

Living Through Mourning

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VOLUME TEN

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Bereavement and Health

Bereavement and Health

By Paivi M. Outinen, RN, LCSW

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The Loss of a Family Pet

Bereavement, like other stressful events in a person's life, can bring along a variety of health consequences. Bereavement can adversely affect the health of the old and the young in both men and women. Grief can alter both the physical and mental health of the bereaved individual during the acute phase and still years after the loss. Bereaved persons' experiences range from depression and anxiety disorders, sleep disorders, and temporary symptoms of physical illness, to long-term chronic functional impairments and even death.

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**Paying Tribute to Your Pet
Anniversary Ideas**

The passing of time alone is not sufficient to get grieving persons "unstuck" if they find themselves having bereavement-related health issues. Family members, friends, health care providers, and clergy all need to be aware of the potential health consequences of bereavement in order to properly assist the grieving individual.

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Mental health concerns may be the most common problems that come to mind when one thinks of grieving individuals. Bereaved persons often think and frequently ask of counselors: "Please tell me, am I losing my mind?" The fear of "going crazy," literally losing one's mental faculties, is expressed by many grieving individuals. These questions arise particularly if the survivor has problems with memory and experiences difficulty in conducting routine daily tasks. Some people get frightened by seeing visions of the deceased or experiencing "signs" of the loved one's continued presence in the home after the death. These alterations in one's sensory perception and level of function are all considered temporary and normal during acute grief. *cont'd on page 2*

The Loss of a Family Pet

By Scott W. Bradley, MSW, CT, NCPsyA

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If you are an animal lover, you know that our trusted companions will cause us intense grief when they die. Caring, training and sharing space with family pet(s) will develop strong attachments and loving feelings for them. This may be especially true for children, and the elderly. It is best to treat the mourning of a pet with the same reverence you would for a human loss. Talk often of the dead pet, conduct a right of passage that would be in good taste and reflective of your pet. Treat the remains with respect and get feedback from the family where the final resting place should be. For children this might be the first time they experience the intimate pain of loss, as well as the healing effects of talking and participating in the death rituals of your family culture. Children as young as three are very capable of expressing thoughts and feelings about "their" dead pet.



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Bereavement and Health *cont'd*

Although the normal range of altered sensory experiences can vary greatly among grieving persons, one needs to pay attention to the possibility of developing mental health problems. A recent APA Release indicates that individuals who have a history of minor depressive episodes (two weeks duration) are at an increased risk of developing major depressive disorder during their lifetime (4).

Depression and anxiety disorders are frequently associated with bereavement. A study of widows shows that widows use psychiatric services more often than their married peers (2). The same study also points out that younger widows, fewer than 65 years of age, tend to utilize psychiatric and mental health services more often than their older counterparts. Older widows have more physical complaints and turn to their medical doctors instead of utilizing psychiatric services. Depression increases the overall physician services utilization according to the above study (2). The physical complaints, particularly in the older adult population, can mask depression and anxiety symptoms making accurate diagnosis difficult.

Depression can interfere with the physical as well as the emotional defense mechanisms during bereavement. It is commonly understood that depression lowers a person's immune function. Research shows that depressed bereaved individuals have immune system dysfunction during the first year of bereavement. This immune system dysfunction in turn leads to increased vulnerability to infections (7).

A variety of physical complaints by bereaved individuals is common. These complaints range from gastrointestinal disturbances to sleep and appetite disturbance to fatigue and malaise (3). Survivors who visit the medical doctor's office often report the exact symptoms that their loved one had before dying (3). Replicating the symptoms of the lost loved one could be a form of a wish to join him/her through illness and death. Fear and anxiety over one's own vulner-

ability in the face of death often may be found underneath the somatic symptoms. Further studies are needed to understand the relationship between the body and the mind. Doctors need to be aware of the bereavement factor as they try to distinguish between symptoms caused by emotional distress and symptoms that clearly indicate somatic illness.


