

Chapter 15

Continuing Bonds Research with Animal Companions: Implications for Men Grieving the Loss of a Dog

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Introduction

It is evident that animal companions have a deep capacity for acceptance, adoration, attention, forgiveness, and unconditional love, thus, satisfying some of our greatest human needs. Pets also help humans to overcome or prevent a sense of isolation that is frequently experienced due to life struggles (Levinson 1969). Because our emotional health is continuously impacted by important relationships, pets have become significant attachment figures who benefit our general social, physical and psychological well-being (Sable 1995). Our connection with animals goes as far back as recorded history, and as Oyama and Serpell (2013) put it, "...humans have always suspected an ability of animals to improve the human condition" (p. 374). In 2012 (Humane Society 2014), in the U.S. alone, 47 % of households owned at least one dog, and over half of U.S. households owned some other species of pet. At the

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same time, an all time high of almost 60 billion dollars will be spent this year on our animal companions, up from 21 billion from 1996 (Manning 2014).

Research has demonstrated that for humans, pets provide companionship, protection, non-judgmental acceptance (Labrecque and Walsh 2011), increased quality of life (Peacock et al. 2012), reduction of mental distress (Aydin et al. 2012), accelerated adaption to traumatic events (Wolfe 1977; Aydin et al. 2012) as well as love and nurturance (Garrity et al. 1989; Zasloff and Kidd 1994). It has been suggested that transitional objects help children feel confident and protected without their primary attachment figure or parents, thus empowering them to transfer their affections from parents to others (Barba 1991). Robin and ten Bense (1985) noted that as transitional objects, pets help children feel safe, whether or not their parents are around. During adolescence, pets can “be a confidant, an object of love, a protector, a social facilitator or a status symbol” (Robin and ten Bense 1985, p. 66). Levinson (1969) has also noted that pets fulfill the need for touch or physical contact without most of the fear that accompanies human contact. In the same vein, there is evidence to indicate that positive feelings and interactions with an animal transfers to improved interactions with other humans (Moneymaker and Strimple 1991; Ruth 1992; Mallon 1992; Thompson 2009; Barba 1991; Ryder 1973; Savishinsky 1983). Animal companions have been additionally described as social lubricants (Messent 1983) or bridges to social interactions (Lockwood 1983), indicating that pets tend to facilitate positive human interactions. Aydin et al. (2012) found that for people who experienced social exclusion, just the presence of a dog reduced emotional distress.

Similar to humans, pets carry the potential to provide an emotional attachment bond that promotes a sense of security and well-being (Sable 1995). The attachment relationship between humans and pets is reinforced by the fact that pets are often viewed as part of the family (Raupp 1999; Raupp et al. 1997). Indeed, over 99 % of pet owners consider his or her pet to be family member (Stutts 1994). People become emotionally close and committed to pets, accept responsibility for pets, share activities with pets and grieve when their pet dies. Thus, it seems evident that the human–pet attachment bond is similar to that between humans, suggesting that one of the most important things a pet can provide is someone to love (Arehart-Treichel 1982) and unconditional love and acceptance.

In this chapter, we examine the human animal bond and the implications for men when their pets die. This will specifically include a discussion about attachment, human–canine bond, gender, grief, and continuing bonds (CB). Continuing Bonds expressions (CBE) (e.g., dreams, fond memories, rituals, memorials) have been found in the literature to be an adaptive means of coping following the loss of a beloved relationship with an attachment figure, including pets. In our research and clinical practice, we have consistently found that men have difficulties expressing their emotions and accessing support following a death. Because of the strong relationship between men and their dogs, a death can be especially devastating. Thus, using CBE may be helpful in affect regulation.

