A Literature Review: Pet Bereavement and Coping Mechanisms

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A Literature Review: Pet Bereavement and Coping Mechanisms

Rachel M. Park, Kenneth D. Royal, and Margaret E. Gruen

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ABSTRACT

The loss of a companion animal results in millions of pet owners grieving annually. To date, little information has been synthesized on the grief response and coping mechanisms of bereaved pet owners. The aim of this review was to examine the relationship between pet loss and owner grief response. Major themes included: factors that influence the grief response, the disenfranchised nature surrounding pet loss, ambiguous pet loss and coping mechanisms used. Across the 48 studies included in this review, bereaved pet owners frequently reported feelings of embarrassment and loneliness following the loss of their pet. Types of coping mechanisms used by bereaved pet owners were identified and included: isolation, social support, continuing bonds, memorialization, religion, and relationships with other animals. Overall, this review was able to identify a consensus among the literature that bereaved pet owners are likely to experience disenfranchisement surrounding their loss. Based on the present findings, suggestions for future research include a focus on the effectiveness of coping mechanisms used by bereaved pet owners.

KEYWORDS

Pet loss; pet grief; coping mechanisms; ambiguous pet loss; disenfranchised grief

Introduction

In the United States, an estimated 68 million households own pets (AVMA, n.d.; United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Pet ownership includes a variety of benefits offering companionship (McConnell et al., 2011), improved health (Chan & Rico, 2019; Hess-Holden et al., 2017) and facilitation of social experiences (Wood et al., 2015). Pets are viewed as integral members of the family (Irvine & Cilia, 2017), often working, traveling, playing and exercising with their owners (Volsche, 2019).

The human-pet relationship is unique, as pet owners often derive unconditional love and acceptance without judgment from their companion animal (Rémillard et al., 2017; Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Wong et al., 2017). In fact, the human-pet bond may be comparable to or supersede relationships with other humans (Vecchio & Saxton-Lopez, 2013; Wrobel & Dye, 2003). The depth of this connection is indicated when pet owners describe their companion animals as their “baby”, “child”, “buddy”, and “best friend” (Kemp et al., 2016). Therefore, the loss of this relationship can result in a grief response similar to that of a human death (Lyons et al., 2020; Planchon et al., 2002; Sable, 2013); this is unsurprising due to the humanization of pets in Western society (i.e. the view that animals and humans are on the same continuum in relation to their emotions and needs) (Uccheddu et al., 2019).

Mourning the loss of a pet can last from 6 months to 1 year, or continue throughout the pet owner’s life (Gerwolls & Labott, 1994; Morales, 1997). Responses to grief may be adaptive (i.e. healthy and/or helpful reaction) or maladaptive (i.e. harmful reaction for the bereaved) (Hunt & Padilla, 2005). While the expression of adaptive grief may include therapeutic crying and sharing feelings or memories about the lost pet with others, maladaptive grief may present as excessive anger,
loss of control or thoughts of guilt (Hunt & Padilla, 2005). A subset of bereaved pet owners may experience complicated grief, in which their feelings of loss are debilitating, traumatic and do not subside in severity with time. These pet owners may experience major depression and anxiety, requiring treatment from medical health professionals (Bussolari et al., 2018; Habarth et al., 2017). However, for the majority of pet owners, grief experiences and the healing process will vary based on a person’s individual circumstances (Erdman & Ruby, 2020). The primary aim of this review was to examine the relationship between pet loss and owner grief response. This will be achieved by identifying main themes in pet bereavement literature through thematic analysis with special attention provided to coping mechanisms used to manage grief following pet loss.

Methodology

This literature review focused on studies of pet owners following pet loss or death. Included studies were required to examine pet death and pet loss as the intervention. All pet species were included in an attempt to provide a comprehensive comparison of coping styles. The outcome evaluated was grief experienced and/or coping mechanisms used by the bereaved. Only papers written in English from 2000 to present were considered for inclusion.

