

Explorations in Mental Health

PET LOSS, GRIEF, AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

PRACTITIONERS NAVIGATING THE HUMAN–ANIMAL BOND

Edited by
Lori Kogan and Phyllis Erdman



Pet Loss, Grief, and Therapeutic Interventions

This book recognizes and legitimizes the significance of pet and animal loss by exploring the various expressions of trauma and grief experienced by those who work with, live with, or own an animal or pet.

The chapters of *Pet Loss, Grief, and Therapeutic Interventions* weave together cutting-edge research with best practices and practical clinical advice for working with grieving clients. Beginning with an overview of the human–animal bond, the book guides readers through the many facets of pet loss, including topics such as animal hospice and euthanasia, offering a comprehensive account of one of the field’s most rapidly emerging areas. Designed to help mental health professionals support clients coping with pet loss, the collection explores personal narratives, current theories, up-to-date research, and future directions.

This unique and comprehensive book will be of interest to students, clinicians, academicians, and researchers in the fields of counseling, psychology, and social work.

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Pet Loss, Grief, and Therapeutic Interventions

Practitioners Navigating the
Human–Animal Bond

**Edited by
Lori Kogan and
Phyllis Erdman**

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Perhaps one reason why there are so few books written that honestly and deeply explore the topics of pet grief and loss is because they are painful to write. We want to acknowledge this fact and express our gratitude to each contributor to this book. Each of you have had your own personal experience with the grief over a beloved pet. Some of you supported an animal through the transition, working through your own grief, sadness, and emptiness, while others of you supported the caretakers of these animals. We hope that the process of writing your chapter helped, at least in a small amount, to process some of this grief. Your wealth of memories and experiences are what has enabled you to help others understand the value of pets and the tremendous pain experienced upon their loss. For your willingness to feel your pain and thereby help others, we thank you. Many of us have experienced the disenfranchised grief that all too frequently accompanies the death of a pet. Your personal stories and contributions to this book indisputably demonstrate that the grief of a pet is equally, and often times, more painful than that of a human companion. Finally, we thank you for validating our own personal grief and, at the same time, recognizing the immeasurable joy our animals provide. These animals deserve to be honored, remembered, and valued during their lives and after their death. We hope our contributors and our readers alike have a lifetime of pet-related memories on which to reflect and many new memories yet to create.

The Editors



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Introduction

It is likely that you are reading this book to learn more about how to help support those who have lost a companion animal. Yet, the chances are good that you, yourself, have shared your life – and your heart – with a companion animal and that the connection you shared with that animal was, or still is, a significant life relationship. As we all know, however, these relationships come with inevitable grief. As Dr. Leo Bustad, one of the early proponents of the human–animal bond, so aptly stated many years ago, “Grief is the price of loving.” We created this book to help give you a better understanding of this particular type of grief; to define and normalize it, and assist you (and your clients) with the healing process. Each chapter in this book presents a unique aspect of the grief process as it relates to the human–animal bond and offers suggestions on how mental health care providers can guide and support their clients through this time in a supportive and validating way.

The book begins with an introductory chapter that reminds us of the importance of the human–animal bond and the profound impact of pet loss. Through the sharing of personal stories and relevant research of the mutual physiological and behavioral benefits of human–animal interactions, the chapter lays the foundation for the remainder of the book. Grief is experienced differently by each individual, yet looking at commonalities within groups can help us better support those who come to us for help. The first part explains how pet loss is experienced throughout the life span, from young children to older adults, and the unique needs associated with each of these periods. In Chapters 2 through 5, the authors provide valuable information to helping professionals on how to recognize and address the unique needs of grieving pet owners at each stage of life. For example, the knowledge that young children do not conceptualize grief in the same way as adults might dissuade parents from involving their children in the euthanasia of a family pet. Yet, as explained, involvement may actually help a child process his/her grief more effectively. On the other end of the life spectrum, the chapter on pets and aging reminds us that many older adults rely on their pets as their only source of companionship, and that their loss can have a grave impact on owners’ mental and physical health.

2 *Introduction*

The third part, “Special Populations,” describes the impact of pet loss for those in unique contexts. For example, veterinarians and animal care agents often deal with animal death on a daily basis, yet we sometimes fail to comprehend the emotional toll this can present for them. Chapters 6 and 7 help us better understand the challenges these professionals face regarding animal loss. The next two chapters (Chapters 8 and 9) help open our eyes to how we can better support vulnerable populations by exploring the unique roles that companion animals can have with prison populations and those who experience homelessness. The last chapter in this part examines a critical, yet often overlooked, component of pet loss – the impact of different cultural perspectives.

