

Grieving the Loss of a Pet

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In my Death, Dying and Bereavement course, we discuss various types of loss, especially as it pertains to the lives of older adults: loss of a spouse or partner, loss of a career through retirement, loss of physical function, and loss of multiple roles as one enters old age. We discuss, in passing, the loss of a pet. I show a film clip about a funeral service conducted by a little girl to honor her pet goldfish to demonstrate that often, we initially learn about death through the death of a childhood pet.

Although a poignant way to demonstrate a point about how we learn about death and grief, I propose that we do not spend enough time discussing the unique role of pets in the lives of older adults and how the death of a beloved pet might reflect a particularly difficult loss for this age group. Various factors including widowhood, geographic distance from family members, and chronic illness may put older adults at higher risk for social isolation and thus pets become important life companions (Carmack, n.d.).

When I was a social work intern in the geriatrics unit at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center, I came to know Rebecca, one of the few female World War II veterans I would meet. She was an extraordinarily vibrant and resilient woman, having served in the Army as a nurse. She, at age 80-something, had survived her husband and most of her friends. Although she was still a beautiful woman, insisting that she be given a moment to apply her lipstick before any of her physicians were allowed to visit her bedside, she was dealing with the loss of her youthful appearance. She was slowly losing her functioning, which put her independence in danger. Rebecca seemed to struggle most, however, with the loss of her pet cat. He was the only family she had for several years and was her constant companion.

Coping with the death of a pet is complicated by the fact that a reaction to this kind of loss may be considered “disenfranchised grief.” This type of grief is not readily accepted by society and thus, it may be difficult for the bereaved to get the kind of support that may be more readily available for other losses, such as the loss of a human loved one. Indeed, the interdisciplinary team that had known Rebecca for over ten years was at a loss as to how they could assist her through the grieving process for her beloved cat.

The first step is to recognize that the loss of a pet can be just as painful as any other loss and that the grief process is normal. It is important to provide support and a non-judgmental listening ear. One can also provide the bereaved with further resources for support. A good start is to visit the Delta Society website (www.deltasociety.org) and look through their pet loss support directory, where they list support groups, organizations and individual counselors that can help someone get through this difficult loss.

References:

Carmack, B. J. (n.d.). Elders and pet loss. Retrieved on August 13, 2010 at:
<http://www.deltasociety.org/Document.Doc?id=175>

Delta Society (n.d.). Pet loss and bereavement support directory. Retrieved on August 15, 2010 at: <https://www.deltasociety.org/SSLPage.aspx?pid=610#california>