A research librarian designed the searches utilizing the following electronic databases: CAB Abstracts, PubMed, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Keywords searched in each database included: pet, bereavement, companion animal, grief, mourning, coping, and various combinations of these words (Table 1). Searches were finalized on May 11, 2020. In an exhaustive effort to collect literature, the snowballing technique was employed to find articles and abstracts not available in the search engines listed above. Articles presented in this review were selected based on their relevance to various aspects of coping experienced by bereaved pet owners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Order</th>
<th>Search Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>“Pets”[Mesh]</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Pet[tiab]</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Pets[tiab]</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>“Companion animal”[tiab]</td>
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<td>5.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
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<td>or/1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-13-14</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>“Bereavement”[Mesh]</td>
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<td>17.</td>
<td>“Postbereavement”[tiab]</td>
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<td>18.</td>
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<td>“Grief”[Mesh]</td>
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<td>Grief[tiab]</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>Mourning[tiab]</td>
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<td>22.</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>Or/16-17-18-19-20-21-22</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>15 and 23</td>
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</table>

This search combined the concepts of pet and grief/bereavement together. Lines 15 and 23 show how these items were grouped together using an “OR” connector. Line 24 brings all the concepts together.
Citations were uploaded to the Covidence Systematic Review Software system (www.covidence.org) to be sorted for inclusion, on the basis of title and abstract content. Inclusion keywords at this level included: coping, bereavement, grief, pet loss. Exclusion keywords identified manually, based upon search results, included: human bereavement, cancer, anxiety, stress, health, illness, children, violence, murder, chronic pain, CAT, (anti)-oxidation, tumor, embryo, biochemical and shelter. One coauthor (RMP) read all abstracts to identify potentially relevant studies. Instances in which an abstract included an inclusion and exclusion word, the evaluator (RMP) determined if the article should advance to the next round of assessment. Full texts for these studies were then acquired and reviewed for inclusion using the Covidence software and Summon database provided by North Carolina State University. The evaluator (RMP) read each article in its entirety to determine if it met the criteria for inclusion in the review. To extract the data, the evaluator (RMP) conducted an inductive thematic analysis of each included study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Study selection and characteristics

From the search, 1,733 citations were retrieved from three different databases (CAB Abstracts, PubMed, Web of Science), while 89 citations were discovered from the snowballing technique employed using Google Scholar. In total, 1,154 non-duplicate citations were screened for this literature review. When inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, 1,065 citations were excluded based on title and abstract content. For the remaining 89 articles, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied following a full text screening process. A total of 41 citations were excluded due to lack of fit for intervention, wrong population, wrong setting, or wrong outcomes. Therefore, after conducting search and study selections, 48 studies were selected for inclusion. See Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) flowchart (Figure 1) for article numbers at each stage. Table 2 presents the 48 included studies with reference to their described methodology and geographical location. The majority of studies used survey methodology (32 studies) with 24 of those studies incorporating validated questionnaires. Other methods used included content analyses (nine studies), case studies (six studies), interviews (six studies), linguistic analysis (one study), retrospective analysis (one study) and ethnology (one study). Eight studies incorporated multiple methodologies. Studies spanned four main geographic regions, with the majority conducted in North America (37 studies), followed by Asia (seven studies), the Oceanic region (six studies) and Europe (six studies). Three studies were conducted in multiple countries.

Themes

Five major themes emerged from the literature which include factors that influence the grief response, pet bereavement related to euthanasia, disenfranchised grief, ambiguous pet loss and coping mechanisms used during pet bereavement (Table 2). From the 48 included studies, nine studies mentioned factors that influence the grief response. Eight studies referred to euthanasia in the context of pet bereavement. Disenfranchised grief was mentioned in eight studies. Only three studies described ambiguous loss related to pet bereavement. Coping mechanisms used during pet bereavement was the most frequently mentioned theme with 33 of the 48 included studies touching on this subject.

