



Pet Loss and Grief: How Some Shelters Are Providing Comfort at the End

By Cathy M. Rosenthal

Sitting in a circle, seven people clutch framed photos, pet toys, collars, and tissues, anxiously awaiting the discussion ahead. Slowly the group begins to tell their stories, as the facilitator goes around the circle ensuring that everyone gets a turn to talk. Each person is asked to share something about their pet: Some people present photos, while others show off their pet's favorite toy or give vivid descriptions of their pet's once humorous antics. By the end of the two-hour session, people are crying, hugging, and even laughing, relieved that they aren't alone in their sadness or feeling like they must be crazy because of the death or impending death of their companion animals. This is what it's like at a pet loss support group.

Twenty-five years ago, pet loss support groups like this one were unheard of, even at animal shelters. "When my pet died in 1978, there was nothing around – no programs, no books, no articles. Nothing to help me get through this difficult time," says Dr. Betty Carmack, professor at the University of San Francisco School of Nursing and facilitator for the San Francisco SPCA's pet loss support group. "Friends without pets just didn't get it. They would say things like 'It's just a cat,' 'You can get another dog,' or 'Are you still crying over your pet?' It was hard to get them to understand what a grieving pet guardian goes through."

Fortunately, the landscape has changed. When friends and family members aren't available or capable of helping someone with the loss of a pet, bereaved animal lovers now have many resources to help them through their grief. Some of those resources are on the Internet and in books and articles that many humane organizations will gladly distribute on request; other resources include pet loss support groups, facilitated by trained volunteers at humane agencies across the country, and pet grief support hotlines, provided by veterinary students or trained mental health professionals.

Certainly, humane professionals are fortunate to have supportive coworkers who can help them through pet grief and who know the benefits that such support can have on

emotional, mental, and physical well-being. But most people do not have such supportive coworkers, family, and friends, and they must rely on veterinarians and animal shelter staff for the proverbial shoulder to cry on when their pet dies or is about to die.

Support Groups and Hotlines

About 12 years ago, two women approached St. Hubert's Giralda Animal Welfare Center in Madison, New Jersey, about starting a pet loss support group. The agency liked the idea and teamed the women together to launch the group. Ever since, the support group has met weekly for about two hours, allowing grieving pet guardians the chance to share their thoughts and feelings with others who have also suffered loss.

"The groups are intimate – anywhere from three to 15 people – and mostly women, as men still seem to find it difficult to talk about this kind of loss," says Nancy Saxton-Lopez, co-creator and facilitator for St. Hubert's pet grief support group. Through her years of experience, Saxton-Lopez has discovered common reasons people seek such support groups:

- To manage guilt. "All too often, people must make the final decision for their pets and the questions linger long after the pet is gone," she says. "Did I make the right decision? Should I have waited longer? Should I have gotten another opinion? Should I have tried something else? Should I have spent more money? All these questions keep going through their mind. In a support group, we listen and help the person find peace with the decisions they made."
- To normalize the experience. "We are not a very grieving society," says Saxton-Lopez. "We don't grieve very well for human folk, and add to this disfranchisement the grief over an animal, and it begins to complicate the actual process of grieving. People feel alone and isolated because society is not very open or accepting. They feel like they are going crazy and need to know that their feelings are completely normal."
- To help with the final decision. Many people attending pet loss support groups haven't even lost their pets yet, but are struggling with the decision about euthanasia. "Nobody wants to make this decision in a vacuum," says Saxton-



American Humane Reprint

Lopez. “They want to know how others came to the decision so that they will know when it’s the right time for their pet. They want support for their decision – support that family and friends can’t give.”

- To cope with the unknown. Some pets don’t die, but run off and are lost forever. Wondering what has happened to a pet, if they are alive or suffering, can be very traumatic for an individual. Support groups can help people move through these emotions to achieve closure and peace.
- To find and create rituals. Many people want to know what they can do to remember their pet or what their options are in handling their pet’s remains. In this forum, people can share their rituals and provide direction for others going through the same thing.
- To decide when to adopt again. Finally, many people attend support groups because they want to talk about potentially adopting another pet. They ask questions like “When is the right time?” or “Why do I feel guilty about adopting another pet?” “For many people, adopting another pet feels like they are replacing the last pet and that can make them feel guilty,” says Saxton-Lopez.