Attachment to Animal Companions

The need for attachment is common to both humans and animals. Humans have a tendency to develop attachment bonds with animals due to anthropomorphism, neoteny, and allelomimetic behaviors (Lagoni et al. 1994). Anthropomorphism is the attribution of humanlike traits to nonhumans, neoteny signifies the presence of infant-like characteristics, and allelomimetic behaviors are human behaviors that are mimicked by animals. Attachment theorists have outlined specific behaviors that are essential to the attachment between human beings and other animals such as the amount of time spent together, physical closeness, care-giving and care-soliciting behavior, sharing of emotional experiences, dependency, cooperative behavior, tactile and visual stimulation, and feelings of happiness evoked by behaviors of the attached figure (Voith 1985; Triebenbacher 1998). Bowlby (1969) noted two important and similar attachment behaviors observed in birds and mammals such as maintaining proximity to and taking care of another animal, as well as specificity and discrimination in the relationship, such as the connection between a parent and child. From a biological perspective, Nagasawa et al. (2009) highlighted the distinct relationship that humans have with dogs, due in particular, to recent “evolved social cognitive abilities in close symbiosis with humans” (p. 217). Animal behaviorists acknowledge that the love and attentiveness humans give to animal companions is reciprocal and beneficial to both (Rynearson 1978; Ory and Goldberg 1983; Garrity et al. 1989).

Attachment theory has often been used to explain the human/animal bond as well and animal companions are considered to be attachment figures. Animal companions appear to provide an alternative opportunity for humans to experience bonding. Recent research (Nagasawa et al. 2009), assessing the biological aspects of the human–dog relationship using physiological and neuroendocrinological approaches, revealed that dogs can discriminate between humans and are the only animals with the ability to use and respond to human-like social cues. Specifically, when a dog “gazes” at their owners (a factor that contributes greatly to social bonding), their oxytocin levels increase. Oxytocin is a “neuropeptide produced in the hypothalamus linked to feelings of trust and bonding, especially between a breast-feeding mother and her newborn child, oxytocin is best known as the mammalian hormone of love” (Frankel 2014, p. 61). Nagasawa et al. (2009), hypothesized that humans and dogs may have similar attachment styles and that these are the elements that could possibly form cross species empathy, thereby creating powerful bonds between men and their dogs. In a similar study, researchers looked at oxytocin levels within humans and dogs and found that after spending quality time together, both humans and dogs had an increase in oxytocin (Handlin et al. 2011), suggesting a reciprocal or similar bonding experience.

This capacity to make an emotional connection beyond typical human relationships is important. Bowlby (1980) investigated the attachment feelings and behaviors beyond childhood and postulated “working models” or an inner psychological organization of the self and attachment figures. Similarly, Sable (1995) proposed

that family pets have the potential to provide an emotional bond of attachment that promotes a sense of well-being and security. According to Levinson (1997), how individuals feel about themselves reflects in the ways they treat their animals and how people treat their animals also tends to mirror the way in which they relate to other people.

The formation of an emotional attachment to animal companions is especially relevant for men. In order to look at the interconnections between our relationship with humans and pets, Cohen (2002) assessed family relationships and pet attachment and found that men reported fewer feelings of psychological kinship and intimacy with both pets and people. At the same time, Williams et al. (2009) assessed children age 9–13 regarding attachment, attitude, and empathy towards their pets. Their findings suggested that regardless of gender, children have strong attachments with their pets. For children, Williams et al. (2009) noted that having a pet is valuable for their overall development and may also increase empathy through the practice of nurturance. Kurdek (2009) studied the extent to which adult owners turn to their dogs in times of emotional duress and found that dog owners scored strongest in the area of proximity maintenance, highlighting how much they enjoyed spending time with their dogs. He also found that “men were more likely than women to prefer dogs to mothers, sisters, best friends and children, but not to partners”, underscoring the notion that dogs are “man’s best friend” (p. 445).

