How Veterinarians Can Assist the Grieving Pet Owner

Studies found that veterinarians often underestimate the importance of companion animals to their own clients...

- Animal as a family member
- Willingness to pay for treatment
- Upset and grief when animal dies

It is important for veterinarians to recognize that...

- Loss is unique to each person.
- Bereaved individuals may experience symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Societal support is often inadequate

Intensity of the grief response after the death of a pet is often associated with...

- Level of attachment to the pet
- Type of death (sudden, traumatic)
- Perceived understanding from others
- Other stressful events
- Means of death
- Negative mood pertaining to one's own death

Pet owners who are at risk of experiencing a prolonged or more intense grief response...

- High levels of attachment to the pet
- Low social support
- Accumulation of stressful events
- Live by themselves or have no children in the household
- Owners who believe that they "rescued" pet from death or near-death
- Believed to have spent childhood with pet
- Believe that their pet got them through a difficult time in their life
- Relied on pet as their main source of support
- Have invested significant time/effort/financial resources towards pets' medical care
- Pet is a symbolic link to a deceased loved one
What NOT to say to the grieving pet owner...

- “He was just a [dog/cat/rabbit/etc]”
- “You can always get another one”
- “At least your pet lived a long, full life”
- “It’s probably for the best”
- “I know how you feel”

**Logic is not comforting** – Bonnie S. Mader, M.S.**

Owners who anticipate the impending death of an animal can still experience an intense grief response. However, the veterinarian can assist the owner by advising them to...

- Plan the actual death
- Decide on a post-death ritual
- Take family photos
- Spend precious last days/months with dying pet

How can the Veterinarian help the grieving pet owner?

- Give the client permission to grieve
- Legitimize, normalize and validate their feelings
- Educate about the grief process
- Make referrals to additional resources

When is it time to get a new pet?

While there is no specific timetable for when it is appropriate to get a new pet, it is important to consider the motivation. If it is to create a distraction from the grief process, then it may be better to wait until such emotions can be experienced and expressed. Families can feel great disappointment when the new pet has a different temperament. When families have had ample opportunity to explore their grief, their choice to open their home to a new pet to love and care for may help lead to a healthy resolution of their grief.

Additional Resources

**Websites**

- Pet Loss Grief Support [www.petloss.com]
- Association for Pet Loss & Bereavement [www.aplb.org]
- AVMA – Making the Decision [www.avma.org/careforanimals/animatedjourneys/goodbyefriend/goodbye.aspx]

**Pet Loss Support Hotlines**

- J.C. Davis (603) 363-1525
- “Grief recovery Hotline (802) 445-4808

**Local Support Groups**

- Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society [www.berkelyhumane.org]
- Lodi Animal Friends Connection [www.animalfriendsconnect.org]
- Modesto Pet Loss Support Group [www.modestocares.com]
- Monterey County SPCA [www.spcamc.org/support.htm]
- Oakland SPCA [www.eastbayspca.org/events/petlosssupportgroup.cfm]