The time to adopt another pet will be different for everyone and certainly will depend on how a person moves through the grief process. According to Linda D’Amico, director of Pet Friends, a program of CONTACT of Burlington, New Jersey, which offers a 24-hour hotline for grieving pet guardians, 15 percent of people who never deal with their grief never get another pet.

“If those people are grieving that much because they love their pet, then they had to be a good pet guardian,” says D’Amico. “We can’t afford to lose even one great pet guardian with so many animals in need of homes. We would never encourage a person to go out and get another pet until they were ready. But I would hope that we can help people get past their grief, so that when it’s time for them to seek that bond again, they will.”

As with support groups, hotlines are not meant to provide therapy services. Rather, because people are isolated from others who have shared the experience, support groups and hotlines are intended to provide the understanding and human acceptance that people need when they suffer a loss. Pet Friends has over 150 volunteers trained to handle pet grief and respond to calls from all across the country.

The Companion Animal Association of Arizona offers a similar helpline for bereaved pet guardians through their Pet Grief Support Service. All volunteers have experienced the loss of their own beloved pets and are sufficiently through their own grieving process to help others. Volunteers are required to read two books on pet grief and study a 40-page training manual written by Marty Tousley, RN, MS, CS, before they can talk to a grieving pet guardian.

“The goal of our helpline is to bring awareness of the bond between people and their pets to the point where accepting that people grieve and need support for that grief is as natural as providing support for other losses in their lives,” says Lucy Linder, pet grief volunteer coordinator. “Unfortunately, not everybody accepts this kind of grief as valid. We want to be part of the healing process that helps restore balance to grieving pet guardians’ lives.”

Opening the Door To Public Grief

In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s book, *On Death and Dying*, opened public discussion on dying and grief. Prior to that, death was a taboo subject that left a lot of people struggling privately with loss. Thanks to Dr. Kubler-Ross’s research, grief became a topic open for observation and discussion. Through her work, we learned that there were stages to grief that were universal, but handled differently by everyone.

As the field has grown over the last 30 years, however, researchers and mental health professionals are trying to steer mourners away from the “stages of grief” theory. “Grief is a very individual thing that doesn’t conform to set boundaries,” says Dr. Tamina Toray, director of Family Support Services for the Argus Institute for Families and Veterinary Medicine in Colorado Springs, Colorado. “It can vary in pain and intensity and can fluctuate from one day to the next. It is a unique process that everyone experiences differently. We all bring our unique background, personality, coping mechanisms, past losses, and gender to the process.”

Dr. Toray explains that there is no recipe for grief and its duration. “We need to move away from assuming there is a model that we are suppose to move through because it makes people think there is a certain way to be in grief and that they should be in certain stages at certain times. If they are not, it makes them feel like they are doing it all wrong, when really,



American Humane Reprint

they are where they need to be.”

At the Argus Institute, Dr. Toray and staff see clients who have been referred by other veterinarians usually because their pet has a terminal or life-threatening illness that requires more extensive treatment. Because Dr. Toray often sees animals that are dying, she usually has to open the discussion of pet loss and grief during the very first visit.

“I can see it [grief] walking through the door,” she says. “Once a person gets the diagnosis, it kind of throws them off. They start to automatically grieve and begin working through the expectation of death. This anticipatory grief can be a very emotional time and may extend for the duration of the pet’s illness.”

Dr. Toray provides at least five minutes of grief support to pet guardians before they leave her clinic. “We talk to them about how grief will affect them physically, cognitively, and emotionally,” she says. “We ask them simple questions like have you eaten today? They may have driven five hours and just had to euthanize their pet. We want to help them identify feelings they will have on their drive home, as well as feelings they may have in the coming weeks or months. Our goal is to help them understand that

what they feel, whatever they feel, is normal.”

Dr. Toray finds that people are often surprised and feel somewhat guilty when they discover that they are grieving harder for a pet than they have for a relative or friend. “It is the loss of purpose, the loss of routine, and a combination of all the other losses that person has experienced in life that contributes to his or her current state of emotions,” says Dr. Toray. “Past losses have a way of resurfacing during grief over another loss, compounding to make the current grief even more difficult to deal with.”

When does someone need help handling grief? According to Dr. Toray, there are two types of grief: noncomplicated and complicated. Noncomplicated grief is the kind that we all go through. No one can say how long it will last or how intense it will be, but it lessens over time. Complicated grief, however, doesn’t lessen over time; instead it stays the same or gets worse. This is when people need to reach out to mental health professionals.