Factors influencing the grief response

Owner characteristics (e.g., gender, life stage, prior experiences), pet characteristics and attachment level to the companion animal may influence the grief response experienced by the bereaved
Compared to men, women tended to report greater feelings of despair following the death of a pet and were more likely to seek counseling to cope with the loss (Brown, 2006; Hunt & Padilla, 2005). Certain life stages are considered at-risk for complicated grief response, particularly adolescents with limited death-related experience or elderly who have suffered subsequent losses (Adams et al., 2000; Chur-Hansen, 2010). However, the literature remains unclear on the effect of age on grief response with conflicting findings across studies (Gosse & Barnes, 1994; McCutcheon & Fleming, 2002; Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983). Grief may be further complicated for individuals who view their pets as a “linking object”, connecting the pet owner to a now deceased family member or significant relationship in their life (Williams & Mills, 2000). Furthermore, lack of perceived social support by bereaved pet owners was predictive of grief severity (Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019) and correlated with a problematic emotional response (e.g. depression, anxiety, guilt) (Packman et al., 2014).

The human-pet bond is an important consideration during the grieving process (Packman et al., 2014). Pet owners who held strong attachments (i.e., either self-reported or determined through...
Table 2. Description of pet bereavement studies included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Author (Year)</th>
<th>Study Methodology Described</th>
<th>Themes and sub-themes mentioned&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Country</th>
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<td>F, E</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<td>Adrian et al. (2019)</td>
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<td>Bardina et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Retrospective analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barnard-Nguyen (2016)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brown and Symons (2016)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s)</td>
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<td>USA, Canada, Japan, Hong-Kong</td>
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<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s)</td>
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<td>Bussolari et al. (2018b)</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<td>Case study</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>E, I, CM, RS, RA</td>
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<td>Dickinson et al. (2011)</td>
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<td>Hunt and Al-Awadi (2008)</td>
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<td>Juth et al. (2015)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s)</td>
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<td>King and Werner (2011)</td>
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<td>USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand</td>
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<td>Lavorgna and Hutton (2019)</td>
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<td>Lee and Surething (2013)</td>
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<td>Lee (2016)</td>
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<td>S</td>
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<td>Mackay et al. (2016)</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>S</td>
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<td>S</td>
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<td>McCutcheon and Fleming (2002)</td>
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<td>Canada</td>
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<td>McKinney (2019)</td>
<td>Survey, Interviews</td>
<td>RS, RA</td>
<td>USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morris (2012)</td>
<td>Ethnography from direct and indirect observation and from interviews</td>
<td>D, S</td>
<td>USA</td>
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<td>Ormerod (2008)</td>
<td>Case study</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
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<td>Packman et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s)</td>
<td>S, CM</td>
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<td>Packman (2014)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s)</td>
<td>F, S, RA</td>
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<td>Packman (2017)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s); Content analysis</td>
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<td>Park and Royal (2020)</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>I, RA</td>
<td>USA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rémiillard et al. (2017)</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>I, S</td>
<td>Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rujoiu and Rujoiu (2014)</td>
<td>Survey; Content analysis</td>
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<td>Romania</td>
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<td>Schmidt et al. (2020)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s); Interviews</td>
<td>CM</td>
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<td>Spain et al. (2019)</td>
<td>Survey</td>
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(Continued)
attachment scales) experience greater grief compared to individuals who were less attached to their pet (Eckerd et al., 2016; King & Werner, 2011; Lavorgna et al., 2019; Packman et al., 2011).

Sudden death was a predictor of anger-related grief (Barnard-Nguyen et al., 2016; Rujoiu & Rujoiu, 2014; Watters et al., 2013) while owners who euthanized their pet due to long-term illness (e.g., cancer) demonstrate an adaptive grief response consisting of lower levels of anger and guilt-related grief (Barnard-Nguyen et al., 2016).

**Pet bereavement related to euthanasia**

Unique to euthanasia compared to natural death (i.e., death resulting from elderly and/or ill pets dying without intervention), is that families often have time to prepare themselves for the loss of their pet (Tzivian et al., 2014). Thus, the grieving process may begin prior to the physical death and this emotional response is termed anticipatory grief (Williams & Green, 2016). Pet owners may engage in “last moments” with their companion animal (e.g., favorite treats as a last meal, allowing the pet to sleep with them the night before) in an effort to demonstrate their love and care before the euthanasia procedure (Tzivian et al., 2014).

