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Are Pain and Mourning for a Pet and a Family Member the Same?

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Abstract

Many people live with pets and the most part of them are considered as family members. So, when a companion animal dies, people experience pain and mourning. Despite the recent increase in research interest in human-pet relationships, to my knowledge there is no review that answers this question: Are pain and bereavement for a pet and for a family member the same? The present narrative review may be a first step in answering this question.

Methods: This review was conducted according to Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. After removal of duplicates and examination of titles and abstracts, 49 records were included in the review (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for further details). The retrieved articles were selected and evaluated by reading each one in full text (see Appendix 3 for further details).

Discussion: This review, was beyond the scope of a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the intensity of mourning for the loss of an AC compared to mourning for the loss of a human. However, in examining the literature collected in the present study, we can highlight some significant recurring themes:

A. Intensity of grief over the loss of one's pet; B. The relationship between the owner/caregiver and their pet; C. The individual's vision and perspective of life after the loss of their pet; D. Society's disenfranchised grief.

Conclusions: The research indicates that AC owners experience a spectrum of pain and grief intensity when their pet dies, ranging from moderate to excruciating.

This grief is often compared to that experienced upon the loss of a close family member. However, many variables influence the intensity of grief: age, social condition (living alone or in a family context) of the caregiver/pet owner, age of the dead animal, etc. Therefore, further research is needed.

In addition, this review reveals a pervasive underestimation of the grief associated with the loss of a pet, both by society at large and by individuals who do not own a pet.

This disenfranchised grief can have a profound emotional impact on those who experience the loss of a pet.

It is also clear that veterinarians can play a role in helping AC owners to grieve and in improving the wellbeing, resilience and quality of life of people around the world experiencing pet loss. Further research is needed to develop a

measure of DG that is specific to the loss of human companion animals (Brown et al., 2023).

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Terminology

The following terms have been adopted, sharing the terminology:

- **Animal companions (ACs):** animals kept as companions to humans and generally of domesticated species. Commonly dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, smaller mammals, birds and reptiles, and excluding fish. I avoid the term 'pet' in this paper because it does not adequately reflect the current scientific understanding of animals' sentience, cognitive complexity and individuality, or the complexity and modern reality of the relationships between animals and their owners (Fraser, 2008).
- **Grief:** the behavioural, social, psychological and emotional reactions that a person has in response to the rupture or ending of a significant relationship with another (after Casarett, Kutner & Abrahm, 2001).
- **Animal companion bereavement:** the period following the death of an animal companion during which grief may be experienced and mourning may occur (after Casarett, Kutner & Abrahm, 2001).
- **Disenfranchised grief:** it is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as "grief that society (or some element of it) limits, does not expect, or may not allow a person to express".

Introduction

In the world, especially in the Western part, there are more and more families living with a pet. For example according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (2023), in the United States approximately 88.8 million dogs and 61.9 million cats inhabited 62 million and 37 million US households, respectively, and according to the latest data Assalco-Zoomark Report 2023 in Italy there are 65 million pets, of which approximately 10 million are cats and 9 million are dogs.

Consequently, a considerable number of individuals dedicate a significant portion of their lives to the company of animals. These individuals frequently develop profound emotional bonds with their pets, to the extent that the vast majority of dog, cat, and other pet species owners in the Western world consider them to be members of their families (Pirrone et al.,

2015a, 2015b).

The majority of common pet species have considerably shorter lifespans than humans, with the range extending from approximately 18 months (hamsters) to seven years (rabbits and select giant dog breeds), 13-17 years (many dogs and cats), and 20 years (some cats). For many pet owners, particularly those with multiple animals, this implies experiencing bereavement more frequently than their human loved ones (Hewson, 2014).

It is therefore highly probable that during their lifetime, owners/caretakers of these animals may experience grief as a result of the loss/death of their pet. The experience of loss is often related to grief and mourning, which are behaviours exhibited by AC owners and expected by social groups following the death of a pet. The grief and mourning resulting from the death of pets is frequently underestimated or even unrecognized (disallowed) by others, which results in a lack of understanding regarding the extent and consequences of disallowed grief (DG) (Brown et al., 2023).

Previous studies have investigated the attachment bonds between pet owners and the animals when they were alive, as well as the bonds between owners when their pets were dead. Additionally, they have observed the coping mechanisms put in place following the loss of a pet.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first narrative review to seek to understand whether and how the pain and mourning associated with the loss of a pet is comparable to the pain and mourning associated with the loss of a significant person.

Methods

This review was developed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. The PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Biosis databases were searched for primary research, including original research articles, systematic reviews, and articles written in any language. The search was conducted, including ahead-of-print publications, up to March 12, 2024, containing the terms "grief," "grieving," "bereavement," "loss," and "pet." A total of 46 documents were identified through the initial search. An additional 25 documents were added through other sources. After removing duplicates and examining titles and abstracts, 49 records were included in the review (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for further details). The retrieved articles were selected and evaluated by reading each one in full text (see Appendix 3 for further details). The selected papers were those that evaluated and/or compared the pain and mourning associated with the loss of a pet with the pain and mourning associated with the loss of an individual who plays an important role in one's emotional life.