Energy is required for a multitude of tasks that the survivor needs to engage in, especially during the acute phase of bereavement. Sleep quality will affect the energy available to the grieving individual. "During sleep, complex physical and biochemical changes occur in the brain and throughout the body. Hormones are released, and cells are nourished and restored," according to Carter (5). Sleep not only helps to restore the physical body but it also mediates stress, anxiety, and tension (8). While sleep disruption is expected during acute grief, having the disturbed sleep quickly minimized will assist the grieving person as she/he is adjusting to life after the loss.

We have all heard sayings that speak of "a broken heart." According to Bohrer & Haynes "...emotions and stressful experiences affect the heart through the autonomic nervous system and neuroendocrine pathways." (6) Bereaved individuals during acute grief can experience stress cardiomyopathy also called "myocardial stunning." (6) In this condition the cells in the myocardium lose their ability to effectively contract. If this myocardial stunning is not accurately diagnosed and treated it can lead to sudden death, but with proper intervention it is reversible. A British study found that the "mortality rate among men was 40 % higher in the first six months of bereavement than that of married men of the same age and that death was most often from cardiac dysfunction." (6)

Clayton (1990) noted in his study that men younger than 75 years old had an increased mortality in the first year of bereavement (2). Yet another study found that mortality rates for male widows are consistently greater than those of their female counterparts (3). So heart health and the care of the heart can become literally a matter of life and death

during bereavement.

Grief is a powerful emotional and physical experience. One needs to respect the potential risks to the bereaved person's mental and physical health. It is important to recognize early when one is stuck, unable to move towards grief resolution, and when it is time to ask for help. Professional counseling might be helpful to assist the bereaved individual in getting "unstuck" and to move again towards resolving his/her grief.

Each individual goes through the bereavement process in a unique manner and pace. While some spend years in the process, others are welcoming new challenges after a year or two. The majority of survivors eventually find a way to minimize the health risks and create equilibrium after the loss. Once the bereaved person can start to welcome joy, reach out to others, and re-engage in life, grief is being resolved. With the resolution of grief, both mental and physical health can again be restored and energized to face new challenges in life. 

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Loss of Family Pet

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When it comes to love and loss there is no better communicator than a poet. Please find below two poems about pet loss from anonymous authors.

The Rainbow Bridge

There is a bridge connecting Heaven and Earth. It is called the Rainbow Bridge because of its many colors. Just this side of the Rainbow Bridge there is a land of meadows, hills and valleys with lush green grass.

When a beloved pet dies, the pet goes to this place. There is always food and water and warm spring weather. The old and frail animals are young again. Those who are maimed are made whole again. They play all day with each other.

There is only one thing missing. They are not with their special person who loved them on Earth. So, each day they

run and play until the day comes when one suddenly stops playing and looks up! The nose twitches! The ears are up! The eyes are staring! And this one suddenly runs from the group!

You have been seen, and when you and your special friend meet, you take him or her in your arms and embrace. Your face is kissed again and again and again, and you look once more into the eyes of your trusting pet.

Then you cross the Rainbow Bridge together, never again to be separated.

For the Dog Lover

Treat me gently beloved master, and I will love you with a full and happy heart.

Show me patience and I will learn to understand your every word and action. I will even protect you with my life if yours is at any time in danger.

Speak to me often, for your voice is music to my ears and I await even the simple sound of your footsteps, knowing


soon you will be near.

Shelter me from nature's bitter cold and wet and I in return will warm your feet beside the hearth. Or, if life should be unkind, I will find a place of comfort for us both, for your pleasure is my dearest wish.

Play with me, for I seek your challenge just as I seek to please you. I will follow a thrown ball to the ends of the earth if you choose it and I will swim the seven seas just to see you smile.

Fill my bowl with fresh water and see that I'm well fed, for I cannot speak to ask you and am completely at your mercy. But my trust in you is so complete, I know you will never do me wrong.

And beloved master, when I grow old and the time comes to say farewell, hold me gently in your arms and I will go without a whimper. For with you I am safe and secure.

