

# Breaking the Human-Animal Bond: Helping Clients Cope with Euthanasia

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## INTRODUCTION

Human-animal bonds are forged through years of companionship and unconditional love offered in the midst of a hectic world where human relationships are often unstable.<sup>1</sup> Pets offer not only companionship, but something to care for, something to touch and fondle, something to keep one busy, a focus of attention, a source of exercise, and safety.<sup>2</sup> As social animals, people need a source of attachment<sup>3</sup>, such as that provided by family or companion animals. For children, companion pets function as sibling substitutes. For childless adults, companion pets can be child substitutes. And for the introverted or lonely, companion pets may be considered by owners to be the only, or at least the best, confidants available.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when a pet dies, the degree of emotion experienced by these highly attached owners may equal the loss of a close relative. The response to loss is grief; that state of mental and physical pain which is experienced when the loss of a significant object, person, or part of the self is realized.<sup>5</sup>

Euthanasia is a very important cause of breakage of the human-animal bond. This loss may result in quite intense emotional and physical reactions from the pet owners: reactions that may be difficult for someone not bonded to the animals to understand. Information, based on research studies, that will prepare veterinarians to deal with the breakage of this bond is becoming more available. Now more than ever there is no need to hide behind scientific jargon and euphemisms<sup>6</sup> or wait for experience to teach us what we need to know about helping clients cope with euthanasia.

## GRIEF AND THE VETERINARIAN

An adequate background knowledge of the stages of grief will give veterinarians understanding and help prepare them to face what before seemed to be irrational and unexpected client reactions. Grief has been divided into five stages by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross as it pertains to the reactions of dying human patients.<sup>7</sup> Though it is not a person who is dying in the loss of a pet by natural causes or euthanasia, the grief reaction is still fundamentally the same. The stages of grief for the pet owner will be broken down into: denial, anger, depression, and resolution.

One of the first stages is 'denial'. The client does not wish to believe his pet is going to die. He may try to side-step the issue of euthanasia by concentrating on matters such as a nail trim.<sup>8</sup> Denial may be recognized in an owner demanding a second opinion or claiming there was a mix-up in the laboratory results. Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected, shocking news. It allows a person to collect himself and, with time, mobilize other, less radical defenses.<sup>7</sup>

If the veterinarian becomes frustrated and tries to push the point of the animal's impending death, it may only serve to sharpen the defenses of the owner. The best thing a veterinarian can do if this stage is recognized in his client is to be patient with his explanations and go along with the client's desire to seek a second opinion.<sup>8</sup> This action will allow the client to protect himself from the shock of the 'bad news'. Denial is usually a temporary defense that will soon be replaced by partial acceptance.<sup>7</sup>

An easy stage to recognize is 'anger'. This anger may be in either or both of two forms: (1) Outward anger—directed against the veterinarian, and/or (2) Inward anger—directed against self. The source of this anger is the client's potential loss; he is frustrated because the situation seems out of his control. Therefore, when the client turns his anger

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against the veterinarian or against himself, it is being misdirected.

The veterinarian can do little to help clients with anger directed outwardly except to recognize its source and therefore not take it personally. It is best to learn to listen, and at times even to accept some irrational anger, knowing that the relief in expressing it will help pet owners toward a better acceptance later on.<sup>7</sup> At this point it should be the aim of the veterinarian to preserve the therapeutic relationship which will aid clients after the anger passes.<sup>9</sup>

The directing of anger inwardly is called guilt. This stage may be recognized when an owner laments, "I should have brought my pet in sooner" or "It's my fault that I didn't watch her more closely." Due to the owners' own perception of their own commitment and responsibility to their pets, they feel they should have done something, though no one could have done anything.<sup>10</sup> The veterinarian is in the optimum position to help a pet owner during this stage. The owner sees the veterinarian as a person with great clinical knowledge and insight. Therefore, when the veterinarian quietly repeats that he felt the owner took good care of his pet and that in no way did the owner contribute to the pet's death, the owner is likely to believe him and his guilt will be reduced.<sup>12</sup> One veterinarian recommends it might be best to turn the owner's attention back to the pet by "suggesting that feelings of anger and guilt are not helping the pet, and since the pet is the primary concern, all efforts should be made to make the animal more comfortable."<sup>8</sup>