Human–Canine Bond and Gender

Research continues to demonstrate a strong bond between humans and dogs (Cain 1985; Serpell 1996). Dogs provide unconditional and non-judgmental love (Cusack 1988), lowered blood pressure (Anderson et al. 1992), fewer health and mental health problems (Serpell 1996), decreases in isolation and loneliness (Duncan 1995) and support for stress (Allen et al. 1991). Much of the research specifically regarding the human–dog bond and attachment has been limited and sometimes contradictory. In one study, gender was not found to be a factor in how much people cared for their pet dogs (Ramirez 2006). In another study, compared to men, women were found to have a stronger attachment with their dogs (Margolies 1999). In contrast, Prato-Previde et al. (2006) observed 25 owner–dog pairs in various scenarios to assess gender differences in the interactions of owners and their pet dogs in an adapted version of the ‘strange situation procedure’ (Ainsworth and Bell 1970). Results suggested no gender differences in play or providing physical comfort. There were no significant differences in the strength of reported attachment. However, women were more likely to interact verbally with their dog and their verbal communication closely resembled infant directed speech. Prato-Previde et al. (2006) concluded that “the behavior of modern pet owners towards their dogs is parental behavior directed towards individuals of another species” (p. 71). The more primitive behaviors of caregiving, such as physical touch

and comfort, could be less affected by gender than the modern (primarily female) use of speech, and most importantly, males and females have equally strong bonds (Prato-Previde et al. 2006). These contradictory outcomes regarding gender and the human–canine bond mirror the complicated and inconclusive findings arising from gender research, in general. This may be due to the suggestion that compared to within gender variations, gender differences are small across cultures (Costa et al. 2001).

Frankel (2014) elucidates the strength of the male-canine bond in her book entitled *War Dogs*. She writes about her observations of military dogs and their handlers, noting Any handler who has brought a dog with him or her to war will say it made all the difference in the world. They will say that the dog by their side provided them with something more than just a living, breathing piece of home—the dog acted as a talisman, insulating them from whatever horrors unfolded, bringing them peace in turbulence, offering companionship in times of loneliness. “The dog’s presence made the path through war bearable, the unendurable somehow endurable, and many will say they came through the other side more stable.” (p. 23)

Pet Attachment and Grief

The loss of a loved one is devastating and nothing but the return of the lost attachment object can truly relieve the emotional pain (Bowlby 1980). Although Bowlby was referring to the loss of a human loved one, research has shown that the loss of a pet rivals or exceeds the pain of the loss of a human in terms of psychological and social difficulties (Quackenbush 1985). Bowlby’s (1980) framework underscores the specific phases of mourning: numbing, yearning and searching, disorganization and despair, and the phase of greater or lesser disorganization and despair. Bowlby (1980) states that these four phases occur in a sequence, although the actual way people move in and out of these phases are often not linear.

These phases, as outlined by Bowlby (1980) are equally applicable in pet loss. Unfortunately, our research and clinical practice repeatedly show that the loss of a pet is often unvalidated. According to Sable (2013), clients who come for emotional support after the death of their pet are often most distressed due to lack of sympathy from those around them. Because there are numerous people who do not consider a pet to be an important attachment figure, they also do not acknowledge other people’s grief when their animal companion dies (Wrobel and Dye 2003). As a result, bereaved pet owners may hide their feelings and suffer in silence. Doka (1989) uses the term disenfranchised grief to describe a grief that is not socially sanctioned or readily acknowledged. Doka (1989) states that disenfranchised grief occurs when: the relationship with the deceased is unrecognized; the loss itself is unrecognized; or the griever is unrecognized. As the majority of society still fails to recognize the depth of relationships people can have with their pets, most, if not all, of these criteria are met in the loss of a pet (Clements et al. 2003).

Gosse (1988) found a positive relationship between pet attachment and the grief response to the loss of a pet, with more grief symptoms reported if a stronger attachment was found. In a similar study, Gerwolls and Labbott (1994) assessed whether the loss of a close human companion was different from the loss of a pet. The authors found that at two and eight weeks post-loss, the grief scores of those who had lost a pet were similar to those who had lost a human companion, suggesting that the loss of a pet was very similar to the loss of a human. In addition, those reporting deeper connections with their animal companions had more difficulties adjusting to the loss.