Pet bereavement following the euthanasia procedure can be complicated by the reasons behind euthanasia. In situations where the animal was euthanized because a life-saving procedure was cost-prohibitive or a result of behavioral issues (e.g., debilitating anxiety, aggression), owners reported experiencing increased feelings of guilt and regret (Chur-Hansen, 2010; Erdman et al., 2020). Additionally, if the decision was not fully unanimous within a family, feelings of resent or anger may arise (Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 2007).

Uncertainties surrounding the euthanasia decision can result in a complex grief response. Negative emotions (e.g., anguish, remorse, self-doubt, fear) may emerge if the pet owner feels that the decision to euthanize may have been the “wrong choice” (Lagoni, 2007; Meyers, 2002). Some companion animal owners experience pain over their euthanasia decision and struggle with whether euthanasia is “what their pet would have wanted” (Wong et al., 2017). However, the majority of pet owners find comfort in knowing that their decision relieved their pet of unnecessary suffering (Bussolari et al., 2018b). Tzivian and Friger (2014) interviewed dog owners in the two weeks following their pet’s euthanasia procedure and found that nearly 83% were certain that their choice was in the best interest of their animal and offered their pet an “honorable death”. Some pet owners may even gain personal strength through the process of euthanasia, as they feel they had to be

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<th>First Author (Year)</th>
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<td>E, I, S, RA</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
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<td>Wrobel and Dye (2003)</td>
<td>Survey with validated questionnaire(s)</td>
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<td>Zottarelli (2010)</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>A</td>
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+F indicates Factors that influence the grief response, E indicates Pet bereavement related to euthanasia, D indicates Disenfranchised grief, A indicates Ambiguous pet loss, I indicates Coping mechanisms – Isolation, S indicates Coping mechanisms – Social support, CM indicates Coping mechanisms indicates Continuing bonds and memorialization, RS indicates Coping mechanisms – Religion and spirituality, RA indicates Coping mechanisms – Relationships with other animals.
“strong” or “courageous” in the best interest of their companion animal (Bussolari et al., 2017; Packman et al., 2017).

Regardless of confidence in the euthanasia decision, nearly 30% of pet owners who euthanized their companion animal experience severe grief (Adams et al., 2000; Davis et al., 2003). While most pet owners will experience emotional reactions to their loss, some may manifest their grief in physical symptoms (e.g. vomiting, trembling, nightmares, dizziness, black outs) (Tzivian et al., 2014), or be at greater risk for psychological disorders (Davis, 2011).

**Disenfranchised grief**

The disenfranchised nature of pet bereavement adds an additional layer to the grieving process, prolonging and deepening negative emotional reactions internalized by pet owners (Bussolari et al., 2018a; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). Social constraints that prohibit the expression of grief have been associated with negative mental and physical health consequences (Bussolari et al., 2018a; Juth et al., 2015; Tzivian et al., 2015a, 2015b). Consequently, disenfranchised grief can result in interpersonal conflict with family members and close friends who do not support pet owners during their time of hardship (Donohue, 2005).

Morris (2012) described encounters between veterinarians and pet owners following a pet’s death in which pet owners would often dismiss their feelings of grief through statements, such as “This is so embarrassing. I can’t believe I am crying like this”. Disenfranchised grief that is self-imposed may prevent pet owners from talking about their loss due to fear associated with the perception that others cannot understand their experience (Tzivian et al., 2014; Wrobel et al., 2003).

