



## From the Backyard to the Pet Bed: The Changing Role of Animals in Society

by Michelle Linn-Gust, MS

I was a late bloomer into the world of pet guardianship. While I grew up in a home with gerbils, goldfish that never lived more than a few months, and a German Shepherd, the joke often was whether or not I would ever pet the dog. When my husband and I bought our house, he begged me for a dog. However, when a neighbor found a stray who needed a home and asked us to take him in, Joe was hesitant. Suddenly, he feared the dog could jump our block wall in the backyard and we both felt nervous about taking on the care of another living being. But after an overnight stay, the dog, which we named Chaco, clearly became part of our family. Today, four dogs live with us, and we represent what is becoming more typical as the traditional role of the dogs as hunting and gathering comrades has evolved into physical and emotional companions. I would come to realize that during stressful events and the numerous losses we have suffered in the past four years, these creatures were very helpful for me in unique ways.

The pet's place in the home has been transformed through an ever-changing household composition. This has altered the role these pets serve during times of loss and at the times of the loss of the pet as well. Sable (1995) noted that the pet will continue to play an important role in families as the family landscape continues to change and people rely on their pets more for help in reducing loneliness, giving purpose to their lives and providing comfort by being nearby. Pets might serve as a family member and a person's only perceived support during times of loss. Also, a person might use the pet in addition to human supports during grief.

According to the American Pet Product Manufacturers Association (APPMA, 2006), 61.9 million homes in the United States have a pet. In 2006, the APPMA estimated that people would spend \$38.4 billion on these pets, up from \$36.3 billion in 2005. At the same time, the average household size in the United States is shrinking (U.S. Census, 2001). In 2000, while the average household size was 2.59 people and the average family 3.14 people, only 52 percent of households were led by a married couple. The two-parent, two-child household that once was so recognizable is not always so easy to find on every street in the neighborhood. As household compositions have shifted, so has the role of the pet. People do not live as close to their families and might find a pet to be the anchor of

support in times when family members are not available (or when people choose not to be available to family members).

Pets have been considered an extension of the human family for some time. Dogs worked in the hunting and gathering role (and some still do) and others serve as protection for their owners. However, many more pets are found inside homes, sleeping in beds with their names embroidered on them. People are more likely than ever to consider the pet to be a member of the family and send out Christmas cards with the pet's photo included. They also take them on vacations (or send them to pet hotels while the family vacations) and might even take them to work. Their immersion into family life has been questionable because the roles they typically serve are not what would be considered useful economic functions as they do not contribute to the family's income or help clean the house (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Instead, the majority of their functions are purely emotional and psychological although these typically may not be considered functions that humans serve in families. Outside the family, pets also are being used for a number of functions for people including therapy for children, companionship for the elderly, and working with prison inmates who teach them skills to help disabled people. Researchers have found that pets positively affect people by decreasing loneliness, stimulating talk, encouraging touch and care, focusing attention, stimulating exercise, encouraging laughter and encouraging social contact (Beck, 1999). Pets also provide comfort for people in nonverbal ways, which is important because a portion of communication is nonverbal and this might work well for people who want comfort, but do not want to talk about their loss (Dew, 2000).

Dogs in particular have been found to lower stress levels of people performing stressful tasks. Kaiser, Spence, McGavin, Struble, & Keilman (2002) reported that talking to dogs reduced anxiety for people as they were performing a stressful task, whereas the opposite occurred if a human was there talking with the person while he or she was doing the stressful task. Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey (1991) found that women who performed stressful tasks in front of their pet dogs found the task to be challenging rather than stressful as they did when they performed it in front of a female friend. Siegel's (1990) research revealed that elderly owners of dogs shared a relationship with their dogs that pet owners of other animals did not; dog owners reported spending more time with their dogs outdoors and talking with their dogs. In turn, they reported less stress and fewer doctor contacts. The soothing effects of caressing a pet and the softness of its fur have been noted as topics that need more research because of calming qualities that they seem to bring people (Straatman, Hanson, Endenburg, & Mol, 1997). Baun & McCabe (2003) found that caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease lowered their stress levels by petting a companion animal. Tannen (2004) found that people used their dogs in interactions with other family members to diffuse tension.

