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EDITOR'S NOTE

Grief: The Secret Among Us?

“Though nothing can bring back the hour of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower, we will grieve not, rather find strength in what remains behind.”

William Wordsworth,
*Intimations of Immortality
from Recollections of Early
Childhood*

As veterinarians, we deal with more “client”-related grief than many other professionals. The death of a pet means the loss of a source of love, of a living being to care for, and of contact with a component of our natural world.

While the grief suffered by pet owners after a pet dies is recognized to be the same as that experienced after the death of a person, the world rarely affords the same empathy to this situation as it does to the loss of a human family member. It definitely doesn't afford much empathy to the veterinarian who has to deal with the loss of a (perhaps well-known) patient and with its owner's grief. We rarely feel capable or comfortable with this all-too-frequent occurrence in our lives, but we survive it by using the pieces of humanity we possess and the collective experiences we have learned over the length of our careers.

The stages of grief and mourning are universal and are experienced by people from all walks of life, across many cultures. Mourning is a response to an individual's own terminal illness, the loss of a close relationship, or to the death of a valued being, whether human or animal.

The 5 stages of grief that people experience were first proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance can all be experienced for different lengths of time, and everyone works through each step and expresses each stage with different levels of intensity. Although these stages do not necessarily occur in any specific order, as veterinarians, we may have the most experience witnessing the denial and anger stages, and sometimes these may be focused toward us, despite our obvious and best intentions.

What should our role be? How do we deal with the emotional and mental stress that we take on during these times? With respect to the latter, do we call it “compassion fatigue” or simple emotional and mental fatigue? Whatever we call it, whether we feel fatigued or not, such stress leaves its scars. We carry it with us. It affects our lives and the lives of those around us.

Some large practices employ grief counselors to help owners deal with their loss and emotions. Many other practices have grief counseling brochures to assist owners in finding a source of support at their time of need. As individuals, we can at least suggest one of a plethora of pet loss support hotlines and groups. However, the acute and variable display of grief-associated emotions often leaves us as the frontline counselors, for which many of us are inadequately trained but which we take on as a recognized part of our job.

So, in answer to the question, “What should our role be?”: It is what we choose it to be. Many of us choose to be on the front line, guiding owners to self-help options as needed. The answer to the second question—“How do



we deal with it?”—needs more focus from the profession as a whole. Not many practices around the world employ counselors for the mental health of veterinary staff faced with clients’ grief, with which we may closely identify. It would seem that we are on our own in trying to understand how we as individuals best deal with this challenge and how we can keep our emotional and mental strength at a level that enables a healthy life and a successful career.

Thankfully, the veterinary profession is recognizing and accepting that we need assistance in dealing with the mental health stresses that we all too often endure. However, we should not have to wait until we need help! Our ability to handle the grief experienced by our clients, whether “successful” or not, can contribute to our need for help, so being prepared may be the best medicine, and education is the best preparation. As an example of how we can educate ourselves, the American Institute of Health Care Professionals offers an online pet loss grief recovery certification course.

As veterinarians, we deal with a multitude of challenges that affect our mental and emotional wellbeing. Confronted together, they may feel overwhelming; however, addressed on an individual basis, they may be more manageable. Understanding how we should deal with the grief in our job is something well worth focusing on. We practice that prevention is better than cure for our patients. It is high time that we admitted we should follow our own advice and that dealing with daily grief is our worst-kept secret. **TVP**

Grief Counseling Resources

For clients

- Rainbow Bridge: rainbowsbridge.com/Grief_Support_Center/Grief_Support_Home.htm
- Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement: apl.org/support/support_groups/

For veterinary professionals

- AVMA Guidelines for Pet Loss Support Services: avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/AVMA-Guidelines-for-Pet-Loss-Support-Services.aspx
- American Institute of Health Care Professionals Pet Loss Grief Recovery Certification: aihcp.net/pet-loss-grief-recovery-certification/