Part IV of the book highlights the importance of understanding grief as it relates to special animal populations. Chapter 11 describes the relationship between horses and people, including the challenges of saying goodbye to our equine companions. Chapters 12 and 13 explore the complicated psychological burden that accompanies the loss of an assistance dog and how to support clients during this time. Lastly, Chapter 14 explains how helping professionals can assist clients with euthanasia decisions that stem from problem behaviors.

The last part explores the complexity of grief, including how mental health providers can help prepare their clients for an impending loss. Chapter 15 provides several models to better conceptualize grief, as well as exploring the concept of disenfranchised grief and the lack of validation that often accompanies pet loss. Chapters 16, 17, and 18 provide ways to help clients prepare for loss beforehand and work through their grief afterward, including the value of hospice care and the many ways that clients may choose to maintain a continued bond with their companion animal, even after death. The concluding chapter suggests how we, as professionals, can navigate interprofessional boundaries to better understand the many facets of pet loss from multiple professional perspectives to best serve those who are suffering a loss.

Working on this book has been both a joy and a challenge. It reminds us, as we read through these chapters, of the undeniable impact that animals have on our lives and the lives of our clients. Despite the long, rich history of these human–animal relationships, only recently has society begun to recognize and normalize the pain that comes from losing these companions. Yet, we still have a long way to go before this type of loss and grief is universally recognized. This book was written to help move us in that direction – by supporting mental health providers in their efforts to help their clients cope with loss and convey an understanding of its often profound impact. Through these teachings, it is the hope that we all can become better at validating the human–animal bond and the pain that accompanies its loss.

Phyllis Erdman and Lori Kogan

Part I

Foundation and Theory



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1 The Eternal Bond

Understanding the Importance of the Human–Animal Bond and its Impact on Pet Loss

Aubrey H. Fine

Does it ever get easier? Will the pain and empty feelings ever subside, or at least appear more manageable? These are common questions frequently asked and considered when people experience the loss of their beloved companion animal. So, I rhetorically ask, why do most people consider getting another pet knowing that perhaps their heart will be broken once again? The answer for many is truly simple. The love that you receive from this relationship is so significant that you are willing to have your heart broken once again.

Over the past 40 years, my heart has been broken several times because of the losses that I have experienced. Goldie was our first Golden Retriever, and he changed my life. I fell in love with him the first time I saw his puppy eyes. Although I had other small animals as pets, I never had a dog. In fact, as a child, I grew up afraid of them. As an adult, I became more infatuated with golden retrievers, and they would become my breed of choice. From the first moment I met Goldie, our relationship was unbreakable. He became my running and riding buddy and was a big brother to my growing children. It was so much fun watching them romp in the fields near my house. Goldie went with us everywhere. Memories of those years will be etched in my mind for a lifetime.

However, we don't stay young forever, and as Goldie aged, he began to slow down. He didn't have many health impairments in his early years, but, when he was about 11 years of age, he developed brain cancer. It was at that time we realized that his life was coming to an end. I must confess, it was very difficult to let go, although, in my mind (not my heart), I knew it was in his best interest. I still vividly recall the afternoon we put Goldie down. We had scheduled a home visit with a veterinarian about four days earlier. When he arrived, I was devastated. I was not ready to let go of my beloved friend. In fact, the night before Goldie was to be put down, I remember barbecuing him steak and letting my wife know I was going to spend the night sleeping next to him (just like a little boy). At some point in the evening, I felt him gazing into my eyes, almost trying to tell me that it was OK to let him go. He even got up a few times to move away for a short time. When the veterinarian finally arrived the next day, he noted

that he could give Goldie a short physical to be sure that our assessment was accurate. Quickly, the reality sunk in and it was clear that euthanasia was definitely appropriate. My eyes welled as we made the final decision. In my mind, I went through all of the stages of Kübler-Ross's grief. I would have bargained to the end of time not to let this occur, but reality did hit. The veterinarian was very comforting and explained everything that was going to happen. Goldie laid his head on my lap and after the injections were given, slowly closed his eyes and began to stop breathing. The veterinarian left me with Goldie for a while. I wept as I gently stroked his warm, soft fur. When the veterinarian returned, he told me that he would take Goldie to be cremated. As I watched Goldie being carried to his car, I remember standing there holding onto his collar and dog tags. His body was leaving, but his soul would be etched into my heart forever.