Guilt merges into depression. Some owners will want to be alone during this stage, and some will need support that others can provide. Physical manifestations are present during this stage. Normal reactions include: restlessness, digestive difficulties, and thinking a great deal about their pets.<sup>10,13</sup> Abnormal reactions, seen often when an animal is the only attachment the owner has in his life, may include prolonged reactive depressions and suicide.<sup>14</sup> As with all stages of grief, "it is important that the grieving individual feel free to express his emotions; to often well meaning friends and relatives encourage the individual not to cry, not to concentrate on the death loss, not to think about the problem. On the contrary, the bereaved needs to give full expression to these emotions so he can have a chance to heal and to move on to other, more constructive emotions."<sup>11</sup>

Resolution is the final stage in the grieving process. It is during this stage that the owners ask for information about the burial process: the

mourning process now begins. Mourning is the word used to describe "conventional behavior as determined by the mores and customs of society."<sup>15</sup> In other words, society dictates that when a human dies, the bereaved is to become involved in a funeral ritual in which the deceased is either buried or cremated. Society is beginning to adopt the same attitudes toward pets as evidenced by the presence of over 500 pet cemeteries in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

For some owners, and especially their children, funeral rituals help them cope with their loss and accept the reality of the pet's death. The veterinarian can help by understanding this need and supporting the owner's decisions with respect to pet burial or cremation. He can also show his support by helping make the necessary arrangements.

### THE EUTHANASIA PROCESS

The veterinarian can do certain things within the clinic environment to help owners through the difficult process of euthanizing their pets. The following is a description of how the veterinarian can handle this process utilizing his skills and those of his animal health technician.

When a pet is suffering some loss of function and death seems inevitable, the subject of euthanasia can be introduced by including it as one of the treatment alternatives including: (1) No treatment — allowing the disease process to run its course, (2) Palliative treatments — analgesics, tranquilizers, etc., or (3) Euthanasia. It is ideal to start this discussion as early as possible. Allowing owners time to spend with their pets can help them work through the grief process. Children especially need time to spend with their pets in order to "alleviate guilt feelings, fulfill any responsibilities felt toward the pets and to resolve any possible negative feelings directed toward the animals."<sup>17</sup> Time allows families to reach agreement on what is best for a pet animal. Most veterinarians agree, it is paramount that the owners make the decisions. Allowing time, when possible, aids in this process.

To begin the euthanasia process, an appointment is set-up so that the owner does not have to sit in the waiting room for any length of time. The staff should be notified that there should be no interruption, such as telephone calls, etc. The owner is then taken to a quiet room where the procedure is explained again in detail. He is shown the euthanasia bottle and equipment. It is then explained that the procedure is painless and no different from pre-surgical anesthesia.<sup>18</sup> Consciousness will be lost first. As the pet enters a deep plane of anesthesia, cardiac and respiratory functions will cease. Involun-

tary defecation and urination may then occur, as may terminal gasps, but these are only reflex actions. Again reiterate that the patient is no longer in pain and is unaware of these body reflexes.<sup>18,19</sup>

The owner should be asked if he wants to leave the room or stay. If the owner decides to stay, a tranquilizer may be wise to restrict any potential struggling and keep the animal calm despite the emotional presence of its owner.<sup>20</sup>

If the owner chooses to leave the room, the normal releases can be signed and the fee paid if this has not already been done. The owner should be retrieved to observe the body after the animal is dead and apparently peaceful and no longer in pain. This can reinforce the confidence that euthanasia was the right decision.<sup>18</sup> Some owners want to be with the body alone awhile. Every effort should be made to grant this request, for it will be of aid to the grief process.

Animal health technicians can be of great help with the euthanasia process.<sup>21</sup> They can clarify points for the owner and answer questions about euthanasia and/or disposal of the body of the pet. They can play an active role in consoling clients by offering a cup of coffee, a comfortable chair, or even a shoulder to cry on.

Posteuthanasia contact with the owners is highly recommended.<sup>22</sup> A card, phone call, or even a visit will usually be appreciated by owners. Animal health technicians can also be encouraged to become involved with this part of the euthanasia process.

### CONCLUSION

Learning more about the psychology of the grief process and staying current on the issues of the human-animal bond will prevent the uncomfortable feeling associated with taking any test unprepared. The "passing score" will reflect itself in increased personal growth and improved client relations.

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