

Title: The Loss of a Pet: A Guide to Coping with the Grieving Process When a Pet Dies
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Reviewer: Kathleen Sheridan

The author of this book, Wallace Sife, is the founder and first president of the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB) (<http://www.aplb.org>), “a nonprofit association of concerned people who are experienced and knowledgeable in the tender subject of pet death. Our members are professional counselors as well as pet-loving people from all other walks of life. We are all concerned with helping pet lovers cope with this unique and very intimate kind of loss.” Sife is a practicing psychotherapist and, as such, has training and extensive experience in counseling, including grief counseling. This gives him a solid foundation for pet-bereavement counseling because he has an understanding of the processes of grieving, how bereavement can affect people, and the types of counseling approaches that can be most helpful to a bereaved person. What he has done in this book is to extend the principles of bereavement counseling to people who are suffering from the loss of a pet, and he does this in a caring and sensitive way. An example of this is his discussion of someone grieving over the loss of a snake (p. 85):

Most people are surprised that the owners of snakes can get so extremely upset emotionally. The most common response to this kind of loss is that a cold-blooded reptile doesn't show love and affection as other pets do, and it couldn't possibly be loved as a more common pet is. . . . Who is to be anyone else's judge when it comes to loving and feeling grief? . . . As pet lovers, we must respect all pets, as well as their owners' feelings of bereavement. This is a matter of simple love, understanding and tolerance.

Although the reader might be put off by what often seems to be an unnecessarily emotive vocabulary, laden with words such as “shocking,” “agonizing,” “cherished,” “beloved,” and “adored,” and by the repetitive nature of some of the material, this *is* a book that can be extremely useful as a resource.

As a pet owner and lover of animals, Sife understands the anguish of losing a pet, as well as the difficulty finding understanding among one's friends and family when the grief of the loss seems disproportionate to them. After all, it was “only a dog” and you can always “get another.” In recognizing how significant the loss of a pet can be—and the important role a pet can play in someone's life—Sife has worked to provide support and understanding for the bereaved pet owner.

This book is aimed at both the pet owner and the practitioner. It is written in a simple style (complete with a glossary of terms in the back, including terms like “anthropomorphize,” “misperception,” separation anxiety,” etc.) and provides sound advice and guidance for the bereaved (p. 95):

When you finally decide to open up your life to another companion animal, there are a few things that should be kept in mind. If you like the same breed and color, that's fine, but do not try to remake the new animal into a replica of your deceased pet. This cannot be done. . . . Make a new relationship and build it on mutual trust, love and respect. . . . Get toys that do not remind you of your deceased pet's playthings. Give this new pet a chance to be wonderful, too, on its own merits.

For the practitioner, Sife provides a wealth of information that can help us when counseling a client who is grieving the loss of a pet. His first chapter discusses the human-pet bond, providing insights into the social functions of bonding with a pet (“Lonely people . . . often turn to pets.” and “A large percentage of today’s city dwellers is composed of people living alone with their beloved companion animals”) as well as dysfunctional bonding (“many people tend to become overly dependent on this . . . relationship. . . . Personal happiness is often measured by the safe . . . and uncompromised bond we share with pets”).

Other chapters include a careful discussion of the grieving process, including sections on grief and mourning, covering different reactions to grief and the phases of grief; as well as more in-depth coverage of different reactions to loss, such as anger, denial, and guilt. Case studies are provided in each chapter to give some insight into the kinds of reactions people can have to the loss of a pet. It becomes apparent, in reading the case studies, that the loss of a pet often triggers grieving for other kinds of loss that haven’t been properly processed (p. 27-28):

One of my patients was a widow whose dog died four years before she came to me. When the woman’s husband died a few years before the dog, she was shaken, but seemed to stand up well to the shock. . . . To her it was very important to keep up appearances for the neighbors.