Although seemingly a cliché, the adage nonetheless is true and apropos: time heals all wounds but never erases the scars. So, as time went on, my heart lightened, and I eventually became ready for another pet to love. I must be clear that new pets are not replacements or substitutes! You never replace someone; instead, you find and embrace another soul with whom you can connect.

Years later, we adopted another Golden Retriever whom we named Magic. Magic became our family's "Forever Dog." There are many reasons why she deserved that accolade, but perhaps it was most related to the time in our lives that we got her. We got Magic two days before my wife Nya was diagnosed with breast cancer. Magic just jumped right into our family and the relationship she had my wife Nya was astonishing. They were always together. Magic lifted Nya's spirit, perhaps because she was so tiny and adorable and always seemed to be right next to her. There was a time during my wife's recovery when she looked at me and said, "I know now why we got Magic when we did. Magic is keeping me busy and brings me joy. She is helping me heal." And so right she was with that impression. What was so special to witness was that every evening they could be found holding hand and paw together. It was their special moment which they repeated daily for almost 12 years.

Losing Magic was devastating! Even though we had prepared ourselves for the couple months that she was ill, because of our connection, it was very difficult. Magic too was battling cancer and unfortunately it was winning the battle. We became her best advocate and put her welfare and quality of life as our top priority. It needed to be about her, not us! We elected not to have her endure any invasive procedures because a healthy prognosis was not there. However, our role was to monitor and evaluate her quality of daily life. When we believed that the quality of her life was unduly influenced by her illness, we would have to make *that* decision. It was only the last 24 hours of her life that she had a noticeable decline. We were told that it could happen quickly and her decline was evident. At dinnertime, she got up to eat and fell down. We knew quickly that her end

was nearing, and it was time to say goodbye to our beloved friend. Nya actually realized that the end was coming earlier in the day before everything seemed to fall apart. Magic was always an early riser, and on that Monday she slept in. It was at that moment I realized how painful it was for Nya as I watched tears drop out of her eyes. She had beaten her battle with cancer, but she felt helpless that she could not help her buddy anymore. It was 6 o'clock that evening that Magic's body began to give out.

Early the next morning, we took our final drive with Magic. Although Nya accompanied us to the veterinarian, she didn't feel comfortable entering. I understood her feelings and respected them, although I have to admit that I called her twice while inside asking her if she had changed her mind. The outcome wasn't any different from the one I experienced 30 years earlier when Goldie passed on. It was hard for both of us because of the strong connection that we had with Magic. Both Magic and Goldie were integral parts of our family and it was hard to let go.

It's been close to a year and a half since Magic passed away, but there hasn't been a day that has gone by that I haven't thought about her, sometimes reflecting for a moment or shedding a tear. More often, as I think of times gone by too quickly, I smile and give thanks! Thanks for having her and all of my pets in my life. They have completed and made our days richer!

The goal of this chapter is to help conceptualize why the human-animal bond is so significant and unique. Attention will be given to these human-animal interactions, and provide information on the physical as well as psychosocial benefits of having animals in our lives. Finally, the chapter will provide a framework by which to better understand the various theories used to explain our bonds with other living beings. This foundation should be helpful in explaining why we have such a strong connection with our companion animals and develop these eternal bonds. In essence, our relationships with animals have evolved from having them live in the backyards of our homes or in our garages to now sleeping in our bedrooms and sharing our homes. Over the past 50 years, science has begun to catch up with what people have known intuitively for centuries – animals are good for our well-being, and they contribute tremendously to our quality of life.

Why We Love Animals

Over the years, pet ownership has grown in America. According to the 2017–2018 American Pet Products Association (APPA) National Pet Owner Survey, 68% of households own a pet, which equates to about 84.6 million homes. In fact, in 1988 when the first survey was conducted by APPA, only 56% of US households owned a pet, so we have seen a modest growth of about 12% in close to 30 years. Dogs are in approximately 60.2

million US households, while cats are in 47.1 million US households. Although cats are in fewer homes, there are more cats than dogs in the United States. There are 89.7 million dogs in our homes while there are 94.2 million cats.