**Ambiguous pet loss**

Bereaved pet owners may experience an ambiguous loss, or a non-death loss lacking closure (Boss, 2016; Duggleby et al., 2013) due to a variety of circumstances (e.g., pet runs away, pet is left behind in a natural disaster, elderly pet owner having to relinquish a pet to go into assisted living). Ambiguous pet loss can have long-lasting, detrimental effects on the resilience of pet owners and their communities (Hall et al., 2004; Travers et al., 2017). The limited research investigating ambiguous loss in bereaved pet owners primarily focuses on losses incurred due to natural disasters (Hunt et al., 2008; Lowe et al., 2009; Zottarelli, 2010). For example, Hurricane Katrina survivors who endured ambiguous pet loss self-reported both short-term (e.g., higher levels of acute stress and peri-traumatic dissociation) and long-term psychological responses to their trauma (e.g., increased symptoms of depression and PTSD) (Hunt et al., 2008). Further, Lowe et al. (2009) found that among a set of single mothers who survived Hurricane Katrina, ambiguous pet loss was predictive of post-hurricane psychological distress.

**Pet bereavement and coping mechanisms**

Five subthemes of coping mechanisms were identified: isolation, social support, continuing bonds and memorialization, religion and spirituality and relationships with other animals (Table 2). Isolation was mentioned as a coping mechanism used during pet bereavement by seven studies whereas social support was mentioned by 18 studies. Seven studies discussed continuing bonds and memorialization as a coping mechanism. Relying on religion and spirituality as a coping mechanism for pet bereavement was mentioned in eight studies. Additionally, engaging in relationship with other animals was cited as a coping mechanism to work through pet bereavement in nine studies.

**Isolation**

Increased emotional distancing and social isolation are symptoms of grief associated with pet loss (Gerwolls et al., 1994; McCutcheon & Fleming, 2002; Rémillard et al., 2017) and bereaved pet owners
commonly choose to mourn their loss privately (Davis et al., 2003; Erdman & Ruby, 2020; Park & Royal, 2020). Bereaved pet owners who struggle processing their grief may tend to avoid others (Wong et al., 2017). Spain et al. (2019) sampled grieving pet owners and found that the majority of respondents felt somewhat socially isolated following the death of their companion animal. Bereaved pet owners who experience an unsupportive environment may struggle to cope with their loss, as they feel incapable of reaching out for social support (Manne & Glassman, 2000; Wong et al., 2017). Self-compassion as a coping mechanism may benefit bereaved pet owners by buffering social constraints and psychosocial outcomes, thereby lessening grief symptoms, decreasing negative social interactions and improving psychosocial functioning (Bussolari et al., 2018a).

Social support

Social support is essential to prevent the development of a complicated grief response (Packman et al., 2014) and may help facilitate improved quality of life (Tzivian et al., 2015b) and positive growth following pet loss (Bussolari et al., 2017; Michael & Cooper, 2013; Packman et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2017).

Veterinarians may play an important role in the pet owner’s support system following companion animal euthanasia (Uccheddu et al., 2019). Methods veterinarians may use to communicate their sympathy for the pet owner include engaging in active listening to the owners’ feelings, reassuring the owner of their decision or offering a comforting touch (Matte et al., 2019; Morris, 2012). Receiving support (e.g., card, memento, phone call) from veterinary staff following a pet’s death may aid in the bereavement process (Adrian et al., 2019; Matte et al., 2019; Tzivian et al., 2014). Pet owners who receive veterinarian support are less likely to experience a complicated grief response and more likely to acquire a pet again, remain at the same veterinary clinic and refer the clinic to other potential clients (Ormerod, 2008).

In addition to soothing pet owners within the clinical setting, veterinarians may provide clients with referrals for grief counseling, local support groups, or the number of a pet loss hotline service (Holcombe et al., 2016; Laing & Maylea, 2018). Grief counselors can offer psychological support to assist in the bereavement process associated with euthanasia and pet loss (Testoni et al., 2017). Receiving validation and understanding from mental health counselors can help ease the stigma around pet grief (Cordaro, 2012). Mental health counselors who help to normalize feelings may be imperative to the healing process, as demonstrated by pet owners returning for further sessions and seeking support from their loved ones (Cordaro, 2012; Toray, 2004).