Planchon and Templer (1996) found that well-adjusted individuals fared psychologically better in the grieving process than less adjusted individuals. Similarly, in a later study, Planchon et al. (2002) found that greater grief following the death of a pet was associated with general depression, depression following bereavement, as well as strong attachments to pets. In another study Adams et al. (2000) found that 30 % of participants reported severe grief and that the most prominent predictors were strength of attachment, the incidence of euthanasia, societal attitudes toward pet death, and professional support from the veterinary team. In fact, higher strength of attachment was once again associated with a higher incidence of severe grief.

At present, there is only a small body of literature that specifically looks at gender and pet loss, with several findings suggesting that females, rather than males, exhibit more distress following the loss of an animal companion (Brown et al. 1996; McCutcheon and Fleming 2002; Planchon and Templer 1996; Gage and Holcomb 1991; Gosse 1994; Reynolds 1999). In a study conducted by Wrobel and Dye (2003) using adult participants, results suggested that the strength of attachment to a pet predicted severity of negative emotional symptoms such as guilt, depression, anger, loneliness, and length of grieving process. In addition, for each of these symptoms, the rate of endorsement was higher for females than for males. McCutcheon and Fleming (2002) found similar results, with females also showing more distress. Wrobel and Dye (2003) note, however, that these data reflect the percent of occurrences of symptoms, and not the intensity of experience. It could be hypothesized that these gender specific disparities are due to socialization and cultural differences (Reynolds 1999) rather than the potency of the loss. It is possible that males might express fewer emotions on questionnaires or interviews (Brown et al. 1996; McCutcheon and Fleming 2002). In fact, in a comprehensive literature review looking at gender differences and bereavement, Rothaupt and Becker (2007) concluded that there were no gender differences in the level of grief, but rather men and women demonstrate their grief in very specific and different ways.

In a comprehensive analysis of gender and human–animal attachment, Herzog (2007) noted that most of the studies he evaluated did not use effect sizes; thus, the comparison of gender responses were inadequately documented. He cautioned not to look at gender differences in human–animal attachment as static, but rather, as a

result of “the interaction of factors that operate at multiple levels and it is unlikely that any single factor can account for the array of differences in human–animal relationships that have been documented over different behaviors and cultures” (p. 17). It is evident that we attach to our animal companions similarly to how we attach to other humans, sometimes even to a more intense degree.

Continuing Bonds and Pet Loss

It is clear that losing a pet is similar to losing a valued human attachment relationship. This is especially salient for bereaved men as they may find it harder to express their emotions, access support, or engage in positive coping skills (Brown et al. 1996; Wroebel and Dye 2003).

In recent bereavement literature the concept of CB has received growing attention, especially its function in relation to coping following a death. (Field and Friedrichs 2004; Field et al. 2005; Stroebe et al. 1992; Klass et al. 1996). Despite the permanence of physical separation, the bereaved can be emotionally sustained through a continuing bond to the deceased (Field et al. 1999). Examples of CB include reminiscing about the loved one, memorials and rituals, dreams, and holding onto special possessions as remembrances. Thus, resolving grief does not involve ending a relationship with the deceased, but rather includes a renegotiation and transformation of the meaning of the loss over time (Field 2008; Klass et al. 1996).

Until 2010, the concept of “continuing bonds” (CB) had not been described in the pet bereavement literature (Packman et al. 2011). Earlier writers described phenomena that were experienced as CBs but not labeled as such (Carmack 2003; Cowles 1985; Podrazik et al. 2000; Weisman 1990/1991). Packman et al. (2011) examined and quantified CB expressions (CBE) experienced by bereaved pet owners. Participants who had lost a dog or cat within the past year completed a set of measures that assessed psychosocial adjustment, (grief, symptoms, growth), and CBE. The measures consisted of the Inventory of Complicated Grief, the Brief Symptom Inventory the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory and projective drawings.

The Continuing Bonds Interview (CBI) of Field et al. (2007) was used to evaluate the degree of connection that the bereaved maintains with the deceased pet and how that bond affects functioning. This interview-based CB measure is designed to investigate the different facets of CB and goes well beyond simply assessing extent of CB usage to distinguish whether the CBE are indicative of poor versus successful adaptation to the loss (Field 2008). If the participant endorsed CBE, they were asked to describe and rate if the experience was comforting, distressing, or both and the degree to which this occurred (see Table 15.1).

