998; Ross, 2005; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998). Children's complicated grief responses require immediate professional care (Ross, 2005). Adolescents grieve the loss of their animal companions who they have considered surrogate siblings, silent counselors and best friends (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). Teens, also potentially forgotten as grievers, mourn the bonding they have had with their animals who have provided them with ongoing affection during the instability and changes of puberty (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). Fourteen-year-old Caleb validated the literature by saying that his animal companions are “like really close friends who don't judge you or laugh at you and who I can talk with about anything.” He described these aspects of being with animals as even more important to him now as a teenager (C. Banks, personal communication, December 29, 2006).

Adolescents' grief responses are related to the degree of bonding experienced with their animals (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996). Often they cope when they create online or other types of memorials. Complicated grief responses can occur with this group also, demanding immediate professional interventions.

Adults and elders grieve the loss of the “there-ness” or presence of their animals. Typically, animal companions are highly valued family members (Antinori, 1998; Carmack, 2003; Lagoni, Butler, & Hetts, 1994; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998). Consistently, companion animals have supported adults and elders through life's challenges and struggles (e.g., losses, job changes, deaths of family and friends, illnesses and role transitions). For some adults and elders their animals may now be their only family, as well as their last connection to a spouse, child or home (Antinori, 1998; Carmack, 2003). Likewise, their animals may provide the only structure, affection, companionship and predictability in their lives (Carmack, 2003). Frequently, the relationship with a pet is described “as a child” with adults being “Mom” and “Dad” (Antinori, 1998; Carmack, 2003). When an animal dies, it is often described, “like losing a child” (L. Anderson, personal communication, January 6, 2007; Antinori, 1998; Carmack, 2003).

While for many children the loss of an animal may be their first experience with death, for adults and elders their animals' deaths may be the latest in an ongoing series of losses and deaths. For elders, life's losses come more frequently. They do not have time to fully grieve one before another occurs. At my recent pet loss support group, three elders described their grief for the deaths of their animals as being more difficult because of their cumulative losses. To lose their beloved animal on top of their other multiple losses felt overwhelming, especially since the deceased animal helped them through the other losses.

One way in which people across the age span cope with their pets' deaths is through honoring the animals and honoring the relationships (Anderson & Anderson, 2005; Carmack, 2003; Traisman, 1995). Children honor these relationships through art, music, drama, stories, funerals and eulogies (Carmack, 2003; Ross, 2005). The importance of rituals for adolescents has been described (Brown, Richards & Wilson, 1996). Various experiences of and coping strategies for grief exist for adults and elders. The contextual factors in their lives, degree of emotional support and presence of people who encourage them to speak openly about the animal and the animal's meaning in their lives influence their grief journey. Often adults and elders are limited in those who can and will support and validate their losses.

The two emotions I see most often clinically in adults are profound grief and guilt. These individuals often are surprised by the intensity and duration of their grief. As with other types of grief, strong physiological, emotional and behavioral responses may occur including sobbing, inability to function, exacerbation of physical or emotional conditions, and suicidal ideation and behaviors. Complicated grief responses require crisis and/or sustained professional assistance. Guilt comes from perceived acts of omission and commission. Euthanasia with its frequent subsequent guilt, self-doubt and questioning is one of the most challenging aspects of pet loss (Carmack, 2003; Lagoni, Butler, & Hetts, 1994; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998).

About 22 years ago I led a pet loss support group specifically for elders. Approximately 23 people attended that afternoon session and openly spoke of their grief for their beloved animals that had supported them through years of life's challenges. Particularly poignant was their acknowledgement that they now felt too old to get another animal. They feared outliving their animals and many realized their own physical limitations prevented them from taking on the responsibility for another animal companion. Additionally, for many their housing arrangements did not allow animals. Adults and elders honor their animals and their shared relationships when they create a home altar, a headstone for a gravesite, or, for people who are comfortable with the Internet, a Web memorial.

Numerous online sites exist for pet Web memorialization. (See the Resource section of the ADEC Web site at [www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org) for links to some of these sites.) Likewise, they honor when they tell the stories of their animals and give witness to their importance

in their lives. Some participate in community pet loss support groups and/or online chat rooms (like [www.aplb.org](http://www.aplb.org)), while others seek individual counseling. For all ages the value of rituals is high. This can be especially true for those for whom, no matter the age, a funeral, burial or eulogy is important. Encouraging all ages to plan for and participate in rituals or memorials is one way to give a voice for expression of grief. It also is an important lesson in validating loss and feelings and demonstrating respect for the animal, the relationship the emotions.

Companioning with those who are grieving the loss of their animals has been one of my major professional activities for 25 years. People have gifted me with their stories. I know with certainty it is not the human age or animal species that matters, it is the relationship, the highly valued abiding presence.

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