Signed, A dog who gave love and received it with a grateful heart 



Paying Tribute to Your Pet

With our pets being a significant part of our lives and family, those of us who have been blessed with the companionship of a pet understand that the death of a pet causes a great deal of grief and sadness. Given an animal's remarkable ability to sense our love and our pain, they become trusted friends and companions throughout our lifetime.

THE TRIBUTE

Our tribute video technicians can assist in putting together a tribute video and memory book by using photos of your beloved pet. Your photos are then brought to life on your television or computer screen by using titles, music and transitions. As a way of enhancing the tribute of your pet, our on staff funeral celebrant can conduct and facilitate a meaningful service for your pet by incorporating this tribute video.

TRIBUTE MERCHANDISE

At Bradley Funeral Homes we offer a wide selection of meaningful pet urns, personalized paw print urns by artist and sculptor Matt Burton exclusively for Bradley Funeral Homes, garden memorials, memory books and keepsake gifts to meet your needs.

For more information visit our website at www.bradleyfuneralhomes.com.

Anniversary Ideas

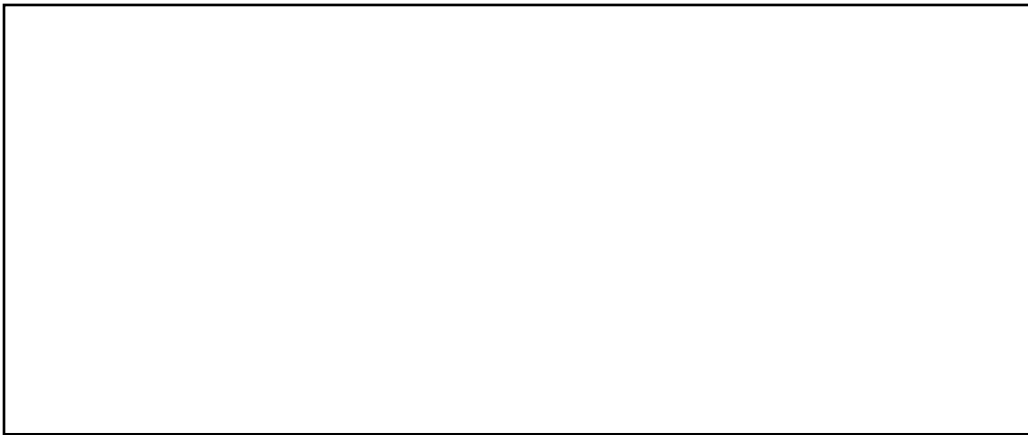
Flowers By Bradley

Flowers are the best way to adorn a loved one's final resting place, no matter what the occasion (i.e., anniversary, birthday, Christmas, Easter, etc). You can schedule annual or one time gravesite deliveries.

We also offer a small swag that can be used for cremations and small marker stones. For more information, please contact our designers at 973-635-2428.

Tribute Videos

Perhaps you felt too overwhelmed during the aftermath of your loss to focus on creating a video of your loved one. An anniversary or other special date is an opportunity to pay tribute with a lasting moment of their life. Your pictures will be edited and set to your desired music in a dynamic and professional video. Please contact our Tribute Department at 973-635-2428 for more information.



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Would you like to help others who have lost a loved one?

At some point in your grief journey, you may feel that you would like to do something productive and meaningful. As one who truly understands the grieving process, there may come a time when you are ready to reach out to others who are grieving. You may feel you have a great deal to share with others who are suffering: you can identify with their struggles, empathize with their sorrows and offer valuable direction and support. Giving of yourself as a volunteer enables you to pursue personal interests, learn new skills and make a positive difference in your community.

Too often we underestimate the power of a volunteer. A touch, a smile, a kind word, and a listening ear all help make a difference in the lives they touch. Volunteers are special people and are our most cherished asset. Their unselfish actions continually help lighten the burdens of bereaved people.

Out of respect for the grieving process we ask that you wait at least a year before volunteering with us. If you or anyone you know would like to volunteer with the Center for Life Transition, please contact Doreen Hall at (646) 771-4146.

www.CenterforLifeTransition.com