Pets are now intimately connected with us, and we graciously and lovingly share our homes (bedrooms, kitchens, living areas) with them. No longer are they confined to the outskirts of homes (backyards, garages). They have become an integral part of our daily lives. People are now spending a great deal of their discretionary funds on pet keeping to ensure the quality of life for their animals. Demonstrating our commitment to our pets, our pets are now more pampered than ever before. Expenditures, including items like food, supplies, boarding, grooming, and veterinarian care, were estimated to be over \$70 billion in 2017 (APPA, 2018). In essence, our relationships with our pets involves not only our heart, but also our pocketbooks. Many talk to their pets like fellow humans and attribute to them several human qualities such as reasoning, cognition, emotion, and perception. The science of canine cognition has been literally transformed in the past two decades and has unearthed new insights. Research into canine cognition has provided new insights into dog behavior and cognition. For example, Horowitz (2009) explained that dogs' strength in communicating with humans is related to their predisposed ability to look at our faces for critical information, for reassurance, and for guidance. These traits are a definite asset for their interaction with humans because they enable dogs to be keen observers of our reactions. Research suggests that dogs uniquely obtain information from facial cues and can use auditory as well as visual information to identify emotions in both canines and humans (Albuquerque et al., 2016). Furthermore, research has demonstrated the importance of mutual facial gazing in the bond between humans and dogs. For example, Nagasawa, Kikusui, Onaka, & Ohta (2015) argue that mutual gaze, a behavior signifying attachment between mother and child, is found in relationships between humans and their pet dogs. More current research now suggests that dogs are also capable of understanding human words. Andics et al. (2016) report that some dogs are able to recognize more than 1,000 human words. Their research found that regardless of how the words are pronounced, dogs process meaningful words in the left hemisphere of their brain.

Fine and Beck (2015) point out that it is apparent that dogs have been bred to co-exist with their human counterparts to fulfill many roles, including herding, guarding, hunting, fishing, and companionship. In fact, they suggest that the supportive nature of animals has played a tremendous role in human lives and believe that this could be one of the major reasons for their domestication in their use as pets. Fine (2014) points out that we established positive interactions with animals ever since we began domesticating them to co-exist with us – over 30,000 years ago. In most cases, humans befriended animals and welcomed them into their

lives for a variety of reasons, including security and companionship. In a discussion with Temple Grandin (2013), she noted that she believed the animals that were the most intuitive, cooperative, helpful, and friendly to their human counterparts were those most welcomed into human circles. Those animals that lacked some of these traits were less likely to be accepted by humans. Furthermore, research also points out that pets can facilitate our social relationships with others. For example, we more easily connect with neighbors who have pets with whom we can interact. Animals are easier to talk to than people, or they act as a bridge into an introduction (Fine, 2014).

What is The Human–Animal Bond?

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) defines the human–animal bond:

as a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological and physical interactions with people, other animals, and the environment.

(JAVMA, 1998, p. 1975)

In many ways, the metaphor *human–animal bond* (HAB) captures the spirit of the infant–parent bond (Fine, 2014). Beck (1999) noted that the term “bond” was borrowed from the terminology used to describe the relationship between parents and their children. In fact, Beck (1999) points out that the first “official” use of the term “human–animal bond” appeared in the *Proceedings of the Meeting of Group for the Study of Human-Companion Animal Bond* in Dundee, Scotland, March 23–25, 1979. An animal’s dependence on humans appears to be a critical factor in establishing and sustaining this bond. Many individuals recognize their responsibility to their pets and how much their pets depend on them. Legally, animals are considered property, but most people view their pets as companions and family members (Fine, 2014). In essence, our healthy relationships with pets have a profound influence on both human and animal health and behavior.

The Physiological and Psychological Benefits of Human–Animal Interactions

Ever since the pioneering research by Erica Friedmann and her colleagues (1980, 1993) demonstrated that pet ownership was associated with better recovery in patients discharged from a coronary care unit, there has been great interest in studying the impact of the human–animal interactions on

human health. Fine (2014) identified a plethora of studies that have highlighted the value of these interactions on human health. Studies have revealed numerous outcomes, including the impact of stroking a pet on heart rate (McGreevy, Righetti, & Thomson, 2005; Shiloh, Sorek, & Terkel, 2003; Vormbrock & Grossberg, 1988), the presence of a pet dog or cat and its impact on heart rate and blood pressure in stressful situations (such as completing mental arithmetic) (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002), pets' impact on reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation (Headey, 1998), and how walking with a dog impacts opportunities to initiate and sustain conversations with strangers (McNicholas & Collis, 2000). Furthermore, in research conducted by Purewal et al. (2017), they found evidence for childhood pet ownership and a wide range of psychological health benefits. The study suggested that pet ownership provides support for increased social competence as well as enhancement of childhood social networks.

