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Death of a Companion Cat or Dog and Human Bereavement: Psychosocial Variables

ABSTRACT

This study found that death depression, general depression, and positive attitudes toward, and attachment to, companion animals were associated with greater grief following the death of cats and dogs both in a veterinary client group who had recently lost their companion animals and in a college student group with a history of companion animal loss. The correlations of both the above variables and the demographic and death circumstance variables tended to be higher with the veterinary clients. Death of a dog by accident as opposed to illness correlated .81 with extended grief in the veterinary clients. Not having their dogs euthanized correlated .70 with extended grief in this group as well.

Humans appear to have an emotional bond or attachment to their companion animals that is not unlike what they experience with their family and friends. People often perceive their companion animals as friends or as part of the family (Gosse & Barnes, 1994; Katcher, 1989). Stallones, Marx, Garrity, and Johnson (1988) found that 95% of companion animal guardians regarded their pets as friends. In

a survey done by Cain (1983), 87% of respondents considered their companion animals members of the family; in another study, 99% of dog or cat guardians entering a university veterinary clinic identified their companion animals as family members (Voith, 1985).

As a result of these perceptions, what do these people experience when they lose one of their beloved companion animals? Grieving the loss of an animal is not merely a modern-day or North American experience. Herodotus said that the Egyptians mourned when dogs or cats passed away (Fogle, 1995; Netting, Netting, Wilson, & New, 1984). In central Japan, there are currently 465 companion animal memorial temples where companion animal guardians can bury and memorialize their beloved companion animals in specialized ritual services (Knight, 1996).

It is conceivable that the death of a companion animal can be just as devastating as the loss of a human significant other (Anderson, 1994; Avanzino, 1996; Hart, Hart, & Mader, 1990). Sife (1993) believed that “the mourning for a pet can be far more intense than for a human” (p. 2). Gerwolls and Labott (1994) maintained that psychological and physical problems typically associated with grief over human deaths also seem to occur in companion animal guardians. Rajaram, Garrity, Stallones, and Marx (1993) found that participants who experienced the death of a companion animal did not have as severe depressive symptoms as those who had lost a significant human, especially a spouse or a family member. However, Gerwolls and Labott (1994) found that subjects at 2, 8, and 26 weeks following the death of a companion animal did not score significantly lower (indicating less grief) on the Grief Experience Inventory than did those who had suffered a human loss.

The present study extended the findings of Planchon and Templer (1996) who reported that persons who grieved more after the death of a cat or dog had higher death depression (negative mood pertaining to one’s own death and death more generally) and more favorable pet attitude. The present study included a measure of general depression in addition to the measure of death depression used by Planchon and Templer. Because death depression correlates positively with general depression, it was decided to obtain a more comprehensive perspective by using a measure of general depression. Also included in this study was the scale of pet attitude employed by Planchon and Templer and another pet attitude instrument. The former is more of a

generic instrument measuring attitude toward companion animals while the latter pertains more to human-companion animal bonding. Additionally, the present study assessed demographic and companion animal death situational variables that, for the most part, did not yield a definitive picture in the Planchon and Templer study. Furthermore, the Planchon and Templer study assessed only intensity of grief symptoms, whereas the current study assessed both intensity and duration of grief symptoms.

This study appeared to have importance not only to veterinarians and those who come in contact with bereaved companion animal guardians but also to mental health professionals. Because there are so many companion animal guardians who will inevitably face separation from their companion animals, clinicians are in a position to offer support and empathy to their grieving clients. Their support could legitimize further the grief of companion animal guardians in the eyes of the general public.

Method

Participants

There were two groups of participants, veterinary clients and college students. Sixty-three companion animal guardians from two local veterinarian hospitals participated in the study. Forty-eight were female and 15 were male. They ranged in age from 9 to 85, with a mean age of 45.43 and a standard deviation of 14.43. One was African American; one, Asian American; and one, Hispanic American. Fifty-nine were White, and one did not specify ethnicity. Twenty-eight veterinary clients had a cat who died, and 35 veterinary clients had a dog who died.

A total of 391 San Jose State University introductory psychology students who had a cat or dog who died participated in the study. Of the students, 217 were female and 174, male. They ranged in age from 14 to 73, with a mean age of 20.56 and a standard deviation of 5.15. Thirty were African American; 3, American Indian; 180, Asian American; 67, Hispanic American; 107, White; and 4 did not specify ethnicity. Of the college students, 112 had a cat who died, 272 had a dog who died, and 7 did not specify the type of animal who died.

