

# Making the Best of the Worst of Times



**You, too, can implement a first-rate pet bereavement program.**

by Jen Reeder

**T**he death of a patient is an unfortunate but inevitable component of veterinary practice, and it takes an emotional toll on veterinary teams and their clients.

As the human-animal bond has continued to increase, so has the need for animal hospitals to offer top-notch bereavement programs to help clients process their grief and eventually welcome another pet into their home.

“The grief process has been changing, and rapidly, over the past few years because of the way people view their pets—they’re family members. They’re no longer these animals that live in the backyard,” said Marie Mondy McNamara, MBA, CVPM, and hospital administrator at AAHA-accredited New Hartford Animal Hospital and Care Center in New Hartford, N.Y. “They’re living very intimately.”

To address these changes, the practice has added services in the past few years, such as creating an exam room that can be transformed into a “comfort room” for euthanasia.

A few years ago, a staff member and her mother sewed special blankets for pets that were either in critical condition or about to be euthanized. Now, the practice also provides extra seating; mats on the floor so clients can be on the same level as their pets; softer lighting; background noise from a white noise machine

with rainfall, bird calls and babbling brooks; and murals on the walls.

"It just takes the medicine out of the room," she said. "It's more comfortable."

### Support groups gain popularity

This June, the hospital also implemented a pet loss support program, a growing trend in veterinary practices. The free monthly group is facilitated by a certified bereavement counselor and is open to those grieving over the loss of a pet or facing a euthanasia decision.

McNamara said the goal is to provide clients with excellent service in every stage of the pet's life, including death.

"We do want to be their first resource," McNamara said. "We don't want them going to the Internet, we don't want them going to their breeder or the pet store... we have the best knowledge and the best resources. We want to be the experts, and we want to be the first ones they think of when they need something."

Many animal hospitals that start their own pet loss support groups have a clinical social worker attend the meetings along with their in-house bereavement counselor in case a client needs more advanced care, such as how to deal with suicidal thoughts (also an important step for liability reasons).

That is the arrangement at Palm Beach Veterinary Specialists in West Palm Beach, Fla., according to Jennifer Fossen, director of operations. The practice began offering a pet loss support group in 2010 as a service to its clients as well as anyone in the community coping with or facing the loss of a pet.

"We saw a need, being a referral practice," Fossen said. "It's a service to the region, really; nobody else is doing this. I have people call me all the time who are not current clients but want to know about the group."

A staff member who had expressed a strong interest in specializing in grief support attended a certification program with the nonprofit Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB) to become a "certified veterinary bereavement counselor."

Now, the bereavement support group meets the third Thursday evening of every month, and sometimes twice a month if there is demand for it. It is free to attend, and refreshments are served. The practice does request an RSVP, because group sizes range from 4 to 16 people. The counselor does not limit her help to the group, however.

"On a day-to-day basis, our certified veterinary bereavement counselor is here. She has other responsibilities, but she tries to make herself available if we have anybody in house who is thinking of saying goodbye to a pet, or people who have said goodbye," Fossen said.

Those people are personally invited to the support group, and postcards about the group are automatically sent to clients who have used emergency services at the practice (which also offers crematory services).

Palm Beach Veterinary Specialists offers other services for people who do not want to come to the pet loss support group, such as one-on-one phone and email counseling, books and links on the practice's website to articles about dealing with grief, and information about how to create a tribute page to a deceased pet on the practice's Pet Loss page.

"It's definitely not expensive in the big scheme of things. You get to be there and continue a relationship with the client," Fossen said. "Not to be able to help your client is expensive."

### Changing times

Ann Johnson, a licensed clinical social worker, has been a facilitator at a weekly pet loss support group in Denver for the nonprofit Human/Animal Bond Trust since its inception in 1988.

"Back then, there weren't even sympathy cards for pet loss," Johnson said. "The whole concept was really new. Now, there's more acknowledgment of the relationship between people and their animals. People are freer to talk about it with friends, family, coworkers."

Denver-area veterinarians refer their clients to the pet loss group, which



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meets every Thursday evening. Participants are encouraged to bring a photo of their pet, which she said group members appreciate.

“There’s sort of an instantaneous bond that happens, and it just goes from there,” she said.

She said a group setting is therapeutic for participants because it provides validation of their feelings and helps them feel they are not alone in the guilt that often surrounds the death of a pet, particularly in cases of euthanasia. Often, participants are surprised by the intensity of their grief, she said.

“I don’t think there’s ever been a group I’ve been at that people don’t say, ‘This has been harder for me than the loss of \_\_\_’—anyone else: mother, father, sibling, child or partner, you name it,” Johnson said. “Then, they get that unconditional love is pretty special, you don’t get that anywhere but from your animals and having a relationship that’s 24/7 is very different from human bonding.”

#### **Staff can take an active role**

Like Palm Beach Veterinary Specialists, many animal hospitals that want to start a pet loss support group contact the nonprofit APLB and enroll a staff member in the certification program. Wallace Sife, PhD, and author of *The Loss of a Pet*, founded the organization in 1997 after his beloved miniature dachshund Edel Meister died and he could not find helpful resources to cope with the grief.