Table 15.1 Continuing bonds expressions endorsement

CB Expression	Pet loss (<i>N</i> = 33)			Spousal loss (<i>N</i> = 24)		
	Percent	Comfort MN	Distress SD	Percent	Comfort MN	Distress SD
<i>Continuing connection</i> Sense of deceased's presence	48	3.56* (1.32)	1.94 (1.12)	46	3.89*** (.93)	1.11 (.33)
<i>Belongings</i> Use of deceased's belongings for comfort	79	3.42*** (1.21)	1.73 (1.15)	75	3.05*** (1.13)	1.74 (0.99)
<i>Associated Places</i> Drawn to places associated with deceased	48	3.12* (1.31)	2.12 (1.36)	42	2.80 (1.23)	2.50 (1.65)
<i>Fond Memories</i> Focus on fond memories of deceased	85	3.54** (1.07)	2.32 (1.52)	92	3.23*** (1.07)	1.45 (0.86)
<i>Dreams</i> Dreams involving deceased	52	2.71 (1.16)	2.18 (1.38)	54	2.62 (1.56)	1.62 (1.04)
<i>Reunited with Deceased</i> Thoughts of being reunited with deceased	58	3.74*** (1.44)	1.58 (1.17)	54	2.92* (1.61)	1.54 (.66)
<i>Living up to Ideals or Wishes of Deceased</i> Aware of wanting to be more like or live up to ideals of deceased	39	3.54*** (1.19)	1.54 (.776)	38	3.00 (1.73)	1.56 (1.01)
<i>Everyday Decisions</i> Making everyday decisions based on deceased's preferences	18	3.17* (1.16)	1.17 (0.408)	8	3.50 (2.12)	1.00 (0.00)
<i>Reminisce</i> Reminisce with others about deceased	79	3.46** (1.27)	1.88 (1.31)	96	3.39*** (1.08)	1.43 (1.08)
<i>Memorials</i> Organize special events to commemorate deceased	39	3.77*** (1.09)	1.85 (1.21)	33	3.38** (1.19)	1.63 (1.06)

(continued)

Table 15.1 (continued)

CB Expression	Pet loss (<i>N</i> = 33)			Spousal loss (<i>N</i> = 24)		
	Percent	Comfort MN	Distress SD	Percent	Comfort MN	Distress SD
<i>Intrusion</i> Mistaking other sounds or sights for deceased	39	3.15 (1.52)	1.62 (.768)	29	1.57 (1.51)	3.00 (1.29)
<i>Lessons Learned/Positive Influence</i> Positive lasting influence of deceased	76	3.64*** (1.11)	1.56 (1.15)	63	3.33*** (1.18)	1.60 (1.18)

p* < 0.05, *p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001

Presence and Prevalence of Continuing Bonds

The most frequently endorsed CBE about the pet were recalling fond memories (85 %), holding onto or using belongings (79 %), reminiscing with others (79 %), and lessons learned/positive influences (76 %) (Packman et al. 2011). To investigate the similarities in the use of CBE in pet loss, the authors compared their sample with a spousal loss sample (Field 2010). Importantly, both groups were similar in terms of relative frequency of endorsement of each CBE. For example, both samples have high endorsement of reminiscing with others, focusing on fond memories and use of deceased’s belongings. A mean score was derived for the extent of comfort and distress in the use of CBE. Both the pet loss and spousal loss groups showed an overall tendency to experience a CB as more comforting than distressing (see Table 15.1).

