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Pet Euthanasia and Disenfranchised Grief: Navigating the Complex Emotional Landscape

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Abstract

The death of a companion animal can evoke profound grief, particularly when animals are regarded as family members and important sources of emotional support and companionship. This manuscript examines companion animal euthanasia and bereavement through the framework of disenfranchised grief, highlighting challenges such as anticipatory grief, euthanasia-related guilt, social invalidation, and limited culturally recognized mourning rituals. Contemporary grief perspectives, including the Dual Process Model, Worden's Tasks of Mourning, and Continuing Bonds Theory, provide frameworks for understanding adaptation to pet loss. The discussion also considers factors influencing bereavement, including the strength of the human–animal bond, circumstances surrounding the animal's death, and available social support. Implications for social work and other helping professions emphasize validating companion animal loss, recognizing euthanasia-related distress, and providing compassionate bereavement support. Greater professional and societal recognition of pet loss may reduce disenfranchisement and promote healthier adjustment following the death of a companion animal.

Keywords: Companion Animal Loss, Pet euthanasia, Disenfranchised Grief, Bereavement, Human–animal Bond, Pet loss Counseling

Introduction

The relationship between humans and companion animals extends far beyond ownership and is often characterized by attachment, mutual affection, routine, and psychological interdependence. Companion animals may function as family members, confidants, sources of emotional support, and stable presences during stress and transition. The American Veterinary Medical Association describes the human–animal bond as a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship that affects the physical, psychological, and social well-being of people and animals. Research likewise associates companion-animal relationships with reduced loneliness, greater social connection, and physiological processes related to attachment and stress regulation [1-3]. Because these relationships can become central to daily life and identity, their loss may produce grief comparable in intensity to grief following the death of an important human relationship [4].

The prevalence of pet ownership underscores the public-health relevance of companion-animal bereavement. The American Pet Products Association reported that approximately 94 million U.S. households—about 71% of households—owned at least one pet in its 2024–2025 National Pet Owners Survey [5]. End-of-life loss is therefore a common potential experience across the lifespan. National data describing euthanasia require careful interpretation because no surveillance system captures all euthanasia of privately owned companion animals performed in veterinary practices. The most current national shelter data indicate that 597,000 dogs and cats were euthanized in U.S. shelters and rescues in 2025; with approximately 5.8 million dogs and cats entering these organizations, this is equivalent to roughly 10% of annual shelter/rescue intake [6]. This figure should not be interpreted as the percentage of all American pets euthanized, because it excludes privately owned animals euthanized in veterinary settings and uses shelter intake rather than the total U.S. pet population as its denominator.

A similarly precise national U.S. percentage of pet owners who experience bereavement after a companion animal dies has not been established. Bereavement is expected to be common because companion animals generally have shorter lifespans than their human caregivers, but studies vary in sampling, definitions of grief, and time since loss. A recent population-based study of 975 adults in the United Kingdom found that 32.6% had experienced the death of a beloved pet; among pet-bereaved respondents, 7.5% met the threshold for probable prolonged grief disorder, demonstrating that a meaningful minority experience persistent and clinically significant symptoms [7]. These findings should not be generalized as a U.S. prevalence estimate, but they illustrate both the frequency and potential severity of pet bereavement.

Loss may occur suddenly through accident or acute illness or gradually through chronic disease and age-related decline. Many owners also confront euthanasia, which differs from unexpected death because caregivers participate directly in decisions about the timing and circumstances of death. Although euthanasia is intended to alleviate suffering, it can generate guilt, uncertainty, responsibility, anticipatory grief, and recurring questions about whether the decision was made too early or too late [8, 9]. These reactions may be intensified when others fail to recognize the significance of the relationship.

Purpose and Scope of This Manuscript

This manuscript examines companion animal euthanasia and bereavement with particular emphasis on disenfranchised grief. It reviews ethical and emotional dimensions of euthanasia, selected contemporary grief theories, distinctive features of pet loss, coping and support strategies, representative clinical illustrations, and implications for mental health and social work practice. Doka's [10] concept of disenfranchised grief provides the central framework for understanding how socially unrecognized losses may leave bereaved individuals without customary rituals, institutional accommodations, or interpersonal validation. The manuscript argues that recognizing companion animal loss as a legitimate bereavement experience is essential to compassionate, person-centered practice.