Further research points out that during interactions with a perceived friendly dog, cortisol (stress hormone) levels decrease significantly, and both humans and dogs experienced an increase in oxytocin, an endorphin that promotes a sense of happiness (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003). It is evident that the presence of and the interaction with a companion animal makes people feel less stressed and anxious and increases feelings of security (Fine, 2014). Findings from research studies have helped explain how through the study of stress biomarkers such as cortisol and immunoglobulin A (Beetz, Julius, Turner, & Kotrschal, 2012; Krause-Parello, 2012, 2008;). In a study by Duvall Antonacopoulos (2017), they examined the effect of acquiring a dog and its impact on loneliness. The results from their study suggest that participants who acquire a dog experience reduced levels of loneliness. Considerable evidence supports the position that pet ownership or interaction with animals decreases social isolation and loneliness, and facilitates social interaction (Wells, 2009). People may seek out animal companionship when they are lonely or feeling bad about their social situation. Even thinking about cats or dogs appears to provide relief from social rejection (Brown, Hengy, & McConnell, 2016).

Kingson (2018), in an article reported in the *New York Times*, cites comments by numerous scholars that support research related to the health benefits of animals. She underscores Dr. James Serpell's findings that having relationships and social experiences with animals is very helpful to people's health and has a positive impact on their immune system and cardiovascular functions. Serpell goes on in the interview to state that:

The hormone oxytocin plays a key role in the way animals can soothe humans. The petting and the physical contact side of things is critical in terms of oxytocin release. Physical contact with something warm and fuzzy and soft is also a good trigger.

Research also highlights the role of pets in enhancing humans' quality of life. For example, a study by Hall, MacMichael, Turner, and Mills (2017), found that there were improvements in quality of life associated with owning a support dog for individuals with physical disabilities. Their research found that the improvements exceeded what was expected from the increased physical independence that was acquired because of having an assistance dog. Some of the lifestyle changes noted by the researchers included increased recreational and social engagement and more involvement in their communities. It appears that both service animals as well as pets contribute to the happiness of humans. Research and writings by Ryan and Deci (2001) highlight some current findings on emotional well-being. Their research point to two general perspectives of where they believe happiness stems. One of the roots can be attributed to a category classified as the hedonic approach, which defines happiness and well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance. On the other hand, they discuss the eudaimonic approach, which focuses on meaning and self-realization in life. Ryan and Deci (2001) define well-being "in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning." Some current research has documented the critical role that pets can play in eudaimonic aspects of well-being. The findings of these studies suggest that pets seem to have an impact on enhancing a sense of personal fulfillment (Kanat-Maymon, Antebi, and Zilcha-Mano, 2016) and understanding oneself more clearly (Hall et al., 2017).

Ample evidence supports the notion that the presence of an animal encourages social interaction. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits that animals provide is their role in acting as social capital. Lang and Hornburg (1998) define social capital as the glue that holds society together. Pets function as one source of social capital – they enhance communication and solidarity among people and act as lubricants for social interaction in the community (Wood, 2011; Wood, Giles-Corti, & Bulsara, 2005; Wood, Shardlow, & Willis, 2009). Additionally, pet owners perceive their communities as friendlier and more amiable than non-pet owners (Arkow, 2015). Wells (2009) prepared a tremendous review of the literature that synthesizes numerous studies that highlight the health benefits of animals. (Readers are encouraged to review this article as well as a chapter in Fine (2014), which highlight some of the same findings.)

Although there have been numerous studies supporting the value of pets in promoting psychological and physical well-being, there are some who argue the evidence is not conclusive. Herzog (2018) in a blog on the *Psychology Today* website entitled "Does having pets really make us healthier" argues that the idea that getting a pet will make you healthier and happier is not accurate. He points out a few studies that have found very little difference between the health of pet owners versus non-pet owners. For example, in a recent study by Mein and Grant (2018), the results showed very little difference between pet owners versus non-pet owners in

regards to health issues. The study included 6,575 participants between the ages of 59 and 79, and about 2,000 of these individuals lived with a pet. Their findings seemed to suggest no differences between the groups in their general health and number of chronic illnesses. Very few of the variables under investigation were found to show any significant difference between pet owners and non-pet owners. One of the factors that did show a difference was in regard to the exercise of dog owners. It appears that dog owners engaged in considerably more mild to moderate exercise than the non-pet owners. These findings seem to be consistent with other research on the role animals can have on human exercise. Herzog (2018) concluded in his argument that the research on the so-called “pet effect” seems to have mixed results. In essence, Herzog (2018) argued that the findings are still inconclusive and that one still needs to use caution in regard to interpreting findings that pets are a definite source of well-being for their human counterparts. I agree with that position and encourage individuals not to view pet ownership and interactions as a panacea to both physical and mental health and to remain guarded and realistic with regard to human/pet interactions (Wright et al., 2016).