“Mentally healthy people know to reach out when they are having a hard time,” says Dr. Toray. “Every city, county, and state has the resources to help, but not all mental health professionals understand the human-animal bond. It’s

important to find someone who has dealt with pet loss and is prepared to help you through the emotions of it.”

Completing the Circle

Many shelters agree that it is essential to provide pet guardians with opportunities to grieve with others who have journeyed the same path. The San Francisco SPCA started perhaps the first pet loss grief support group in 1982 and many other shelters have followed suit, as it has become less of a stigma to seek this kind of support.

“We are there in the beginning with adoptions and throughout the pet’s life with advice on pet care and behavior,” says Kelly G. Vanasse, public relations consultant for St. Hubert’s. “It’s only fitting that we come full circle and are there at the end too to give people suffering this loss some final closure in their lives.”

Indeed, shelters offering pet loss support groups say the response from attendees has been sheer gratitude. “Confronting these difficult issues in a safe environment allows the healing process to start,” says Norma Buchanan, volunteer facilitator for a pet loss support group at the Animal Humane Society in Golden Valley, Minnesota. They start remembering the good things about their pets and are glad to be somewhere where they aren’t ridiculed for their feelings.”

Finding the right person to facilitate such a group for your shelter can be challenging. San Francisco SPCA’s facilitator, Dr. Carmack, suggests choosing a facilitator who has experience in working with people dealing with grief and loss and who has sufficient education in the different approaches to grief and bereavement to handle a variety of situations. “People come into these support groups with very strong emotions. A few in the last 20 years have come in contemplating suicide. Now not everyone who says that means it, but the person leading the group should know what the warning signals are and when it’s necessary to get additional help for that person.”

While helping people through grief may sound like disheartening work, the support group facilitators and hotline volunteers say it actually has the opposite effect. By providing a safe environment in which people can share similar experiences, bereaved people can start on the road to healing. Most volunteers say they enjoy listening to people reminiscing time spent with a special companion animal.

“It’s a real privilege to be with people at that place on their



American Humane Reprint

journey,” says Dr. Carmack. “In this field, you hear awful stories about people abusing animals and people’s lack of commitment. All you have to do is sit in on one of these groups to be reminded about the power of the human-animal bond. You hear it over and over, story after story. They thank me for facilitating the group, and I thank them for reminding me of the depth of these relationships.”

In memory of Cathy’s nine-year-old dog Rocky, who died unexpectedly after she wrote this article. He will be mourned by his family.

When a Pet is Left Behind

By Cathy M. Rosenthal

When Mrs. Wilmont died, none of her relatives could take care of her two 11-year-old cats and seven-year-old dog. Because she hadn’t made any provisions for her pets’ care in her will or discussed potential guardians with family, her relatives were left wondering what to do. For lack of options, the family took the pets to the local animal shelter.

Some people in this position consider euthanasia as a viable option, as well. Today, however, many shelters are guiding pet guardians on how to make proper provisions for a pet’s care after their death, so that euthanasia won’t be considered an alternative. For example, the Potter League for Animals in Newport, Rhode Island, provides an extensive 30-page packet of information titled *Planning for Companion Animals in the Event of Death or Illness*. In the materials, the League notes three reasons to plan ahead. First, the law considers pets personal property and, therefore, a pet may be left in limbo after the guardian’s death and until the probate of the will. Provisions should be made to guarantee the pet’s short-term care during this in-between time.

Second, the pet may need short-term care if the guardian is hospitalized or incapacitated for any reason. Pets cannot go without food, water, or a chance to relieve themselves and must receive immediate care in these circumstances. Pet care instructions should be written and given to a family member or friend in case of emergency. Finally, the pet will need long-term care after the guardian’s death. If provisions aren’t made

in the will or stated to the family ahead of time, the family is not obligated to keep the pet.

For people without extended family, the problem looms even larger. What if they can’t find anyone to appoint as a guardian? Some humane societies are responding to this problem by offering to house pets temporarily while the societies look for a new home for them. “We will step in and do everything we can to find the pet a new home,” says Jenny Kershner, director of development for St. Hubert’s Giralda Animal Welfare Center, Madison, New Jersey. “Through our Pet Guardian Program, pet guardians fill out extensive questionnaires on their pet’s personality, dietary habits, and daily activities. Knowing this information ahead of time allows us to make better matches when the time comes.”