Defining Euthanasia in Companion Animal Care

Euthanasia, derived from the Greek terms eu (good) and thanatos (death), literally translates to "good death." Within veterinary medicine, euthanasia refers to the intentional and humane termination of an animal's life to relieve suffering when recovery is no longer possible or when quality of life has deteriorated to an unacceptable level. Unlike many forms of physician-assisted death involving humans, companion animal euthanasia is generally regarded as an ethically acceptable intervention designed to minimize pain and preserve dignity [11]. The procedure typically involves administering an overdose of anesthetic agents, most commonly pentobarbital, resulting in rapid unconsciousness followed by cessation of cardiac and respiratory function. The primary objective is to ensure a peaceful and painless death while preventing unnecessary suffering [12].

Ethical Considerations and Moral Challenges

The decision to euthanize a beloved companion animal is often accompanied by considerable ethical complexity and emotional distress. Owners frequently struggle with feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and responsibility, questioning whether they are acting too soon or waiting too long. These concerns are compounded by fears that euthanasia may represent a betrayal of the relationship shared with the animal. Although such concerns are understandable, veterinary ethics generally emphasize the alleviation of suffering as a fundamental obligation, viewing euthanasia as an act of compassion rather than abandonment [12].

The ethical principle of beneficence, which emphasizes promoting welfare and preventing harm, serves as a guiding framework in veterinary medicine. Veterinarians are ethically obligated to recommend interventions that prioritize the animal's quality of life rather than merely prolong biological existence. This perspective recognizes that life extension in the presence of unmanageable pain or diminished functioning may not constitute humane care [13]. Consequently, euthanasia is often considered an expression of compassion that seeks to preserve dignity and alleviate suffering.

Veterinary Perspectives and Professional Responsibilities

Veterinarians occupy a unique position in the euthanasia process, serving simultaneously as medical experts, ethical consultants, and emotional support providers. Their responsibilities extend beyond diagnosing illness and administering treatment to include helping owners navigate one of the most painful decisions they may ever face. Effective communication and compassionate care are essential components of veterinary practice, particularly when discussing end-of-life issues [14].

Prior to euthanasia, veterinarians typically conduct comprehensive evaluations of the animal's condition, prognosis, and treatment options. These discussions allow owners to understand the progression of disease and to make informed decisions regarding their pet's care. Clear communication regarding the euthanasia procedure itself can alleviate anxiety and dispel misconceptions. Veterinarians often explain the physiological process involved, describe what owners may observe, and address concerns related to pain or distress. Such transparency helps promote trust and facilitates informed consent [9].

Assessing Quality of Life

Central to euthanasia decision-making is the assessment of quality of life. Quality of life encompasses an animal's physical comfort, mobility, appetite, hygiene, emotional well-being, and ability to engage in activities that previously brought pleasure and meaning. Because companion animals cannot verbally communicate their experiences, owners and veterinarians must rely on behavioral observations and clinical indicators to determine the extent of suffering [15].

Several quality-of-life scales have been developed to facilitate objective evaluations. One widely utilized framework is the HHHHHMM scale, which assesses hurt, hunger, hydration, hygiene, happiness, mobility, and the balance between good days and bad days [15]. These domains provide owners with structured criteria that can help reduce emotional bias and support informed decision-making.

Indicators of diminished quality of life may include persistent pain, loss of appetite, inability to ambulate independently, respiratory distress, chronic vomiting, cognitive decline, and withdrawal from social interactions. Owners are often encouraged to maintain journals documenting daily functioning and to evaluate whether their pet experiences more good days than bad. Such records can facilitate discussions with veterinarians and provide reassurance that euthanasia decisions are based on compassionate concern rather than convenience or emotional impulsivity [13].