As members help and learn from one another in an open environment, they experience less guilt and depression (Dunn et al., 2005). Vulnerable bereaved pet owners (e.g., geographically isolated, suffering from extreme grief, ambiguous pet loss) may particularly benefit from online support group options and/or pet loss support hotlines, as these options do not require face-to-face contact and may be perceived as less intimidating (Lyons et al., 2020; Mackay et al., 2016; Paulus & Varga, 2015; Rémillard et al., 2017; Turner, 1997). Ultimately, social support can serve to facilitate community bonds for pet owners (Packman et al., 2011).

Continuing bonds and memorialization

Continuing bonds are recognized efforts to remain emotionally connected with a deceased loved one (Field et al., 1999). Common continuous bonds used by bereaved pet owners include looking at photos, reminiscing over memories, talking to the deceased, preserving their possessions (e.g., leash, blanket) and writing letters to their pet (Field, 2008; Habarth et al., 2017; Packman et al., 2011). Bereaved pet owners who held high attachment to their pet and displayed high levels of grief often use a greater variety of continuing bonds (Habarth et al., 2017). Children grieving the loss of a pet may benefit the most from participating in activities that draw on internalized continuing bonds, such as holding a memorial service, writing stories about their pet or planting flowers in an area the
pet liked to spend time (Schmidt et al., 2020). Bereaved pet owners associate continuing bonds most commonly with comfort (Packman et al., 2011). However, in some circumstances, such as when very little time has passed since the pet died, continuing bonds can be associated with distress (Davis et al., 2003).

In Western culture, there are no recognized or standard funeral services to mourn the loss of companion animals (Brown, 2006; Chur-Hansen, 2010). As traditional mourning practices help establish a “right to grieve” (Doka, 2002), an absence of these rituals may contribute to disenfranchised feelings experienced by bereaved pet owners. However, bereaved pet owners who do participate in a burial or find ways to memorialize their pet experience increased comfort and benefit from a positive mental state (Rossell, 2005; Tzivian et al., 2014; Veldkamp, 2009). Families who choose to bury their pet or spread their pet’s ashes will often do so in their backyard, under a memorial tree or in a spot they can re-visit (Davis et al., 2003; Tzivian et al., 2014). While uncommon, pet cemeteries exist and may offer the bereaved a sense of connection to their companion animal— a physical place where they can communicate with, view photographs and remember their beloved family member (Bardina, 2017; Dickinson et al., 2011). In some situations, pets cannot be buried (e.g., owner’s choice, size or logistical barriers) and crematoriums may offer a memento for pet owners, such as an urn or locket. Bereaved pet owners may hold funeral services for their companion animals, typically using rituals common in human burials (Davis et al., 2003; Rossell, 2005). Memorials may help with the management of grief, particularly when services allow emotions to be expressed in a supportive environment (Castle & Phillips, 2003; Rossell, 2005).

Religion and spirituality

The pain experienced during grief can often result in a “crisis of meaning” where the bereaved searches to make sense of their loss (Lee, 2016). Grieving pet owners may turn to religion to help cope (Lee & Surething, 2013; McKinney, 2019; Podrazik et al., 2000). The belief in an afterlife for pets promotes resilience during the grieving process (Testoni et al., 2017). Bereaved pet owners find reprieve in the knowledge that their animal is now free from pain and in a “better place” (Davis et al., 2003; Lee, 2016). For instance, pet owners who endorse the Rainbow Bridge¹ indicate more comfort from the belief that they will be re-connected with their pet in the afterlife (McKinney, 2019; Wong et al., 2017).

Bereaved pet owners may find comfort in performing religious rituals following the death of their pet including citing afterlife prayers. For example, Israeli women may demonstrate their mourning by wearing black clothing, not wearing makeup and not engaging in social contact with friends. Pet owners who follow the Jewish faith may hold Shiva² for their dog following the euthanasia procedure (Tzivian et al., 2014). Additionally, Wong et al. (2017) identified that Buddhists perform chanting rituals as their pet is dying or shortly after death to bring their companion animal peace in the afterlife. The Buddhists included in that study believed that animals are eligible for rebirth and salvation with one participant suggesting that his pet “may even reach nirvana”.