Measures

All participants were administered the 21-item self-report Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961); the 27-item self-report Censhare Pet Attachment Survey (Holcomb, Williams, & Richards, 1985) that contains two subscales, Relationship Maintenance and Intimacy; the 17-item self-report Death Depression Scale (DDS) (Templer, Lavoie, Chalgujian, & Thomas-Dobson, 1990); and the 18-item self-report Pet Attitude Scale (Templer, Salter, Dickey, Baldwin, & Veleber, 1981). Participants also completed the Pet Loss Questionnaire, which contains subject demographics, pet loss information, and grief symptoms (see Table 1).

Table 1. Pet Loss Questionnaire

Age: _____ Gender: _____ Female _____ Male

Ethnicity:

_____ African American

_____ American Indian or Alaskan Native

_____ Asian American or Pacific Islander

_____ Hispanic American

_____ White

1. What was the nature of the most recent loss of your companion animal? Please check only one.

_____ Accident

_____ Illness

2. Did the death involve euthanasia?

_____ Yes

_____ No

3. What type of companion animal did you have? Please check only one to indicate the type of animal that you lost most recently.

_____ Cat

_____ Dog

4. Please specify the amount of time that has passed since the loss occurred. _____

5. Please specify the amount of time that you had the animal. _____

6. At the time of the loss, were there other pets present in the household?

_____ Yes

_____ No

Table (cont.)

7. After your companion animal died, did you . . . (Please check all that apply and indicate the duration of each.)

_____	feel a lump in your throat?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	cry?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	feel a need to be alone?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	have difficulty sleeping?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	yell at someone?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	need an alcoholic drink?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	feel guilty?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	feel depressed?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	feel angry?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	feel a sense of failure?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years
_____	feel a sense of relief?				
_____	_____ hours	_____ days	_____ weeks	_____ months	_____ years

Procedure

A letter announcing the study was sent to 33 veterinarians from local small animal practices to elicit their help in obtaining potential participants for this study. A stamped acceptance postcard was included with the letter. Approximately two to three weeks later, those who had not returned the acceptance card were telephoned. Two veterinarians who wished to participate were provided with a detailed description of the methodology and procedures to be followed.

The principal researcher sent letters signed by the veterinarians briefly describing the study to clients who had lost a companion animal through death

within the last year. Companion animal guardians who wished to participate returned a pre-addressed, stamped postcard to the researcher. The senior author then sent a consent form and instruments to the companion animal guardians. Each participant signed the consent form, completed the measures described above, and returned them and the completed consent form in the pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope provided.

The San Jose State University Psychology 1 students were partially fulfilling a course requirement of 4 hours of research time by participating in the study and could do so by participating in studies of their choosing during the university's open research days. Participation in this study earned a student 1 hour of research credit. On the open research days, the students who wished to participate in this study were asked to sign two consent forms and complete the materials described above. They were instructed to keep one of the signed consent forms, to place the other signed consent form in the box marked *Consent Forms*, and to put the remaining materials in the box marked *Companion Animal Project*.

Two indices of cat grief and two indices of dog grief were employed. The first included the criteria used in the Planchon and Templer (1996) research in which the Fogle and Abrahamson (1991) items that significantly correlated at the .05 level with the total score (feel a lump in your throat, cry, feel a need to be alone, have difficulty sleeping, feel guilty, feel depressed, feel angry, and feel a sense of failure) were given 1 point each. They were subsequently referred to as Cat Grief 1 and Dog Grief 1. The second (Cat Grief 2 and Dog Grief 2) were extensions of Criterion 1. Specifically, the number of grief symptoms was multiplied by the time in days for the duration of the grief symptoms, and the total was calculated.

The independent variables were the BDI score; the Censhare Pet Attachment Survey total score as well as both the subscale scores (Relationship Maintenance and Intimacy); the Death Depression Scale score; the Pet Attitude Scale score; age of the companion animal guardian at the time of the loss; and gender. The variables also included whether death was accident-related or illness-related; whether euthanasia was involved; how much time had elapsed since the loss occurred; how long the person had the animal; and whether there were other companion animals in the household at the time of the loss.

Results

The reader should bear in mind that lower Pet Attachment Survey scores indicate more positive pet attachment. The reader also should keep in mind that Cat Grief 1 and Dog Grief 1 are measures of the intensity (the number of symptoms endorsed) of grief and that Cat Grief 2 and Dog Grief 2 are measures of the number of grief symptoms multiplied by the duration of the grief symptoms. The means and standard deviations of the duration of grief symptoms in days for the veterinary clients and college students are reported in Table 2. Tables 3 and 4 consist of the independent variable correlational matrices for the veterinary clients and college students respectively.