Defining Grief and Its Manifestations

Grief is a universal yet highly individualized response to loss that encompasses emotional, cognitive, physical, behavioral, social, and spiritual dimensions. Although grief is commonly associated with sadness, it is a multidimensional process characterized by a broad range of experiences that vary in intensity and duration. Bereavement researchers emphasize that grief is not a pathological condition but rather a normal and adaptive response to the disruption of an emotionally significant relationship [16].

Theoretical Models of Grief

Numerous theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain the grieving process. Although no single model adequately captures the complexity of bereavement, these theories provide valuable perspectives that help clinicians and researchers understand individual experiences of loss.

The Dual Process Model of Bereavement

The Dual Process Model developed by Stroebe and Schut [17] represents one of the most influential contemporary theories of grief. According to this model, adaptive grieving involves oscillation between two forms of coping: loss-oriented coping and restoration-oriented coping. Loss-oriented coping focuses directly on the deceased and the emotional consequences of the loss. Individuals engage in activities such as reminiscing, crying, yearning, and confronting painful emotions associated with bereavement. Restoration-oriented coping, in contrast, involves adjusting to life changes, assuming new

roles, establishing routines, and engaging in activities that divert attention from grief.

Healthy adaptation occurs through movement between these two orientations rather than prolonged immersion in either one. Periods of confronting grief are balanced by periods of respite and reengagement with daily life. This oscillatory process allows bereaved individuals to gradually accommodate their loss while continuing to function effectively [17].

Worden's Tasks of Mourning

Worden [16] conceptualized grief as an active process involving four tasks that facilitate adjustment to loss. The first task involves accepting the reality of the loss. The second task requires individuals to process the pain associated with bereavement rather than avoiding emotional distress. The third task focuses on adjusting to a world in which the deceased is absent, including external, internal, and spiritual adaptations. The fourth task involves finding an enduring connection with the deceased while continuing to engage in life and form new relationships.

Unlike stage models, Worden's framework emphasizes active adaptation and recognizes that mourning requires ongoing psychological work. Individuals may revisit these tasks repeatedly, and successful completion does not imply forgetting the deceased but rather integrating the relationship into a continuing narrative of life.

Continuing Bonds Theory

Traditional grief theories often assumed that healthy mourning required detachment from the deceased. In contrast, Continuing Bonds Theory proposes that maintaining emotional connections with loved ones can represent an adaptive aspect of bereavement rather than evidence of unresolved grief [18]. Continuing bonds may be expressed through memories, rituals, symbolic connections, or internal dialogues with the deceased. Contemporary grief research supports the notion that preserving meaningful connections facilitates adjustment and contributes to resilience.

The Unique Nature of Pet Loss Grief

Although pet loss shares many characteristics with human bereavement, several factors contribute to its unique emotional significance. Companion animals provide unconditional affection, nonjudgmental companionship, and emotional stability that are often distinct from human relationships [4]. Their constant presence in daily routines creates a level of intimacy that can render their absence particularly painful.

Companion animals frequently serve as sources of emotional support during periods of stress, loneliness, illness, and major life transitions. Consequently, their loss may disrupt not only attachment relationships but also daily structure, routines, and perceptions of security. Activities such as feeding, walking, grooming, and playing become embedded within everyday life, and their sudden absence can create profound feelings of emptiness and disorganization [8].

Pet loss is further complicated by the unique circumstances surrounding euthanasia. Unlike most forms of human bereavement, owners often assume responsibility for making end-of-life decisions. Although euthanasia is intended to alleviate suffering, owners may experience guilt, self-doubt, and questions regarding whether the decision occurred too soon or too late [9]. These moral and emotional conflicts can intensify bereavement and contribute to complicated grief reactions.

Another distinctive characteristic of pet loss is the lack of socially sanctioned mourning rituals and institutional support. Unlike human deaths, companion animal losses are rarely accompanied by bereavement leave, formal memorial services, or extensive communal support. Consequently, grieving individuals may feel isolated or misunderstood when others minimize the significance of their loss. This social invalidation often contributes to feelings of shame and loneliness and sets the stage for the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief, which will be explored in the next section [10].