At the Humane Society of Boulder Valley, Boulder, Colorado, The Companion Care for Life program also provides foster care for pets when guardians are incapacitated. “This program involves getting as much information about the animal’s life as possible and knowing a guardian’s wishes in advance,” says Lisa Cromar, development director for the Humane Society of Boulder Valley. “This program offers pet guardians some peace of mind.”

Estate planners can help shelters produce materials for distribution that are in accordance with a state’s laws. Overall, though, estate planners recommend listing several potential pet caregivers in the will, so that the executor has several options. A shelter may be designated to receive the pet, along with money for its care, but an agreement should be made with the shelter ahead of time, as all shelters do not offer this kind of service. An individual may also be appointed to receive a portion of the estate for the pet’s care, but that person is not obligated to use the funds for that purpose. Planners advise selecting a trusted individual.

Shelters wanting to provide this service should contact local estate planners, as probate laws are different in each state.



Finding Ways to Remember Pets

By Cathy M. Rosenthal

“What we have enjoyed we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.” Helen Keller

Society has not developed formalized rites for the death of pets. As a result, people often look for creative ways to memorialize their pets and give tribute to their lives. According to mental health professionals, the need for rituals is very normal and offers a bereaved person a chance to honor a companion that gave him or her unconditional love for so many years. Rituals help shift the loss of the pet’s physical presence to a spiritual plane, so the pet guardian can begin to hold the pet’s memory in their hearts.

Suggestions for creating rituals include compiling a scrapbook or photo album, writing a eulogy or poem, or planting a tree or home garden in a pet’s memory. But many people want to do more, and they often look to animal shelters for ways to offer lasting tributes to both pets and people.

In response to these requests, animal shelters have developed a litany of memorial services. Very often, people make donations to a humane organization in memory of a person or pet, which range from listings in the agency newsletter to engraved plaques, brick pavers, tiles, and memorial stones that become a permanent part of the humane facility. Memorial gardens and tree-planting opportunities are other ways shelters provide ritual space for honoring people and pets. Memorial contributions range from \$15 to \$1,000, depending on the type of memorial, and all proceeds benefit the receiving shelter’s homeless pets.

Many shelters also provide pet obituaries on their websites – some for a nominal fee, some for free. The shelter may run a photo of the pet along with a few lines of text or a poem for anywhere from 30 days to indefinitely. These have proven popular in recent years and provide pet guardians with a way to share their grief with other animal lovers.

While many shelters offer pet cremation services, it’s rare that a municipal animal control facility will do so. However, Lubbock Animal Services in Lubbock, Texas, saw a real need to give grieving pet guardians some closure. “I have been an animal control officer for 10 years and meet these people on a daily basis and cry with them when their pets die,” says

Nancy Hickman, center manager. “I knew if we ever had the opportunity to offer them some meaningful closure, we should do so.”

For the past two years, Lubbock Animal Services has offered cremation services for pets and a memorial area called the Peaceable Kingdom, where a pet’s cremated remains can be strewn along a riverbank. The service has proved popular “even in Texas where you are not suppose to cry for a pet,” says Hickman.

Pet obituaries can also be found in newspapers. Earlier this year, the Philadelphia Daily News began running a pet tribute page where people can memorialize their dearly departed companion animals. The listing appears the first Tuesday of every month under the heading “A Fond Farewell to our Beloved Pet.” For \$52, pet guardians can run a picture of the pet and some memorializing text.

“We’re thinking of them more as pet tributes than obituaries,” says editor Debi Licklider. “It’s something you can cut out and keep. We also think that people may like to read them.”

Still, other shelters hold special tributes throughout the year, especially around the winter holidays or on Pet Memorial Day, the second Sunday in September. These tributes include stringing lights on the shelter facility or on a holiday tree. Pet guardians make donations so that a light is lit in memory of their pet or in honor of a companion animal.

“During the presentation of our Hope’s Lights program, a screen with all the names of the pets being honored runs behind the speaker,” says Sarah Budan, development specialist for the Wisconsin Humane Society in Milwaukee. “It’s just another way to pay tribute to a loved pet.”

Humane society memorials also provide for the continued care of shelters’ homeless pets, and many pet lovers like that they can remember their pet and make a difference for abandoned animals too.