. . . All her attention and love focused on the dog. . . . As the years went on, the woman grew increasingly dependent on what the dog represented to her. It was a combination of surrogate roles, from child to best friend to husband.

When the dog died a few years later, she was overwhelmed by inconsolable grief and even had to be hospitalized for a few days. After an intense period of mourning, which was never resolved, she tried to go about a normal way of life, but she couldn’t without the dog. She would not get another pet, and as a result, her life became entirely devoted to the remembrance of her deceased dog. Her apartment was turned into a near shrine, with pictures draped in black and the dog’s toys and other memorabilia on prominent display. The pet’s ashes and urn occupied the central focus of the living room.

. . . it turned out that much of this abnormal behavior had been in response to other deep-rooted problems she had never faced or resolved. She suffered a deep sense of guilt for not having grieved for her husband . . . and was afraid of letting any feelings get out of hand, so she suppressed them. Thus, she could never complete the mourning process for her husband or for the dog.

. . . It turned out that early in her marriage she had a baby who died in an auto accident, when he was only a year old. She had never forgiven herself or her husband for that, and it was a psychological time bomb just waiting to explode. . . . [It was the death of the dog that] was the trigger mechanism that set everything off at once.

The chapters that are perhaps the most useful to us as counselors are those that deal with issues related more specifically to pet bereavement; they provide a sensitive and well thought-out approach to the kinds of questions that come up when dealing with the loss of a pet:

- *Other Kinds of Loss* looks at loss other than death, such as the disappearance of a pet, loss due to divorce, or when a pet is forcibly removed by the authorities.
- *Another Pet?* discusses the question of getting another pet. Here Sife provides some guidelines and activities bereaved persons can go through to help them decide when the time is right.
- *Children and the Death of a Pet* is an extremely important chapter. Throughout the book, Sife mentions the problems and questions children have when a pet dies. As he says, “Bereavement in children too often has been trivialized or given inadequate attention and respect.” He emphasizes that trying to shelter the children from what has happened is not the best approach—no matter how well intentioned. He answers the question “What is safe to tell children?” and provides a section on “Explaining a

death.” He ends the chapter with a section on “Helping a child adjust” in which he lists ideas and suggestions to help children understand and cope with the loss of an animal that has shared a special place in their lives.

- *Euthanasia* is a topic that can be particularly difficult to deal with: “Aside from being the right thing to do, euthanasia can be a psychological nightmare of confusion, guilt and final responsibility. . . . Choosing euthanasia is probably one of the most upsetting decisions one will ever have to make.” Sife discusses euthanasia thoroughly and with great sensitivity. Again, he considers the involvement of children in the decision, what needs to be considered when deciding on euthanasia, the pet owner’s responsibility, ethical considerations, and a description of what the pet might experience during the process.
- *Final Arrangements* discusses the various options for disposing of the pet’s body and gives useful advice for finding a reputable pet cemetery or crematorium.
- *Supportive Counseling* looks at the development of pet-bereavement counseling and gives some useful advice for anyone who has suffered any kind of loss and is grieving. At the end of the chapter, Sife has listed counseling centers and hotlines for pet bereavement in the US. He has also included information on the APLB.
- The chapter on *Religion and the Death of Pets* is one of the most interesting chapters in the book. Sife discusses the question of whether animals have souls and looks at the answers of various religions. He includes the opinions of Anglican, Buddhist, Jewish, and Unitarian-Universalist religious authorities to give the reader some guidance.
- *Some Practical Suggestions in Review* are based on Sife’s years of counseling experience, and this chapter, again, lists activities appropriate to helping any bereaved person through the grieving process.

The Loss of a Pet is a book rich in useful information provided in a context of caring and sensitivity regarding this difficult subject, and I would not hesitate to recommend it to anyone who is grieving the loss of a pet or who wishes to counsel people who have lost a pet. I would also strongly recommend it to people who have children and pets—the information it gives on helping children understand the loss of a pet—and of death, in general—is perhaps its strongest selling point.