Theories Explaining the Human–Animal Bond

Many wonder why people appear to naturally gravitate towards meaningful relationships with non-human animals. Fine and Weaver (2018) and Fine and Mackintosh (2016) note that there are three theories that can shed light on explaining the human–animal bond phenomena. These three theoretical orientations include animals acting as a social support, the attachment theory, and the biophilia hypothesis. The first orientation suggests that animals serve as social support for their human counterparts. In essence, it is believed that animals can provide comfort and strength in difficult times and that many people have pets for this reason. People of all ages may turn to their pets as an outlet for their feelings during stressful circumstances as well as occasions where they just want companionship (Fine and Eisen, 2016; Melson, 2001; Strand, 2004). As research has previously documented, pets may be helpful in physically calming their owners by reducing blood pressure and heart rate, and decreasing the levels of stress hormones such as cortisol (Handlin et al., 2011). Furthermore, there has been some research that points out that interactions with animals impact several neurobiological hormonal agents including decreasing cortisol (de-stressing) as well as increasing serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine (Beetz, Uvnas-Moberg, Julius, & Kotrschal, 2012; Wohlfarth, Mutschler, Beetz, Kreuser, & Korsten-Reck, 2013). McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, and Martin (2011), in an interesting paper called “Friends with benefits,” noted that pets seem to have the ability to stave off negativity caused by social rejection. The researchers summarize that pets can serve as an important source of social support. Furthermore, in a study

by Stewart, Dispenza, Parker, Chang, and Cunnien (2014) regarding the therapeutic application of human–animal interactions, they noted that animal-assisted therapy outreach interventions seem to significantly decrease self-reported anxiety and loneliness of college students in need. They point out that today it is not uncommon to see animal visits used as a source of comfort for college students in difficult times.

Children, too, can benefit from the social connections formed with non-human animals. For example, how many times have you heard stories of children who turn to their pets during times of tremendous stress and anguish? Furthermore, for some children and adults who lack friendships and social contacts, turning to an animal can provide them with an otherwise missing sense of comfort and security. I recall a boy who was seven years old who was diagnosed as having Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The child had limited relationships outside of school and was often considered lonely. His best friend was actually his dog, with whom many would frequently witness him playing with and walking. Ironically, it was his relationship with his dog that acted as a catalyst in gaining access to other children who wanted to interact with him and his dog. They approached him because of his strong connection with the dog, and peer relationships were created as a consequence.

In other situations, it's not uncommon to find people living in isolation who turn to their animals. They view the animal as being critical in providing them social support. Over the years in talking to elderly people, including those with chronic illnesses, it has not been uncommon for information to be shared about the perceived importance of their pets as strong contributors to their social support system. They recognized how their animals contributed to their quality of life and realized without them they would have even more profound challenges. Lisa is a 77-year-old widow who lost her husband 2 years ago and has battled feelings of isolation and loneliness. She attributes her decreased despair and internal strength to a new cat in her life. She loves taking care of him and his attention helps her in moments of supreme emptiness. She finds that when she feels stuck in a chasm of loneliness, she turns to her beloved cat for comfort and support.

The attachment theory provides an alternative perspective of why we are so connected to our pets. The theory suggests that our strong relationships with animals exist because of our innate attachment needs as caregivers. Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby (1969), who described a major element in parent–child relationships that relates to humans' desire to protect their infants. This widely accepted theory has also been associated with why people want to have pets. The attachment theory explains the strong connection we have with our pets. Biologically, we can explain the attachment bond with the higher levels of oxytocin that are often found when this connection is elicited. Oxytocin, often considered the “love hormone,” is a peptide hormone that is often released in

periods of hugging and other forms of interpersonal connection. It is believed to be critical for the attachment that parents have with their children, and in our case the attachment between humans and their pets. In essence, the literature has now provided tremendous support for our understanding of the biology of attachment.

Zilcha-Mano, Mikuliner, and Shaver (2012) suggest that humans view their companion animals in a similar fashion as those caring for an infant. Taking care of an animal brings pleasure and joy and is the impetus of the relationship. Furthermore, in a paper by Barba (1995), the author described owners' relationships with their pets as parallel to the parent/child relationship. In so many ways, our pets depend on us for their care and protection (Fine, 2014). This caretaking role provides people of all ages, including children, with opportunities to be caregivers rather than receivers. In fact, it has been noted that in both boys and girls, taking care of an animal and being a nurturer is a valued and accepted behavior (Fine, 2014). Additionally, research by Carlisle (2014) indicated an increase in social behavior among children with pets, suggesting that children too seem to show strong levels of attachment to their animals. Furthermore, there is also biological evidence that the neurotransmitter oxytocin is prevalent not only in parent-child relationships (highlighting familial love) but also between owners and their pets, which gives the attachment theory a neurobiological basis (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003).