Table 5 displays the product-moment correlation coefficients between the independent variables and the two cat grief and two dog grief indices, respectively, for the veterinary clients. Multiple regression was not carried out because of an insufficient number of veterinary client subjects.

Table 6 provides the product-moment correlation coefficients of the independent variables with the two cat grief indices and the two dog grief indices, respectively, for the college students. Cat Grief 1 stepwise multiple regression yielded an R^2 of .30, with the contribution of the Pet Attachment Survey

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Grief Symptoms

Grief symptoms	Veterinary clients		College students	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Feel a lump in your throat	21.15	52.80	100.33	589.12
Cry	40.46	63.35	49.81	301.67
Feel a need to be alone	26.95	61.80	18.63	63.14
Have difficulty sleeping	53.15	76.38	14.90	47.61
Yell at someone	4.00	2.65	64.73	329.71
Need an alcoholic drink	3.33	3.21	63.21	133.76
Feel guilty	21.60	161.07	93.33	299.90
Feel depressed	82.59	150.57	45.17	198.71
Feel angry	369.76	868.49	52.84	238.02
Feel a sense of failure	61.19	85.21	69.92	318.60
Feel a sense of relief	79.56	141.64	49.79	147.28

Table 3. Correlations of Independent Variables With Cat/Dog Grief - Veterinary Clients

Independent variable	Cat grief		Dog grief	
	1	2	1	2
Beck Depression Inventory	.52**	.68**	.51**	.35
Pet Attachment Survey	-.29	-.31	-.50**	.05
Relationship Maintenance	-.28	-.34	-.41**	.03
Intimacy	-.26	-.19	-.53***	.09
Death Depression Scale	.33	.62**	.54***	-.02
Pet Attitude Scale	.20	.33	.30	-.10
Age of pet owner when cat died	-.45*	.27	-.45**	-.30
Gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male)	-.53**	-.34	-.06	-.25
Death of pet	-.05	.13	-.06	-.81***
(1 = Accident, 2 = Illness)				
Euthanasia (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.13	.16	-.11	-.70***
Time since loss occurred	.14	-.23	-.19	.04
Time had the animal	.25	.41	-.37*	-.49*
Presence of other pets	-.01	.05	-.07	.29
(0 = No, 1 = Yes)				

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4. Correlations of Independent Variables With Cat/Dog Grief - College Students

Independent variable	Cat grief		Dog grief	
	1	2	1	2
Beck Depression Inventory	.21*	.13	.14*	.05
Pet Attachment Survey	-.52***	-.28**	-.22***	-.02
Relationship Maintenance	-.48***	-.28**	-.20***	.00
Intimacy	-.51***	-.24*	-.23***	-.05
Death Depression Scale	.20*	-.15	.18**	.03
Pet Attitude Scale	.40***	.10	.25***	.09
Age of pet owner when cat died	-.13	.35***	-.09	-.05
Gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male)	-.06	-.05	-.04	-.01
Death of pet	.02	-.21	.03	-.08
(1 = Accident, 2 = Illness)				
Euthanasia (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.05	.16	.07	.00
Time since loss occurred	-.08	.01	-.12*	.10
Time had the animal	-.02	.25*	.14*	-.04
Presence of other pets	-.06	-.04	.11	.07
(0 = No, 1 = Yes)				

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 5. Correlations of Independent Variables With Cat/Dog Grief - Veterinary Clients

Independent variable	Cat grief		Dog grief	
	1	2	1	2
Beck Depression Inventory	.52**	.68**	.51**	.35
Pet Attachment Survey	-.29	-.31	-.50**	.05
Relationship Maintenance	-.28	-.34	-.41**	.03
Intimacy	-.26	-.19	-.53***	.09
Death Depression Scale	.33	.62**	.54***	-.02
Pet Attitude Scale	.20	.33	.30	-.10
Age of pet owner when cat died	-.45*	-.27	-.45**	-.30
Gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male)	-.53**	-.34	-.06	-.25
Death of pet (1 = Accident, 2 = Illness)	-.05	.13	-.06	-.81***
Euthanasia (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.13	.16	-.11	-.70***
Time since loss occurred	.14	-.23	-.19	.04
Time had the animal	.25	.41	-.37*	-.49*
Presence of other pets (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.01	.05	-.07	.29

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

total score and the BDI. Table 7 contains the multiple regression summary. Cat Grief 2 multiple regression yielded an R^2 of .43, with the contribution of total score on age of companion animal guardian when cat died, Relationship Maintenance, death of companion animal (accident or illness), the amount of time the person had the animal, the time since the loss occurred, and the BDI. Table 8 contains the multiple regression summary. Dog Grief 1 multiple regression yielded an R^2 of .12, with the contribution of total score on the Pet Attitude Scale, the Death Depression Scale, and the BDI. Table 9 contains the multiple regression summary.