“I was an emotional basket case myself, even though I had two PhDs in psychology and used to counsel in human bereavement,” Sife said. “I was wondering, ‘Why is this hurting me so deeply and making me so dysfunctional?’ It took me a long time to figure it out, and I eventually wrote the book that I would have wanted for myself that wasn’t there.”

Now the organization’s website offers a host of free services to grieving pet owners, ranging from articles about grief, a list of veterinarians who perform home euthanasia (he encourages veterinarians

who do so to get in touch via the website), a memorial section and online chatrooms. More than 30,000 pet owners have visited the chatrooms in the past 15 years. People can also become members for \$25 and receive a quarterly newsletter and other benefits.

“We’re trying to do everything we can,” Sife said. “We also have a special program, a 10-page letter of advice and instruction on how to form a support group in your area,” adding that practices can email him via the website to request the free letter.

Another service for members is that they can enroll in the APLB’s pet bereavement counselor certification program, a 5-week online course that costs \$300. On successful completion of the course, the student receives the APLB Certificate of Training and 10 CE credits (authorized by the National Association of Social Workers). He said the program is needed because veterinary schools “barely touch on” the subject of grief and how to deal with it.

Sife suggested that the certified pet bereavement counselor conduct some sort of sensitivity training with the rest of the staff, particularly receptionists.

“There must be some sort of sensitivity training... how to deal with compassion with people whose pets are being brought in for euthanasia,” he said. “If you get an incident of insensitivity or indifference, the person will never come back again.”

#### **Critical communication**

The Argus Institute at Colorado State University’s Veterinary Teaching Hospital offers what is perhaps the gold standard of client and veterinary advocacy by retaining a staff of five and two full-time clinical counselors to help with dealing with sick pets throughout every stage of the process.

For example, the counselors are available for crisis intervention; if a client brings in a dog that was hit by a car, an Argus Institute counselor is paged and he or she sits with the client while the

dog is stabilized. They also act as surgical liaisons.

“We often say the clock runs a lot slower in the front of the building, where the clients are waiting, than in the surgical suite, where sweat is rolling down your face in the middle of a procedure,” said Jane Shaw, DVM, PhD, and director of the Argus Institute. “So, we try to go the surgical suite, get an update about what’s happening and then report back to the client.”

She said the program was started in 1984 by Steve Withrow, DVM, DACVS, DACVIM (Oncology), because of the high number of cancer patients brought to the practice. Initially, the Argus Institute focused on loss, euthanasia and end-of-life care, but it has evolved to focus primarily on “decision-making conversations,” according to Shaw; for example, pet owners with children have specific needs.

“Parents want to keep kids safe. How do I tell my kids that he has cancer? How do I talk to my kids about his quality of life? How do I help my kids be part of a euthanasia decision? Should they be present or not? Those are the kinds of conversations we have with parents, and, basically, we empower and educate parents with information so they can have those kinds of discussions with their children,” Shaw said. “The loss of a pet is often one of the first losses that children go through. If we model a healthful grieving process with pets, it’s a way to prepare kids with a toolbox for when they face grief in the future—when they lose a grandparent, for instance.”

Although client support is a key feature of the Argus Institute, another major component is to support the veterinary team, which Shaw said Withrow urged from its inception.

“He said, ‘Treating cancer is stressful; we’re delivering bad news, we’re talking about tough topics and the team needs support just as much as the clients do,’” Shaw said.

The Argus Institute offers veterinary patient communication workshops for

veterinary students and practicing veterinarians to help understand how to have those tough conversations and how to deal with them. The counselors are also available to the staff if they need help themselves.

“I often use the language that veterinarians wear backpacks, and they kind of throw difficult situations into their backpack,” Shaw said. “Then, if we don’t take time to process or debrief or to let go, our backpack starts to get pretty heavy and we have to lug that backpack around. Then, we get concerned about stress or anxiety or depression carrying around this load.”

The concept of helping veterinary staff process grief over the death of a pet, which they may have known for years or particularly bonded with during prolonged treatment, can serve any animal hospital developing a pet bereavement program.

“Hospitals are beautiful about thinking about ‘how do we care for our clients?’” Shaw said. “The same person who does that can also care for the team.... We care for them so that they can care for the clients.” ■

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder showered her 2-year-old lab mix, Rio, with extra hugs and treats while researching this article.



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### Links for More Information

ASPCA Pet Loss Hotline: Support 24/7 by a psychologist, 217-337-9773, [aspca.org/Home/Pet-care/pet-loss](http://aspca.org/Home/Pet-care/pet-loss)

APLB: [aplb.org/index.html](http://aplb.org/index.html)

AVMA guidelines for establishing pet loss support services: [avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/AVMA-Guidelines-for-Pet-Loss-Support-Services.aspx](http://avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/AVMA-Guidelines-for-Pet-Loss-Support-Services.aspx)

The Argus Institute: [csuvth.colostate.edu/diagnostic\\_and\\_support/argus/rdvm.aspx](http://csuvth.colostate.edu/diagnostic_and_support/argus/rdvm.aspx)

The Argus Institute’s book on grief, titled *What Now? Support for You and Your Animal Companion*: [aahanet.org/Store/ProductDetail.aspx?type=Search&code=WTNWS](http://aahanet.org/Store/ProductDetail.aspx?type=Search&code=WTNWS)