Packman et al. (2011) assessed whether the comfort and distress mean score ratings moderated the relationship between the Continuing Bond Ongoing Connection Factor (comprised of five of the CBE) and the psychosocial adjustment measures. Analyses revealed that the comfort variable moderated the relationship between the ongoing bond on the one hand and grief, as well as other symptoms on the other hand. Significant trends were found for the moderating role of comfort on the relationship between ongoing connection and post-traumatic growth and drawing measures. Importantly, the research suggests that the relationship between CBE and both grief and symptoms is contingent on comfort: those who use more CBE and derive comfort from them experience less grief and fewer symptoms. In addition, those who use CBE and derive comfort from them experience growth. On the other hand, these relationships do not hold for the distress variable, i.e., individuals who report using many CBE accompanied by distress experience more grief and symptoms.

In a later and ongoing cross-cultural study, Packman et al. (2014) use qualitative and quantitative methodology to compare, analyze, and report responses of U.S. and French Canadian participants to the last open-ended question on an online pet loss survey.

Now that you have answered our questions are there any other feelings or thoughts about your experience of grieving for your pet that you would like to share with us? Feel free to write as much or as little as you like.

The survey provided respondents with a place and a means to describe their experiences. Four major themes emerged: intensity of loss; lack of validation and support; nature of the human pet relationship; and CB. In this part of the chapter, we include representative quotes from some of the men respondents who participated in the cross-cultural survey.

Intensity of Loss

It was not unusual to have grievors speak about intensity of loss. Men wrote of their symptoms of grief, some expressing them on a physical level while others described them in terms of emotional pain often reflected in behavioral ways. Intensity was expressed by statements such as, "I am missing her terribly and feel a piece of my heart is gone and it won't ever heal. I'm trying to adjust to the emptiness and loss, but it's a struggle." A police officer stated: "I was emotionally immobilized for almost two weeks and couldn't perform my duties. This could have jeopardized mine or other people's lives." Still another stated, "I thought I was a tough guy, but can't believe how weak I am with her being gone."

Another man talked about his grief as follows: Since Tracy died, I get waves of tremendous sadness. She died two weeks ago and fortunately these feelings are starting to decrease in number but not in intensity as of yet. Although I have lost 2 parents, losing my dog is even worse in some respects—in a special kind of way. I was not expecting this. Although I love my wife and my kids tremendously, the love I had for my dog was somehow just as strong; I did not expect to feel the grief that I've been feeling.

Another respondent said: My dog Clancy was my soulmate. When I'd had a bad day, I could always look forward to coming home, being greeted by Mr. Clancy as I walked in the door.... He was my "go to" thing in life... He was the one who slept right by my side.... I was his primary caregiver who fed, walked, bathed, groomed, and medically cared for him.... Now that he is gone after suffering a brain tumor, I am lost on a sea alone in the world, and the world seems more lonely and meaner than before when he was by my side. How will I go on without him? Additionally, it was not unusual to have grievors speak of their intensity in terms of suicidal ideation.

I miss my dog. I cry too easy. I don't want to feel this way all the time. I'm very sad. My dog was one of the only things in my life which was perfect and pure. I sometimes thought about killing myself but wondered who would feed my dog. And that kept me alive. Now, I don't have a good reason to live. My wife will be fine without me but my dog needed me.

Disenfranchised Grief: Lack of Validation and Support

In spite of the intensity of loss, respondents had limited places for expression of their grief as well as minimal support for their loss, i.e., their grief was disenfranchised. One man expressing his lack of validation and support wrote:

People seem to somehow trivialize the loss of a pet as if it is the loss of agricultural livestock; they think there is no way that sane, well socially integrated people can become so emotionally attached or dependant on a 'dumb animal'. Well, I can tell you that's not the case. After a decade and a half of living together, Randy was my best friend and my little boy, and he knew me and my little habits and idiosyncrasies just like I knew his, and we lived together perfectly as a result.

The Nature of the Human–Pet Relationship

The intensity and strength of men's relationships with their animal companion cannot be underestimated. Several examples illuminate the depth of their connection:

I am always uncomfortable letting people know how much I love my dog, and how much I grieve for him. Many people will never understand how much a part of my life my dog is. I love my wife more than anything in the world, but I have always had a special relationship with dogs. I can't imagine being happy without a dog. A dog is like a familiar spirit; they are an attachment to the soul, they give me something that no person can. I trust people, but I trust dogs more. When a dog meets me, it's as if they are meeting another dog instead of a person. I like to think that I have a heart and soul good enough for a dog.