Discussion

This review, was beyond the scope of a qualitative and quantitative assessment of the intensity of mourning for the loss of an AC compared to mourning for the loss of a human. However, in examining the literature collected in the present study, we can highlight some significant recurring themes.

A. Intensity of Grief Over the Loss of One's Pet

1. All participants reported significant grief after the loss of their AC, with the majority of participants rating their pain as 10/10. This high level of pain continued for weeks, if not months (Wilson et al., 2021).
2. The death of a pet can produce similar effects to those caused by a variety of other losses, including the death of a spouse, a child, or a job (Uccheddu et al., 2019).
3. For some individuals, the grief response experienced following the loss of an animal companion may be similar to that experienced following human bereavement (Reisbig et al., 2017).
4. It has been demonstrated that pets can be regarded as attachment figures, with the loss of which a significant pain response is elicited (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).
5. On the paper by Lavorgna et al. (2018) was compared and measured, for 50 participants aged between 18 and 65 who had experienced the death of a human (n=35) or the death of a companion animal (n=15), the severity of pain. No significant differences were found between pain severity levels, however, qualitative analyses highlighted the complexities associated with attempting to compare these pain experiences.

B. Relationship between Owner/Handler and Their Animal

1. All AC owners report that their relationship with the animal is emotionally significant (Wilson et al., 2021).
2. The analysis indicated that pets were frequently designated as family members, and that strong emotional bonds between animals and humans were reported in some studies (Kemp et al., 2016).
3. The findings of the Mourning Dog Questionnaire corroborate the tendency of individuals to anthropomorphize their pets (Uccheddu et al., 2019).
4. Pets are frequently regarded as an integral member of the family unit (Baydak, 2000).
5. Pets are frequently regarded as integral members of the family unit. Of the 16 respondents, 13 indicated that they would administer a scarce drug to their pet in lieu of a non-family member (Cohen, 2002).
6. ACs can be described as "fictitious relatives," and many owners would describe them as full members of their family (Hewson, 2014).
7. An increasing number of people view their pets as family members, and the death of a pet often induces a grief reaction of a severity comparable to the loss of a significant human relationship (Kogan 2022).

C. The individual's vision and perspective on life after the loss of their pet

1. The findings of the Mourning Dog Questionnaire corroborate the pessimistic outlook on life after the demise of a pet (Uccheddu et al., 2019).
2. A lot of research indicates that losing a pet can cause depression. (Davis, 2011; Davis et al., 2003; Planchon et al., 2002).

D. The underestimation of the pain of losing a pet by society and the social context in which it occurs

1. The pain associated with the death of a pet is frequently underestimated or even not recognized by others. (Brown et al., 2023).
2. Despite the relatively high frequency and intensity of grief over pet death among pet owners, this process is largely unrecognized socially and underexplored in research (Packman et al., 2012).
3. The perception of animals by dog owners does not differ from that of humans with regard to the emotional, physiological, and legal aspects of their nature (Uccheddu et al., 2019).
4. It is probable that those who have lost a pet will experience feelings of disenfranchisement as a result of this loss. (Park et al., 2023).
5. A total of 13 participants (out of 18) indicated that relationships with family and friends who did not understand their pain were strained (Baydak, 2000).
6. It has been posited that society tends to undervalue the significance of animal companions, which may result in the grieving process surrounding the loss of an animal companion being overlooked or even pathologized, leading to what is known as disenfranchised grief (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2024).
7. The relationship between humans and animals is often regarded as inferior to that between humans. This becomes problematic during times of loss and grief when members of a grieving pet owner's support system fail to recognize the significance of the relationship with the pet. (Reisbig et al., 2017).
8. The death of a pet typically does not involve the same rituals that allow owners to express their grief (Kogan et al., 2022).

Conclusions

The results of this study, along with the conclusions that can be drawn from them, are presented below.

The research indicates that AC owners experience a spectrum of pain and grief intensity when their pet dies, ranging from moderate to excruciating.

This grief is often compared to that experienced in the loss of a close family member.

In order to know the precise intensity of this phenomenon, it would be necessary to use an appropriate instrument, such as the Mourning Dog Questionnaire, or Pet Bereavement Questionnaire, or the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale, or the Animal-Human Continuity Scale, which would take into account a number of variables, including the owner's age, gender, occupation, education level, and whether he or she lives alone or with family; age, cause of death, and type of pet.

Additionally, this review reveals a pervasive underestimation of the grief associated with the loss of a pet by both society at large and individuals who do not possess such a bond.

This underestimation can have a profound emotional impact on those who experience the loss of a pet.

It is also evident that veterinarians may play a role in supporting AC owners through the mourning process. Further study is required to develop a measure of DG specific to human–CA loss (Brown et al., 2023).

The present study is not without limitations. The lack of research on this specific topic and the lack of access to the full text resulted in the identification of multiple limitations. However, this field of research may prove to be important for developing effective strategies for primary prevention.

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