

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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What a revolutionary breakthrough it would be if we found a way to lower blood pressure, lessen the ravages of depression, boost our immune systems, enhance our sense of emotional well being, decrease our feelings of loneliness, increase motivation, elevate our self-image, and promote our ability to trust! These are only some of the benefits of pet ownership. Under most circumstances, having a pet is a healthy and healing experience.

Since ancient times pets have been part of the human experience. Early contacts between humans and dogs benefitted both species. The dogs were fed scraps of food, bones and other leftovers, until they developed a dependent relationship with humans. Then, in turn, the dogs served as watch-guards, warning humans of intruders approaching their encampments. Today an estimated 50 million households have pets. In addition to 120 million pet dogs and cats, people make pets of birds, fish, rabbits, hamsters, as well as a variety of exotic pets, including pigs and reptiles.

With the decrease in attachment bonds in our society over the last several decades, we have seen increases in depression, loneliness, lack of trust, and a heightened sense of vulnerability. People don't feel the closeness, the sense of social engagement, and the intimacy with others that they experienced in the past – when people were more likely to live in the same community throughout their lives, when communication was more personal, when travel was not



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as widely available. The role played by pets in our lives is likely to become more significant within this context since pets can serve as substitute sources of attachment. Pets can compensate for some of the losses we feel in an increasingly impersonal era.

Pets are an important source of emotional attachment that can be as significant as, and sometimes even stronger than, the bonds formed between people. The purpose of attachment, according to developmental theory, is to form an affectional bond and to provide a sense of safety and security. These needs, which emerge early in one's life, are directed toward a few specific people and tend to endure throughout one's life span. Any relationship, not just those between people, can become an attachment relationship if it fills our needs for safety and security. Filling these needs with pets can, in many cases, be easier than trying to develop or sustain them with people. Pets provide a bond that is genuine and a source of consistent unconditional love and acceptance. Even supportive friends and family members find it difficult to provide the nonjudgmental validation and acceptance that a dog or cat can give to a person. As long as a pet is treated well, it will forgive us for our lapses in good behavior. The pet remains loyal, consistent, and shows unconditional approval. Because of this, pets address, at least to some degree, our needs for trust, for safety and security, for inclusion, for interaction, and for consistency over time. Pets demand little from us – yet they are a source of immediate and consistent feedback, a commodity that is hard to find in the social world.

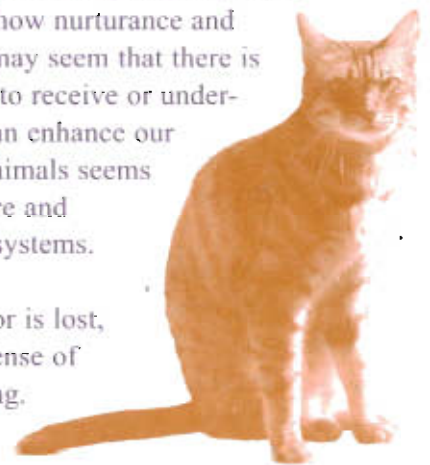
Pets perform an important role in families. They provide a common focus of attention for families that may lack much to communicate about. Taking care of a pet – walking the dog, feeding the pet, grooming and bathing the pet – are duties that can be shared by different members of a family. Thus, they tend to bring families closer together. Pets can also serve as lightning rods within family systems. Pets may provide a diversion from the conflict or tension felt by family members, and, unfortunately, they can become the target for misdirected anger meant for other members of the family. Similarly, they can become the focus for love which family members may have difficulty expressing toward each other. In many respects some pets are important members of families.



There are many other benefits to pet ownership. Pets are the ideal social lubricant. Take your dog (or a friend's dog) for a walk in a dog park and see how easy it is to start conversations. Your physical health can be improved as well by having a pet. Studies show that people with pets make fewer doctor visits, and their mortality rate is one third that of people without pets. Women living alone who have little contact with the outside world reveal that having a pet has the same cardiovascular benefit as social interactions with other people. An important Australian study found that pet owners had lower blood pressure readings than those without pets, and they also had lower levels of cholesterol. Male AIDS patients who own a dog or cat are less likely to be depressed than male AIDS patients without a pet. One study even shows that pets can make psychotherapy progress faster.

Despite the many benefits people experience from pet ownership, it must be emphasized that having a pet is not for everyone. A person with allergies, for example, should not try to have a dog or cat in the house. Unless a person is able to keep the pet vaccinated, healthy, groomed, and well fed, it would be advisable not to become a pet owner. If the pet becomes ill, the financial consequences could create a problem.

Pets can be our most personal and trustworthy companions. They are always there for us, regardless of how we look or feel (think of the positive consequences regarding our self-image when we are accepted unconditionally). Caring for our pets helps to structure our day and give the day at least some meaning (structure and meaning help to combat depression). We can show nurturance and love to a pet when it may seem that there is nobody else out there to receive or understand our love. Pets can enhance our social lives. Petting animals seems to lower blood pressure and enhance our immune systems.



