

Module 6

Pet loss and coping

"Hi, I'm Vanessa Rohlf - I'm a consultant, therapist, and educator specialising in stress management, compassion fatigue, pet loss, and animal bereavement for animal caregivers. I've teamed up with Flynn's Walk to provide you with some short and easy to digest "well-being tips" because we all need a bit of support from time to time....

Many people consider their pets to be part of the family. They are viewed as our fur babies and our best friends rolled into one. It's no surprise then that research shows the death of a pet can be intense and distressing with the grief experienced from the loss of our beloved pet to be just as significant and upsetting as the loss of a human friend or family member. And actually, my experience as a pet loss counsellor has shown me that sometimes the level of grief can be even more intense.

As veterinary professionals, you are often at the front line. You are no stranger to death, dying, loss and grief. But that doesn't always make it easier. If you do find supporting clients through loss challenging, you are not alone, many veterinary professionals cite providing support to distressed and grieving clients a significant source of workplace stress.

In this module, I'm going to give you some tips on how you can support grieving clients and also how you can care for yourselves during these times.

Let's start by first understanding why losing a pet can be so significant. The grief that we experience when we lose a person, or an animal can often mirror the relationship that we had... so quite simply pet loss is significant because our relationships with pets are significant.

They provide us with unconditional love, purpose and support. They are constants in our lives and share our ups and downs. They are there when we wake in the morning and they are there when we go to bed. Our daily rituals are enmeshed with one another. They may have been there when you had your first child, when you graduated and when you went through a difficult break up. They are considered our children, siblings, best friends, confidants and protectors. The bonds we share with our pets can be pure and genuine. When this bond is broken and an animal dies, grief can be overwhelming.

Grief is an inevitable consequence when a bond is broken. So when supporting clients, it can be helpful to understand that grief is a necessary, normal and natural response to loss.

It may also be helpful to learn that grief is experienced in many ways. It can affect our thoughts, feelings and behaviours and we can have physical reactions to loss too.

Some typical reactions can include feeling sad or angry, some clients may have feelings of guilt or feelings of self-reproach perhaps thinking if only that had made different decisions would the outcome be different, they may be shocked and disbelief at the news, and sometimes there may also be confusion. If this occurs, it may be helpful to be patient and sometimes clearly repeat information or be available if they have questions. Sometimes asking for a support person to be present when breaking bad news can also be helpful as the support person can be present to hear the information you're providing as well as offer practical support like transport to and from the clinic and of course emotional support.

People will grieve in many different ways. You may find some clients will want to treasure reminders like their pet's collar, bed or fur and others may wish to avoid reminders because it's just too painful. Sometimes this can change so be prepared for when a client feels ready to pick up their animals' belongings.

When it comes to grieving, the important thing is that as long as those experiencing loss are not hurting others or themselves, we want to allow people the opportunity to grieve in a way that works for them.

When supporting a client you can;

- **First, validate the loss for the person** - by saying something as simple as "I'm so sorry for your loss"

Pet loss can be a form of disenfranchised grief – a type of grief that isn't always openly acknowledged. Although this is changing its not common practice to have funerals, or memorials for a pet and to take leave for the loss of a pet and sometimes clients friends and family, while well meaning, may say things like "it was just a dog" or "when are you going to get another one"

So the best thing that you can do is let that person know that you get how significant this loss is.

- **Second - Be there for them and be present** - People sometimes think that they need to say something profound, but honestly all you need to do is show up. And listen - listen non-judgmentally, this includes not getting distracted by other things and asking open questions to let them tell their story. Letting people talk about their loss can really help them make sense of the loss.
- **Third – Share a memory and if you're sad about the loss you can tell them this too.** Based on my experience supporting people through pet loss, they tell me that they have found a lot of comfort in knowing that their pet mattered and made an impact not just to them but to others as well.
- **Fourth, follow up and check in with them** - often we might initially acknowledge and validate the loss but in a week forget and assume that the person is ok but given that we know grief can last much longer than this, it's nice to check in with them and see how they are coping.

The last thing you can do is **refer**; let clients know that support from counsellors, like me, who have a special interest in the human-animal bond and pet loss is available. This way you can be sure that your clients have the follow up and personalised care and support that they need after the loss of their companion.

Now, there may be some occasions when the loss of a pet can be really devastating and some people may experience a crisis. Do direct clients to crisis support when there are concerns of suicide risk or self harm. The number for Lifeline is 13 11 14 (Aus residents). For Emergencies call 000 (Aus residents)

Veterinary professionals grieve too. Sometimes there might be a particular animal or client you have bonded too or it could be that multiple losses can build up....

Being in a caring role. Being exposed to multiple losses is a balancing act - We must care deeply without being overwhelmed by grief, we don't want to be completely numb to our feelings and lose our ability to empathise and make authentic connections but we also don't want to be completely overcome by grief either.

So what you must do is to give yourselves time and permission to process the losses.

Debriefing sessions in the clinic can be an effective strategy to help professionals cope with grief in the workplace. Many professionals find this to be a helpful way to allow themselves to take stock and decompress before they return home.

Decide how you might like to say farewell so that you have closure. You can talk or write about it. Do take care of yourself and that includes getting adequate rest and exercise as well as a balanced diet. Do be gentle to yourself and know your limits. You too can also seek support.

Remember grief is a normal, natural and inevitable response when the bond with an animal is broken. We all must work through grief BUT We don't have to do it alone

"Thanks for listening. It is our hope that these tips have helped you. Remember, there are other modules available, so do be sure to explore them in your own time... and if you've liked this content, why not share it with a friend or family member!"

That's it from me bye for now.