Another man described his connection with his beloved dog Moby, as follows: Moby and I were inseparable... I could take him to work with me daily, and after that he and I would walk for two hours... I was definitely clinging to him as my marriage fell apart. He got me through my divorce. Even the dog people realized we had a very great bond and were a little pack of our own. Although I was obviously overly attached to him I didn't care and both of us were really only happy if the other one was nearby.

Coping with Loss/Continuing Bonds (CB)

In terms of CB, resolving grief does not involve ending a relationship (detachment), but instead involves a reorganization of the relationship with the deceased (Field 2008). In earlier work, Packman et al. (2012) described both the comforting and distressing aspects of CB. The qualitative data from the cross-cultural sample also supported both the adaptive nature of CB as well as their distressing nature.

One participant described both aspects when he wrote, “It was my wife’s idea to give away or destroy all objects which would remind us of our boy. The sole exception is the wooden box which houses his ashes. It now sits next to the one that houses his brother who died nearly ten years ago.”

Two other men talked about the hope of being reunited with their dog:

I am missing her terribly and feel a piece of my heart is gone and it won’t ever heal. I’m trying to adjust to the emptiness and loss, but it’s a struggle. I want to honor her and what she meant to a lot of people, but find myself dwelling on the events of the loss and not the joy of her life.... I loved her so much and know I will struggle with her being gone until I see her again. Each time I look out of the window I expect to see the little white tail go trotting past with such purpose as he surveys his garden, but of course I won’t. He’s exploring the great garden in the sky, waiting until we meet again.

Clinical Implications

Within our research, (Packman et al. 2014) men have frequently reported that they grieve more for their animal companion than they did for some humans. This finding is corroborated by our clinical experience and underscores the strong connection between men and their dogs.

With respect to gender, our experience suggests that therapeutic interventions with men will understandably vary, depending upon a number of person specific factors (e.g., strength of attachment, ethnic identity and practices, age, style of grieving, prior experience of loss and grief, perceived degree of social support, and safety in expression of emotions). Professional literature describes many men from an early age being socialized into not expressing emotions. Men grieve deeply, but the ways in which they grieve can be very different from the way females grieve (Doka and Martin 2010). At the same time, our clinical experience suggests that all men do not grieve the same way.

Additionally, a client’s ability to access various clinical options must be considered. For example, some men attend pet loss support groups, participate in online pet loss chat rooms and pet loss hotlines, or see an individual counselor. Other men choose to be more private within their own world and life. Still, other men do not know how to recognize their feelings, access help, or move through their grief, especially if the death of their dog is their first experience of significant grief.

Because CBE can be an adaptive means of coping following the loss of an attachment relationship, clinicians need to address CBE and pet loss. Both research and clinical practice emphasize that male pet owners do maintain ongoing, meaningful ties with their pet, e.g., creating rituals and memorials, looking at photographs and reminiscing, having thoughts of being reunited with their pets after their own death, or holding onto a pet’s possessions (Packman et al. 2012). Therefore, clinicians are encouraged to assess whether clients experience CBE and if the CBE are a source of comfort, distress, or both. In fact, in many cases they are mixed (Packman et al. 2012). Clinical experience suggests that those men who find comfort or more comfort than distress from these CBE are more likely to integrate them

into their loss experience. In contrast, if CBE are too distressing, it is also adaptive to not engage in them. For those men who do not know about CBE, clinicians can educate about their nature and potential benefits of CBE as a coping strategy for loss as well as a means to maintain a meaningful connection to their dog.