Relationships with other animals

Companionship from other animals can be beneficial to the grieving process as some pet owners may derive purpose from caring for another life. Bereaved pet owners who have more than one pet often find comfort in caring for their remaining living animals (Wong et al., 2017). The loss may result in pet owners experiencing greater appreciation for the time that they have left with their remaining pets (Packman et al., 2014). Following euthanasia, remaining animals were viewed as a source of comfort and joy, with one participant referring to their dog as their own personal “zootherapist” (Tzivian et al., 2014).

For those without another animal in the household, acquiring a new pet may offer psychological comfort and help pet owners cope with their loss (Clements et al., 2003; McKinney, 2019; Wong...
et al., 2017). Approximately one-third of pet owners report getting a new animal as helpful in processing their loss (Park & Royal, 2020). Previous reports suggest that a majority of pet owners will acquire a new pet in the year following pet loss (Tzivian et al., 2015a), not as a “replacement” for the pet lost but as a new addition to the family (Davis et al., 2003). Bereaved pet owners who acquired a new pet following their loss indicated lower depression scores (Brown & Symons, 2016). However, while some pet owners may plan to get another pet when the time is right, others may not find themselves ready for another animal as they may not want to endure the emotional experience of losing a pet again (Tzivian et al., 2014).

Discussion

Factors influencing the grief response

The finding that women tended to be more emotionally affected by the loss of their companion animal could indicate a disparity among genders in their willingness to express their feelings openly following a pet loss, as females may be more willing to participate in surveys on sensitive issues. Furthermore, the human-pet bond was suggested to be an important factor affecting the grief response. Attachment is a predictor of sorrow, grief and anger in bereaved pet owners who euthanized their companion animal. Interestingly, attachment was not a predictor of guilt suggesting that pet owners may rationalize their euthanasia decision as the best choice for their animal and feel comfort in their decision (Barnard-Nguyen et al., 2016).

The circumstances surrounding the pet loss may influence the grief response, particularly for owners who euthanized their pet, as discussed in the next section. These findings may indicate that prior knowledge of the animal’s health condition allows for anticipatory grief to occur, providing more time for owners to come to terms with the loss of their pet.

Pet bereavement and euthanasia

Participating in rituals intended to honor the loved one may be viewed as an adaptive response to the impending loss. Additionally, owners have the option to remain with their pet for the euthanasia procedure. Attendance may help alleviate regret experienced by pet owners and serve as an active form of grief facilitation (Adrian & Stitt, 2019). However, there is no clear evidence that experiencing anticipatory grief lessens distress after the pet’s death (Erdman & Ruby, 2020; Kehl, 2005).

Heightened emotions experienced during the euthanasia decision-making process may lead to detrimental effects following the procedure, such as severing ties with disgruntled family members which may be harmful to the grieving individual in need of emotional support. Therefore, healthy coping mechanisms and interventions may be increasingly important for this subpopulation.

Disenfranchised grief

Within Western society, pet loss is often not recognized as a legitimate reason to grieve (Morris, 2012; Packman et al., 2014) despite the strength of the human-pet bond. Following the death of a human family member, social support is provided, a memorial is held, and time away from work is compensated (e.g. bereavement leave). However, these options are not socially endorsed in the same way for pet loss, suggesting that this loss is somehow “less than” compared to human loss (McKinney, 2019; Toray, 2004). As a result, the death of a pet may seem inconsequential, invalidating the emotional response of grief experienced by bereaved pet owners (Adams et al., 2000). Therefore, grief resulting from pet loss is often regarded as disenfranchised grief, an emotional response that is not openly acknowledged in fear of judgment from others (Doka, 1989).

Bereaved pet owners who do not feel comfortable expressing their grief with others in their daily life may experience loneliness, shame and social rejection. Disenfranchised grief can be self-imposed,
as bereaved pet owners may not recognize their own grief as appropriate since their emotions do not fit into their internal schema of acceptable behavior (Erdman & Ruby, 2020). Bereaved pet owners may find themselves focused on justifying or normalizing their grief rather than confronting the feelings associated with the loss (McKinney, 2019). This mismatch of expectation and reality may result in owners feeling self-conscious about their expression of grief and lead to feelings of frustration and embarrassment.

