

## DEALING WITH THE LOSS OF A MUCH LOVED ANIMAL COMPANION

Grief is an intensely painful and primal emotion. The last couple of years have brought this into a particularly sharp focus. Many of us have suffered loss and, at the very least, been unable to avoid facing the spectre of death in our own society. We have also witnessed the endless tragedies reflected in the wider world through the media and our connections with others.

Hardly surprising then, that clients in therapy are reluctant to appear to dwell too deeply when faced with the death of a much loved pet. They skirt over the event until pulled up and asked to focus on this pain and the impact on them, and often their family too. It's as if they need permission to allow their deep distress to be acknowledged publicly in the light of what seems like bigger, more public tragedies.

A connection to an animal is a real attachment, often a deep one. It affects us emotionally and mentally and the breaking of that bond brings real separation distress. Many pets will be a link to the past and shared experiences; a bridge to a part of our former selves. For children, there may be no remembrance of a time when the pet wasn't part of their household.

Animals that had no working or financial use only became part of family life in Victorian times which subsequently led to a formal and recognised mourning process to commemorate the ensuing loss.

The earliest documented pet cemetery is in Hyde Park in central London where the gatekeeper, a Mr Winbridge, agreed to bury little Cherry, a dog who had belonged to regular visitors. Her tombstone stated 'poor Cherry. Died April 28, 1881.' Until this time, the burial of animals in any public space was considered illegal, but the trailblazing Mr Winbridge was the instigator of a cemetery that contained 300 loved animals by its close in 1903. A custom was begun and public celebration and grief over emotional links to our animals was publicly and allowably acknowledged.

Picture below: One of the many pet gravestones in Hyde Park Pet Cemetery



Mourning rituals are a necessary part of grief.

In old country houses and inns it's not hard to find a quiet corner with tiny headstones erected in memory of a beloved cat or dog. Paintings of adored horses and domestic pets were commissioned to celebrate and remember animals now long forgotten.

Many other pet cemeteries were not uncommon from the late 1800s celebrating the 'beloved companions' of a life long forgotten and even to the extent of elevating some animals to the family status of another child. Much was made of the hope that in an afterlife there would be the joy of reunion. Denny, a 'brave', beloved cat of the time was buried with the optimistic epithet 'God bless until we meet again.'

Literature is full of stories of heroic cats, dogs and horses. Yet in our busy industrial lives we seem to have become almost shy of publicly stating the enormous grief and pain when an adored pet dies

Barbra Streisand even went to the lengths of cloning her dog on discovering that particular traits of the breed were unrepeatable. She publicly stated that she couldn't bear to lose Samantha, so she had DNA samples taken to recreate her adored dog and obtain two surrogate replicas Violet and Scarlett. Our publicly stoic Queen was said to have been devastated at the unexpected death of the puppy that was given to her when her husband was terminally ill. It happens to us all if we allow this unconditional animal love into our lives. There is a flurry of celebrities on Instagram who have opted for tattoos to celebrate a lost companion. Possibly these images will be loved and admired long after some of their current human relationships are a distant memory.

Many pets will be a distinct part of a family. Memories and photos will be countless. They will have given structure to the day and a loyal welcome on our return home. They provide social links and stimulate conversation. Who doesn't smile when our gaze seems to be lovingly returned by a silent partner. And yet it's easy for these strong emotions to be minimised by well meaning outsiders. 'You can always get another dog.' 'It was only a cat.' 'Pets are easy to replace, so many more out there.' No point in trying to refute the thoughts of others. Accept their unknowingness and look for empathy elsewhere. Grief can feel like a lonely process when others don't understand the depth of your feelings.

As with most loss, it can attach to other loss and amplify. Guilt can also creep in - 'weren't we responsible for this animal's welfare, could we have done more?' These are normal emotions and will lessen, but grief never totally disappears, it just softens in time. Pain is subjective to our own experiences and our reactions to any event can be immensely personal.

It can be tricky to find a way to deal with the emotions of children. This may be their first experience of death. Many might not even have any memory of life without their pet. It's possible that the experience may trigger fears of other death. If there is an end to this life, who else may disappear? It's hard to deal with such bewildering emotions, but honesty is usually best. Praise their compassion, let them see that it's ok to feel sadness at this big hole in their lives. Include children in a memorial. Maybe a scrapbook with their drawings and photos or a dedicated flowering shrub in the garden. Allow plenty of time to grieve before considering a replacement.

So, don't minimise these feelings, they are the counterpoint to the joy you had. In therapy, stop and allow the time to talk and mourn - it's never 'only a pet' - as you know.

*'How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard' said Winnie-the-Pooh.*

*Christina Fraser*