Discussion

General depression, death depression, and the four measures of attitude toward companion animals and relationships with them are the variables that tended to produce the highest correlations with the grief measures in the veterinary client and college student participants. It must be kept in mind that most of the participants apparently are not depressed. The veterinary clients had a BDI mean of 6.21 and a standard deviation of 7.25. According to the

Table 6. Correlations of Independent Variables With Cat/Dog Grief - College Students

Independent variable	Cat grief		Dog grief	
	1	2	1	2
Beck Depression Inventory	.21*	.13	.14*	.05
Pet Attachment Survey	-.52***	-.28**	-.22***	-.02
Relationship Maintenance	-.48***	-.28**	-.20***	.00
Intimacy	-.51***	-.24*	-.23***	-.05
Death Depression Scale	.20*	-.15	.18**	.03
Pet Attitude Scale	.40***	.10	.25***	.09
Age of pet owner when cat died	-.13	.35***	-.09	-.05
Gender (1 = Female, 2 = Male)	-.06	-.05	-.04	-.01
Death of pet (1 = Accident, 2 = Illness)	.02	-.21	.03	-.08
Euthanasia (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	.05	.16	.07	.00
Time since loss occurred	-.08	.01	-.12*	.10
Time had the animal	-.02	.25*	.14*	-.04
Presence of other pets (0 = No, 1 = Yes)	-.06	-.04	.11	.07

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 7. Summary of Simultaneous Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Students' Cat Grief 2

Independent Variable	B	SE B	BETA
Age of pet guardian when cat died	23.24	7.20	.35**
Relationship Maintenance	-11.62	4.20	-.29**
Death of pet (1 = Accident, 2 = Illness)	-174.03	69.65	-.25**
Time had the animal	1.84	.66	.28**
Time since loss occurred	-1.67	.65	-.30**
Beck Depression Inventory	7.34	3.60	.19*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 8. Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Students' Cat Grief 1

Independent variable	B	SE B	BETA
Pet Attachment Survey	-.08	.01	-.52***
Beck Depression Inventory	.05	.02	.19**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 9. Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting College Students' Dog Grief 1

Independent variable	B	SE B	BETA
Pet Attitude Scale	.03	.01	.30***
Death Depression Scale	.09	.02	.21***
Beck Depression Inventory	.03	.01	.15**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Beck manual, only 11.1% of the veterinary clients are in the range of possible depression or depression. The college students had a mean of 9.82 and a standard deviation of 8.67, and 20.5% of them scored in the range of possible depression or depression.

As in the Planchon and Templer (1996) study, the Death Depression Scale correlated positively with measures of companion animal grief. In the present study, but not in the Planchon and Templer study, a measure of general depression was employed. This measure, the BDI, correlated positively with the indices of companion animal grief.

The positive correlations of the Pet Attitude Scale and the cat grief and dog grief measures were congruent with the Planchon and Templer (1996) study that also reported significant positive correlations between such variables. In that study, the Pet Attitude Scale was the only pet attitude measure employed. In the present study, the Pet Attachment Survey correlations with cat grief and dog grief were also positive and tended to be somewhat higher. It is, therefore, suggested that these higher correlations are a function of the Pet Attachment Survey's tapping more of the intense human-animal bonding in comparison to the Pet Attitude Scale, which is more of a generic measure of attitudes toward pets. Furthermore, the positive correlations between the grief measures and the length of time the owner had the pet also would be congruent with such a formulation.

It is apparent that the Companion Animal Grief Index 1 (those that measured intensity of the grief experience) provided higher correlations than the Companion Animal Grief Index 3 (this was essentially a measure of intensity times duration). The reason for this is not known. Participants were asked to report their grief experiences retrospectively; for some individuals, these losses occurred decades ago. The self-report retrospective data pertaining to

duration and severity might place greater strain on memory resources than intensity alone.

The two highest correlations of the study are with extended grief with veterinary clients. Clients whose dogs died because of an accident had greater extended grief ($r = .81, p < .001$). Perhaps they blamed themselves for not taking better precautions. Clients whose dogs were not euthanized had greater extended grief ($r = .70, p < .001$). Perhaps the dog's suffering upset them. Apparently, as with human deaths, the circumstances of the death can make a bad situation worse.

We recommend that research of a more comprehensive and definitive sort be conducted with the companion animal grief. We suggest that this research include a variety of clinical, personality, demographic, life history, and pet history variables. Longitudinal research in guardians with terminally ill companion animals and longitudinal research following the death of a companion animal may be fruitful.

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Note

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