**Ambiguous pet loss**

Without resolution, bereaved individuals are left in a place of limbo, often not knowing the fate of their beloved companion animal. This type of loss is repeatedly characterized by psychological immobility and feelings of isolation (Knight & Gitterman, 2019; Lenferink et al., 2017).

Bereaved pet owners experiencing an ambiguous loss may be disproportionately affected by the lack of recognition and support following their loss. These findings align with current understandings of grief experienced from ambiguous loss (Knight & Gitterman, 2019). As there is no clear end in sight for grief related to ambiguous loss, bereaved individuals may experience feelings of hope, despair and uncertainty (Wayland et al., 2016) and be less likely to seek support for grief (Knight & Gitterman, 2019). Future research is needed to elucidate health and emotional consequences of ambiguous loss in bereaved pet owners.

**Pet bereavement and coping mechanisms**

Following the loss of a pet, owners may cope in a variety of ways. Some coping mechanisms may be maladaptive to the bereaved pet owner while other coping methods may be healthy and encourage personal growth from the experience. Isolation is a common maladaptive coping mechanism used by bereaved pet owners. This coping mechanism may be employed as a result of the disenfranchised nature of pet grief previously discussed. In contrast, when bereaved pet owners are provided with social support following their loss, these owners tended to have positive outcomes. Bereaved pet owners’ support systems may need to extend beyond traditional family and friends to include the bereaved pet owner’s veterinarian, counselor or external outlets (e.g., support groups, pet loss support hotline). Likewise, support systems or groups provide an environment where bereaved pet owners can come together (in person or online) to process their emotions. Members may help to normalize feelings that accompany the disenfranchisement of their grief response. Normalization of the grief process by support systems allows pet owners to perceive their feelings as commonplace, with little to no difference from the emotions that other people within these circumstances experience. Often group members will express that they are relieved that they are not “the only one upset by the loss of my pet” (Dunn et al., 2005).

Furthermore, a lack of standardized memorial procedures may leave pet owners without clear expectations of how to proceed with life following the death of their pet, negatively impacting the grieving process. Although Biblical scripture may not provide direct examples of pet bereavement, religious officials may serve a role in the bereaved pet owner’s support system. Religious leaders may attend to the bereaved in their congregation and legitimize the grief of bereaved pet owners by acknowledging companion animal loss during sermons and services (Rossell, 2005). Bereaved pet owners who practice religion tended to incorporate their pet into their religious rituals and beliefs, including seeking God’s care for their soul. A small proportion of bereaved pet owners expressed a negative association between their pet loss and their religion, expressing that their loss felt like they were being punished by God. However, engagement in negative religious coping was relatively rare (Lee, 2016).

**Conclusions and future directions**

The consensus from the literature is that bereaved pet owners likely experience disenfranchisement surrounding their loss. This is evident in the emotional reaction reported by bereaved pet owners, as
they express feelings of embarrassment and loneliness. The grief response can be compounded by this experience and is reflected in the methods used by bereaved pet owners to cope with their loss. Although the social support benefits are evident (e.g., family, friends, support groups), the majority of bereaved pet owners impacted by disenfranchised grief may not feel capable of connecting with others following their loss. As most studies reviewed recruited participants from pet bereavement support groups or online forums, information about the general population of bereaved pet owners is lacking and these pet owners may differ from those who are willing to seek out social support. Future research should focus on quantifying the use of different coping mechanisms by bereaved pet owners from an international sample. Furthermore, the effectiveness of coping mechanisms should be evaluated as this would aid in provision of interventions that could truly help bereaved pet owners.

Notes
1. A meadow in the afterlife where animals are restored to full health, able to run and play, until their owner dies and meets them at the bridge where they cross into heaven together
2. A Jewish mourning ritual for 7 days following a family member's death

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