Counselors must not trivialize pet loss and grief, as too often, clients' experience is disenfranchised and minimized (Packman et al. 2014). Clients have reported clinicians looking to uncover the "real reason" for the grief, either within their family or within areas of dysfunction in personal or professional relationships. Such an approach discounts that the loss of a loved animal companion can, in fact, be the cause of intense grief. Along the same lines, some clinicians determine that such intense grief for a dog implies that their clients' have difficulties in relationships with people. When the clients' loss for their beloved animal companions is disenfranchised and minimized, they may experience social constraint when talking to others about their loss (Kiel et al. 2015). For a man, the impact of having his story heard and his grief legitimized must not be underestimated. They expect to hurt, but they are often unprepared for how much or how long. Thus, validation and normalization of feelings are essential therapeutic interventions.

Providing non-verbal ways to access and express client grief can also be useful, e.g., journaling, expressive arts such as drawing or sketching, and music. In our pet loss support group (CB and BC), several men have shared poetry they have written or art they have created. One male participant's stated, "I write her (his dog) a little more each night in a letter I'm writing her." This reflects and models another way of grief expression. In a related vein, Jimmy Greene, a saxophonist, in an interview on NPR November 25, 2014, described the creation of his album, "*Beautiful Life*" as a memorial to his daughter, Ana, who was killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings. He said, "when there's not an accurate way to express my emotion or my struggle or my trauma, there's music. It's helpful in that way. It's akin to talking it out with someone." It is important to let men know there is no one right way to grieve and to help them find the strategy or strategies most appropriate for them.

Providing men with resource lists such as on-line chat rooms, pet loss support groups and pet loss hot lines, in addition to books, pamphlets and articles can be helpful. Clients can take these resource lists and consider them in the privacy of their home. Articles and books authored by men about their relationships with their dogs and their resulting grief can also be particularly helpful. Reading descriptions by men about the intensity of their grief for their dogs allows other men to recognize that the intensity of their grief is not that unusual, serving again to validate and normalize the experience.

In conclusion, there exists a continuum of male grief following the loss of a deeply loved attachment relationship, his dog. This continuum reflects both intensity and duration of grief. In this section we have presented a framework for recognition, care and treatment of male client grief following the death of a dog. Our framework, consisting of the component parts of recognition and validation of the grief experience, openness to a variety of clinical modalities, and integration of CBE, provides a useful guide to professionals for whom pet loss is a new or unfamiliar clinical experience.

Future Directions

Recent research has demonstrated that there is no difference between the intensity of grief between males and females (Rothaupt and Becker 2007; Wrobel and Dye 2003); rather, they cope differently with their emotions. A clear interface exists between research and clinical practice in relation to CBE and pet loss. Research findings reflect the comfort men often receive from their ongoing bond with their pets (Packman et al. 2011). We know that both men and women use CBE, but there is little information regarding frequency, duration, type of CBE, and most importantly, the extent to which men derive comfort from the use of CBE. In our ongoing cross-cultural pet loss research (Kiel et al. 2015) we assessed the specific process or predictor variables associated with pet loss, including gender. Preliminary results indicated that women reported higher levels of social constraint, that is, negative social responses to expressing grief, than men. It is possible that women talk more openly about their loss with others. Thus, they may be more likely to receive negative social responses (high social constraint) than men. These preliminary results support further investigation and analyses of the relationship between social constraints, gender, attachment, loss and CBE.

In addition, future research should use a longitudinal research design and repeated measures of CBE and other constructs in order to see how CBE change over time. It would then be possible to clarify the developmental course of various CBE for men in pet loss.

Future research should also include an in depth exploration of contextual factors related to pet loss. Specifically, we recommend examining the situational factors related to euthanasia and their impact on grief. Of interest would be the relationship between the euthanasia decision-making process and the subsequent intensity and duration of grief, in addition to the impact on CBE. Clinicians and researchers are in need of knowing how CBE are experienced similarly or differently, if they are, in various groups, e.g., within and between gender variables, children, adults and elders. Specifically, we should identify and explore the person specific factors which contribute to a client's ability or willingness to utilize CBE as an adaptive coping strategy. Knowledge about multi-cultural and different spiritual experiences of pet owners is also lacking. Because of this, our ongoing international cross-cultural research related to CBE and pet loss is significant for clinical practice.

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