Many examples come to mind that highlight the attachment theory. Pet owners who feel a strong commitment to their pets and take care of them as children could be used as examples of this position. I think of Diana, who takes great pride in caring for her golden pups. She is their best advocate. When her eldest dog Savanna was very ill, she did what was humanly possible to make sure she was comfortable. In many ways, just like Bowlby's work suggested, she felt a strong kinship with her dog, and the instincts of a parent taking care of an infant seem very comparable. These actions are not uncommon and can be seen in homes of millions of families across this country.

Finally, E. O. Wilson and Stephen R. Kellert developed a theory called biophilia that suggests that humans evolved to bond with other forms of life as a means of survival (Kellert, 1997; Wilson, 1984). According to Edward O. Wilson (1984), biophilia is the inherent need of humans to understand and relate to nature (Wilson, 1984). Furthermore, Stephen K. Kellert asserts that humans are intimately reliant on the environment for survival (Kellert, 1993). In essence, the theory suggests that biophilia motivates humans to form relationships with other animals and to feel a kinship in nature (Fine & Weaver, 2018). Fine and Weaver (2018) suggest that biophilia is also the cause of an innate part of the human brain that draws enrichment through connections to nature. The theory provides another alternative to understanding human-animal interactions. In essence, this orientation suggests that humans are very connected to their

natural environment, and there is a biological need for us to interact with nature as a whole – including animals. That is why we see people walking with their pets in nature, bird watching, or engaging in other forms of ecotourism. We just seem to have a fantastic connection with nature as a whole. In summary, each of these orientations provide a different glimpse as to why we have unique relationships with pets. While each of these might not completely answer the question of why people relish being surrounded by animals, they do provide us with a solid foundation from which to start.

Conclusions

It is apparent that our relationships with animals have long been valued. Although science has not conclusively provided evidence that animals make a significant impact on our physical and emotional well-being, most people intuitively accept this belief. Many people would agree that pets provide humans with tremendous support that enrich their lives. Our relationships with animals help us endure and persevere in difficult moments and they help us find joy in everyday moments. In essence, animals are good for our well-being, and unfortunately their significance to us makes losing them even harder. Anatole France (n.d.) once stated: “that until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened.” How appropriate this quotation is in capturing the essence of our bond with animals. Their lives become so entangled with ours that we become richer as a consequence.

When Magic passed on, we tried to think of many ways to celebrate her life. We decided to engrave a portrait on her urn with a small etched passage written by Isla Paschal Richardson. The passage helped us put into perspective the significance of her life to our family. “*Grieve not, nor speak of me in tears, but laugh and talk to me as if I were beside you ... I loved you so – twas heaven here with you.*” When we develop such strong connections with our pets, it would be ridiculous to believe that their physical absence will not affect us. Most people adjust to their grief over time and hold onto a relationship that meant so much to them. This book will provide answers to many of your questions on how people cope and deal with loss, as well as covering some best practice approaches to supporting people who are bereaving the loss of their pets.

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Part II

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2 Children's Experiences of Pet Loss and Separation

A Child Development Framework

Gail F. Melson

Introduction

Pets are everywhere in human society. Companion animals provide significant relationships in the lives of most children. A growing body of literature on Human–Animal Interaction (HAI) documents the multiple ways interactions with animals in general, and pets in particular, affect human development. (Note that although humans are clearly animals, I follow customary usage and refer to non-human animals as “animals” and human animals as “humans.” In addition, the terms “pets” and “companion animals” are sometimes contested terms, implying exploitation or unacceptable power asymmetry to some people. While acknowledging these controversies, the terms “pets” and to a lesser extent, “companion animals” remain in wide usage. Hence, for clarity, I employ them.)

Within the HAI literature, there is now ample evidence that children develop close, affectionate bonds with pets and derive emotional and social support from these relationships, especially in times of stress. Physiological relaxation effects, as measured by heart rate, stress hormones such as cortisol, and galvanic skin response (GSR), may occur in the presence of a friendly pet, even one that is unfamiliar or belonging to another family. Ties with pets prompt children to consider moral questions concerning the human treatment of animals (Melson et al., 2009) and affect later attitudes toward animal welfare and environmental issues. There is also evidence that involvement with pets, including pet care, may help children to develop a more accurate understanding of biological processes. Thus, the child–pet relationship affects multiple dimensions of children’s development – physiological, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral.

