

Doulas for Dying Dogs

BY JEN REEDER

In spring of 2024, the University of New England launched a special online class: the End-of-Life Pet Doula Certificate program.

Students learn how to offer practical tools and emotional support to both pets and the people who love them, according to instructor and certified death doula Tracey Walker, founder of Let It Be End-of-Life Services in Michigan.

“A death doula provides holistic, nonmedical, nonjudgmental care to the dying and their loved ones—and that translates directly to pets,” she says. “It is what we can do to help pet parents support their animal loved ones in palliative, hospice, and end of life.”

To develop the curriculum, Walker collaborated with veterinarians, including those specializing in at-home euthanasia and hospice care. Pet death doulas assist veterinary professionals, assess a pet’s quality of life, offer suggestions for ways to make the dog more comfortable, share recommendations about pet memorials and celebrating last days, and provide emotional support.

Since dogs and cats live in nearly 70 percent of American homes, Walker believes there’s a clear need for such services—and

interest. Walker surveyed her human death–doula students and graduates about other areas in which they’d like to specialize, and the number-one choice was “companion animal doula.”

“It is this recognition that pets are family, and those deaths are impactful and important,” she says.

Walker grew up as an animal lover, working as a teen at an animal hospital—cleaning kennels and taking dogs out for potty breaks—and helping her family care for their nine pet dogs.

As an adult, she became certified as a human death doula, and soon found clients reaching out for support when their dogs got a diagnosis or died. Sometimes they would ask for help organizing a home funeral or burial on the property.

Meanwhile, a close friend fosters “silver muzzle” senior dogs in palliative or hospice care so they can be in a home when they die. Walker has helped her through the loss of “many, many, many” dogs over the past decade. So branching into pets as a doula happened organically, she says.

“I believe wholeheartedly that death care is community care at the heart of it,” she says.

Walker hopes an increase in dog death doulas will help pet

loss become less of a disenfranchised grief.

“Every single time you have a conversation about a loved one’s death, it validates that person—their feelings and their grief,” Walker says. “I hope it does become more mainstream and destigmatized.”

She also hopes anyone interested in helping better support others through pet loss will consider taking the End-of-Life Pet Doula Course—from veterinary professionals and death care workers to generally compassionate people.

While people have remarked that working as a death doula must be sad, Walker feels that though it *can* be sad—self-care is a must—it’s also “the most fulfilling thing I’ve ever done.”

“It is such an honor to accompany anyone—any animal, any person—through that journey into death,” she says. “It’s been some of the most beautiful experiences I’ve had in my life, and it really makes me appreciate life more.”



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