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# What Are The Experiences of Pet Bereavement?

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## Abstract

On average, 80 million American households, or 34.8%, own one or more pet (American Veterinary Medical Association as cited in Cordaro, 2012, p.283). Despite the significant role pets play in their owner's lives, the loss of a pet is inconsistently recognized as an authentic occasion for bereavement (Clements, Benasutti & Carmone, 2003). Research on pet bereavement focuses on pet and owner attachment, comparative studies examining differences in the child and adult pet bereavement, and pet loss via euthanasia. Despite the range of existing literature, there is a gap on the experience of pet bereavement; therefore, additional research is needed to understand the experience of losing a pet and how this loss is grieved by pet owners.

## Introduction

Available research on pet bereavement ranges from the exploration of pet and owner attachment levels; comparative studies examining differences in the child and adult grief reaction, focusing on pet bereavement; and pet loss via euthanasia. However, there is little focus on the overall experience of pet bereavement. The goal of the current study is to gain a deeper understanding of pet bereavement through experiences of pet owners. Phenomenology is based on a shared experience and meaning making (Creswell, 2013), therefore it is well suited to this inquiry by allowing the voices of pet owners to describe their experiences in their own words. Furthermore, this research aims to identify and increase resources for those grieving the loss of their pet and help to inform social service providers how to better assist pet owners through the bereavement process.

## Objectives

1. To explore the experiences of pet bereavement
2. To bridge the gap in the current literature and bring recognition to the pet bereavement process and the importance and meaning of pets to people.

## Methods

### Phenomenology

- Phenomenology is the proposed method, which is well suited for a study focused on a shared experience. Utilizing the participants' own words, phenomenology focuses on describing what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

### Theoretical Frame Work

- Social construction relies on the participants' lens informed by their experience, culture, values, and other influences that generate an understanding and assign meaning to the participant's experience and is well matched for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013).
- The second theory is Keith-Lucas Theory for Mourning which will assist in explaining the pet bereavement/grief process. The stages proposed by Keith-Lucas, as outlined by Harris (2015), are as follows: shock and denial; protest; and despair and mastery.

### Participants

- Criterion sampling was used in this study. The criterion was eighteen years of age with the loss of a pet at least six months ago. The sample included ten participants from across the United States. There were eight female participants and two male participants, with nine participants experiencing the loss of a dog and one participant experiencing the loss of a cat.

## Themes & Essence

### Theme One: Grief

**Sub-themes: The Impact; Time Helps; Ready To Start Again; It Never Goes Away**

**Essence:** "We were with him he was put to sleep it was very peaceful and the sun went down and we went inside and just bawled you know like uhh for hours I think in ways that I've never cried anybody or anything, I've lost a lot of friends and you know not some--my parents are still alive but my grandparents have passed away and I've never felt like that kind of attachment to anything before" (Participant 1015)

### Theme Two: Illness, When Your Pet Is Sick

**Sub-themes: The Shock; No Treatment, No Hope; Not Knowing Why; Making The Decision**

**Essence:** "I had to choose when to put her down which was hell" (Participant 1018) "We probably couldn't have done anything you know it would have been just to let her be happy and let her be peaceful in her last months" (Participant 1019)

### Theme Three: Supports Specific to Pet Bereavement (See Table 1)

**Sub-themes: Who Could I Turn To; Insensitivity From Providers; Difficult To Talk About; No Supports Specific To Pet Loss; Get Over It**

**Essence:** "I feel like people say they understand or umm you know even other people who have lost pets but then it's really not the same as when you lose a family member you know it's sort of like you're expected to get over it much more quickly and people don't really check in on you at all like it, it's like 'oh my gosh I'm so sorry' and then after the event then it's just over" (Participant 2025)

### Theme Four: Lessons Learned

**Essence:** "it's not very easy for me to be in the moment so I think going for walks, going to the ocean, going to -- we would go paddle boarding together -- and going for walks on a routine basis. I think she taught, her presence her personality taught me to be present in the moment um gave me the gift of a relationship just like reinforced the gift of a relationship and oh aww to be patient" (Participant 1101)

### Theme Five: What My Pet Meant To Me

**Essence:** "It leaves that spot in your life because she was my constant companion, I'm retired on disability she was my first dog that I ever spent 24/7 with you know I didn't have to go to work and leave everyday so we were very much she was very much a part of my everyday life so I was very very lost for a while" (Participant 1301)

### Acknowledgements:

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Significant Statement	Meaning Unit
like I didn't ask for it, nor do I think that they had like a post like and after care plan. 1101 P.2	There were no supports offered to me at the vet clinic and I assumed there weren't any
nothing was really offered to me except that umm people who I am close with who had had pets pass away I guess that was my support. 1018 P.2	There was no formal grief support, only people who also lost their pets.
there's all kinds of you know stuff out there and so you're desperate and uh so having online support is not the same as having real people (chuckles) uhh-uhhh they can't really hug ya uh but it's better, I mean I know you can say stuff on a website like that and people would understand whereas people who are not pet owners I don't think they really understand the depth of the grief. 0405 P.2	I don't think people without pets understand the gravity of this kind of loss
Therapy probably, just to have someone to talk to when you felt like that, that they were tired of hearing it would certainly be helpful. 1301 P.2	Having professional support may have helped
It's minimized in our society quite a bit, you know, the loss of a pet. 2009 P.4	There is not enough recognition around the loss of a pet

Table 1

## Discussion

Previous studies have found that the bonds between a pet and its owner(s) are unique and, often times, a pet secures the role of a family member (Cordaro, 2012; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). However, current literature lacks to explore, analyze and understand pet owners experienced with the pet bereavement and grief process. The current research study explored the experiences of pet bereavement, finding five major themes: grief; illness, when you pet is sick; supports specific to pet bereavement; lessons learned; and what my pet meant to me. These findings are further supported by current research, for example Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Cordaro, 2012; and Clements, Benasutti & Carmone, 2003, have found that although the grief experienced by pet owners is genuine, it does not warrant empathy from social supports nor does it is recognized as an authentic bereavement experience.

It is apparent that the pet-owner relationship is significant, powerful, and unique and pet companionship may very well be an essential component of a pet owner's healthy lifestyle, both physically and mentally. Thus, it is vital that more sufficient support and resources are provided to those experiencing pet bereavement. Further research on the role providers play throughout the pet bereavement process (as well as their overall perspectives) is necessary in continuing to recognize pet bereavement as a true form of grief. Additionally, continuing this research will help to establish formal supports and assist in beginning to normalize and acknowledge that pet bereavement is an authentic form of grief.