Another body of literature addresses children’s developing understanding and experience with loss, separation, and death. Scholars have documented how the cognitive understanding of death unfolds, including a gradual understanding of key features of death, such as finality, universality, and causality. However, less research attention has been paid to understanding children’s emotional responses to death, despite

recognition that confronting the permanent loss of a loved one is, above all, an emotional experience. At the same time, practitioners have developed therapeutic interventions for adults and children facing human as well as animal losses. Many children's books dealing with death are available to parents. Thus, because of clients' needs, therapy, support, and interventions have outpaced research into evidence-based best practices.

Given the pervasiveness of pets in children's lives, for many children their first experience with death comes from the death of a pet. Yet, the two bodies of literature – that on children's ties with pets and that on children's experiences with death – have not been well integrated. This chapter addresses that gap. I advance a child development perspective, asking the following questions:

1. How do children's relationships with pets affect their experiences of pet loss, separation, and death?
2. In what ways are children's experiences of loss, separation, and death, involving human ties versus animal ties similar and different?
3. What individual, familial, and contextual factors affect children's experiences of pet loss, separation, and death?
4. What are the implications for therapeutic interventions with children and their families?

The Significance of the Child–Pet Relationship

Ever since the publication of Uri Bronfenbrenner's 1979 classic, *The Ecology of Human Development*, an ecological approach to child development has been central. This approach emphasizes that children grow up in widening circles of relationships and environments, from the most intimate – the family – to the most expansive – the wider culture and historical epoch. While children bring their own temperament, personality, and genetic heritage – the “nature” of the nature–nurture interaction – their development is shaped by these interrelated contexts.

Despite the complexity of Bronfenbrenner's descriptions of the multiple contexts and relationships in children's lives, he, along with most other psychologists, assumed that only relationships with other humans were consequential. This “anthropocentric” bias (Melson, 2001) has given way to a more “bio-centric” perspective, in which connections with other animals and nature are recognized as important contexts. The field of Human–Animal Interaction has now grown to host international conferences and produce scientific research journals dedicated to this subject.

Nonetheless, children's ties with the non-human world are still not fully integrated into our understanding of child development. Most child development textbooks, as they address social relationships fail to mention, let alone discuss in depth, ties with animals, especially pets. When scholars advance theories and conduct research on children's ties to pets and other

animals, this academic work is often “siloeed” in journals and books dedicated to the human–animal bond. Thus, we have little insight into how children’s relationships with humans and non-humans are interwoven and interrelated. We need a perspective that integrates all relationships and environments, human and non-human.

We also need a developmental perspective to fully understand children’s relationships with animals. This perspective recognizes both dynamic change and continuity in all living things from conception to death. Such a recognition mandates consideration of earlier experiences as shapers of the present. This is particularly true of early childhood experiences which often form a “template” or predisposition toward future experiences. In addition, children, indeed all humans, are influenced by their expectations of the future. A child development perspective further recognizes predictable maturational changes as children move from infancy through early childhood into middle childhood and then adolescence. Finally, a developmental perspective considers multiple domains or areas of development – physiological, cognitive, emotional, social, and moral. While conceptually distinct, each domain influences the others through mutual feedback loops. For example, a child’s cognitive level in understanding death is likely to influence the child’s emotions during a death experience and vice versa.

Pet Ownership

Even today, the US Census does not ask about non-human family members. Similarly, other countries rely on survey data and individual studies to project pet ownership rates. As a result, we only have estimates, not firm figures, of the extent of pet ownership in the US and worldwide. These estimates indicate that pet ownership is widespread, with recent surveys by the Humane Society of the US, the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Pet Products Association estimating that about two-thirds of all US households had at least one pet. Ownership of multiple pets is common among pet owners. Rates are similarly high in other societies in Europe and Latin America, with rates in Asian countries rapidly increasing. For example, a 2018 online survey of 27,000 individuals across 22 countries found pet ownership rates highest in Latin America, with 80% of Mexican and 80% of Argentinian respondents indicating pets in the household. Seventy-three percent of Russian respondents identified as pet owners. By contrast, 31% of South Korean and 37% of Japanese respondents said they owned pets. However, the most rapid rate of increase in pet ownership is currently in Asian countries (see www.gfk.com/global-studies-pet-ownership). Moreover, households with children under 18 years of age are more likely than other household types to have pets. For example, a UK study found that 74% of families with a 10-year-old also had at least one pet (Westgarth et al., 2010).