Although few studies have specifically looked at how pets can help humans cope with other human losses, there are some that give us hints about how animals can help humans as they work through their grief. Eckstein (2000) found that animals reduced feelings of adversity or transitional issues during times of divorce or grief. Bolin (1987) reported that pet owner widows had a more positive outlook than did the non-pet owner widows. Also,

Akiyama, Holtzman, & Britz (1986) found that the non-pet owners reported more physical symptoms of illness. Following the loss of a child, Adkins & Rajecki (1999) found that 75 percent of parents stated that their dog or cat was helpful in adapting to the loss of the child. The pets were rated high in providing distraction, comfort and serving as a confidant while scoring low in the negative roles of burden and scapegoat. However, the helpfulness of the pet decreased with the increasing number of surviving children in the household and/or the presence of a new child. It appears that by having more children in the home, parents might have less energy left for the pet.

However, one major issue that pet guardians face is the shorter life span of most pets. Many animals (particularly dogs and cats) live less than 20 years. People might have multiple pets in one lifetime and throughout different points of the developmental lifespan. The loss of a pet could be a person's first experience with death. And because of the shorter lifespan, pet guardians also face the prospect of saying goodbye to a pet that has been with the human through important times of his or her life. Sometimes pet guardians are embarrassed by their grief, afraid that other people will not understand why they are upset (Podrazik, Shackford, Becker, & Heckert, 2000). But Quackenbush (1984) has noted that the grief experience of a pet is similar to that of a human loved one. In recent years, the information available on this topic has increased along with the number of therapists who specialize in pet loss. There also is an increase in the availability of pet loss support groups, hotlines and Web sites. As the pet continues to be of importance to humans, the support and resources for people who cope with the loss of a pet also will expand.

For some people, the pet is the last connection to the person who died. They might find comfort in the fact that they still have that tie and then experience more grief when that connection dies. It also has been pointed out that people often find that the pet is the reason they get up each morning and get out for a walk because the pet needs to go out and needs to be fed (Akiyama, Holtman, & Britz, 1986). But for others, they might be angry when they are left to care for a pet they did not want in the first place because that pet belonged to the loved one (Lund, Johnson, Baraki & Diamond, 1984). It should be noted that people do not always respond positively to their own pets after a loss. The economic costs of the pet can be a concern (Akiyama, Holtman, & Britz, 1986). Sometimes, people find the pets to be a burden or as found by Lund, Johnson, Baraki & Diamond (1984), people feel negatively about their pets immediately after the death of a loved one when compared to months later. The pets were more work than they had energy for during that early point in their grief.

The study of the human-animal bond is not perfect. Some studies are dated while others lack a theoretical basis that many human-animal researchers have pointed out as missing from that research arena. Another issue is that the roles will differ because species of animals are unique. Some studies focus just on dogs while others are not specific to what kind of pet studied. This is important as the role of a dog in a family could be significantly different than that of a fish that cannot be petted or taken for a walk. But questions emerge about dogs and cats where no research has taken place. For instance, does the size of a dog matter? Is a lap dog a better companion than a large dog that

cannot sit on the couch? Is the friendliness of a cat a factor for someone who wants a companion after loss? Does the length and softness of the fur matter? While these might seem like trivial questions, they are important in finding out how pets can best be used to help people cope with loss.

When seeking interventions for grieving people, a pet might not be the answer for everyone. While not enough research has cleared who would benefit most from a pet during grief, it must be noted that there are other variables to consider. Obviously, animals are more important to some people than others. While pets are playing a larger role for many people in society, they do not have the same status with each person. As each person is unique, the grief experience will be as well, therefore, we must consider the grief experience itself (e.g., the type of death, the relationship to the person who died).

How people cope with pet loss is a place Beck & Katcher (2003) have noted as important because it provides us insight into understanding human loss. As people become more attached to their pets, those losses become more significant. If the ultimate goal is to help people cope with their grief, then we cannot let the opportunity to help people cope with pet loss slip by. And as the role of the pet has changed through the years, we cannot continue to ignore that many pets and/or animals can help people cope with the stress of their losses.

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