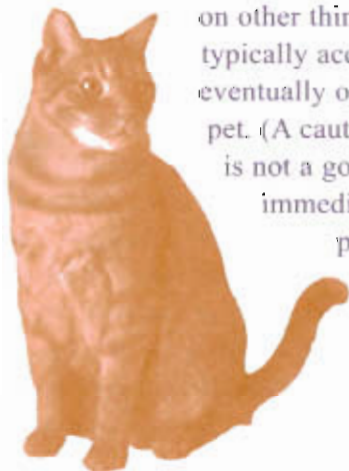
When a pet dies or is lost, however, the sense of grief can be devastating.

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When the Bond is Broken - Grieving Pet Loss

Many people are unable to understand the enormity of the grief experienced by a pet owner when their pet dies or is lost. The grieving pet owner is often left to process their feelings of loss without adequate social support. The degree of attachment felt between people and a pet who dies is a good indicator of how intense the grief reaction will be. Pet owners experience depression and a significant disruption in their functioning after the death of a pet, especially if the attachment bond is strong.

People experience the loss of a pet in a manner similar to the grief response when a beloved person dies. The grief process usually begins with a feeling of numbness and disbelief. Then there is a period of sadness, guilt, and depression. Sometimes a person in grief over the loss of a pet will also experience anger – toward the veterinarian, toward the person who caused the accident, or toward friends who don't seem to understand the degree of pain experienced by the grieving pet owner. A bereaved pet owner may even direct anger inwardly, toward him or herself, if there is an overwhelming feeling of guilt over the death of the pet. Grief reactions often involve preoccupation with thoughts and memories of the pet and a decreased ability to focus and concentrate on other things. Over time there is typically acceptance of the loss, and eventually openness to having a new pet. (A cautionary word, however – it is not a good idea to get a new pet immediately after the death of a previous pet. We need time to process the death of the first pet.)



There are individual differences in how we react to the loss of a pet. People who live alone or lack strong social support may have more difficulty in adjusting to a pet's death. People who feel that others understand their loss seem to process their grief reactions more quickly. Whether a pet dies suddenly or after a long illness will have an impact on the grief process. If a person has had other losses recently, the need to process these losses compounds mourning for the pet. The decision to euthanize an animal can be especially difficult and can complicate the grieving process. Feelings of guilt can be devastating for the pet owner who chooses euthanasia because of the expense involved in medical procedures. Even when money is not the issue, there may still be guilt associated with not having done more to prevent the illness or injury that led to the decision to euthanize the pet.

Our society lacks a set of rituals to help us deal with the death of a pet, so there is some suggestion that processing the loss of a companion animal is more difficult than mourning the death of a person. Indeed, in our society the expression of grief and rituals for mourning the loss of pets is discouraged. We define the death of an animal as not worthy of as much acknowledgment as the death of a person. This approach fails to acknowledge the reality of a situation in which an animal may be our closest companion, a surrogate child (especially in childless or empty nest families), and a source of emotional and physical comfort for several years. We may come to depend on the unconditional love and validation that animals can provide us. Caring for an animal may be an important part of our structured daily routine. Exercising an animal keeps us in physical shape. Thus, when our pet dies, the impact on our lives can be greater than when a person dies.



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The Effect of Pet Loss on Children

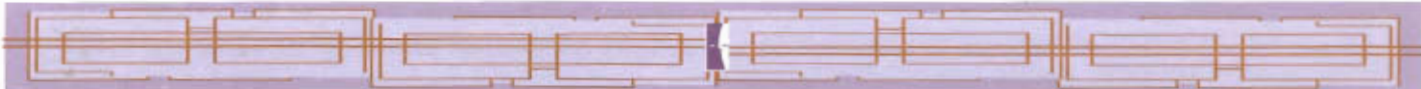
Many children describe their pet as their best friend or sibling. The relationship between children and pets may be more important now than it has been in the past because more children now grow up in smaller families, often with both parents working outside the home. Children spend a considerable amount of time alone, and the pet takes on the role of companion in a child's daily activities. A child's pet does not judge or make the child feel inadequate – and can actually give the child a sense of self-worth. Caring for a pet enhances the child's learning a sense of responsibility. Thus, the death of a pet can be profound, especially if this is their first experience with death or loss.

How a child responds to the loss of a pet depends on his or her level of cognitive development, degree of attachment to the pet, the circumstances surrounding the loss, and the support available to the child. Studies have shown that children display a more intense grief response and longer periods of bereavement to the loss of a pet than do adults. Unlike adults, children are noted to grieve in spurts because they cannot deal with intense, prolonged grieving. An adult may be alarmed at the length of time a child grieves the loss of a pet, and the intensity of the child's grief response may serve as a constant painful reminder of the parent's own feelings regarding the loss.

When children grieve the loss of a pet, they need the support and understanding of an adult – who may be reluctant to share the intensity of his or her own grief feelings around the child. Even when adults model expressions of grief, the child may be confused when their feelings are not consistent with those of the adult. Although children may experience a strong emotional grief response, they might withdraw and show their feelings less outwardly than do adults. Children also withdraw when they perceive that adults are not sensitive to the importance of the pet in their life.

Adults should keep in mind the following points when a child grieves the loss of a pet –

- Give the child clear, age-appropriate information about the loss of the pet, keeping in mind that young children think in concrete terms.
- Allow the child to see your grief. This is good role-modeling and it shows the child how to express his or her own grief.
- Validate the child's emotions and comfort the child.
- This is a good opportunity to teach a child about death if they are old enough to grasp the concept.



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