Ultimately, the intensity of pet loss reflects the depth of the human-animal bond rather than an exaggerated emotional response. Recognition of the unique characteristics of companion animal bereavement is essential for providing compassionate support and understanding to individuals mourning the death of a beloved animal companion.

Defining Disenfranchised Grief

Grief is generally accompanied by social rituals and emotional support that help individuals process loss and adapt to changed circumstances. However, not all losses are recognized or validated by society. Doka [10] introduced the concept of disenfranchised grief to describe grief that is not openly acknowledged, socially supported, or publicly mourned. Disenfranchised grief occurs when individuals experience losses that society fails to recognize as legitimate or worthy of mourning, thereby depriving grievers of the emotional support and rituals that facilitate healing.

According to Doka [10], disenfranchisement may arise when the relationship itself is not recognized, when the loss is considered insignificant, when the griever is not viewed as having the right to mourn, or when social norms discourage expressions of grief. Under these circumstances, bereaved individuals may experience feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation as they struggle to reconcile their profound emotional pain with societal expectations that minimize or invalidate their loss. Without acknowledgment and support, grieving individuals often suppress emotions and may encounter difficulties integrating the loss into their lives. Disenfranchised grief challenges traditional assumptions regarding who is entitled to grieve and which relationships are considered socially meaningful. As a result, losses involving companion animals, miscarriages, estranged relationships, or stigmatized deaths often receive limited recognition despite their profound emotional significance [19]. Among these forms of loss, the death of a companion animal represents one of the most common and least socially validated experiences of disenfranchised grief.

Why Pet Loss Is Frequently Disenfranchised

Although companion animals occupy central roles in the lives of millions of individuals, societal attitudes have historically positioned animals as property rather than family members. This perspective often minimizes the emotional significance of the human-animal bond and contributes to the perception that grief over pet loss is excessive or irrational [20]. Consequently, individuals mourning the death of a beloved companion animal frequently encounter a lack of understanding from family members, coworkers, and friends.

One of the defining characteristics of disenfranchised pet loss is the absence of culturally sanctioned mourning rituals. Human deaths are often accompanied by funerals, memorial services, bereavement leave, and communal expressions of sympathy. These rituals provide social validation and opportunities for emotional support. In contrast, the loss of a companion animal is rarely recognized through formal ceremonies or institutional accommodations. Most workplaces do not provide bereavement leave for pet loss, and grieving individuals are generally expected to resume normal functioning immediately after the death occurs [21]. The social minimization of pet loss is often expressed through well-intentioned but invalidating comments such as "It was only a dog," "You can always get another cat," or "At least it wasn't a person." Such statements imply that grief over a companion animal is disproportionate and discourage emotional expression. As a result, many individuals conceal their sorrow, avoid discussing their loss, and grieve privately to avoid criticism or misunderstanding [4]. The discrepancy between the significance of the relationship and the lack of social recognition creates a unique

form of suffering that complicates the bereavement process. Moreover, pet owners may experience secondary losses associated with the death of their animal companions. In addition to losing a cherished relationship, they may lose daily routines, social interactions, feelings of purpose, and sources of emotional support. For individuals who live alone, are elderly, or rely on companion animals for psychological stability, these secondary losses can be particularly devastating [8]. Nevertheless, society frequently overlooks these dimensions of grief, further contributing to disenfranchisement.

Emotional and Psychological Consequences

The absence of social acknowledgment can intensify emotional suffering and interfere with adaptive grieving. Individuals experiencing disenfranchised grief often report feelings of loneliness, anger, shame, guilt, and confusion. Because their loss is invalidated by others, they may begin to question the legitimacy of their own emotions, leading to self-criticism and emotional suppression [22].

Isolation represents one of the most significant consequences of disenfranchised grief. Social support serves as a protective factor during bereavement; however, when support is unavailable or withdrawn, individuals may feel disconnected from others and reluctant to seek assistance. This lack of interpersonal validation can increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and prolonged grief reactions [23].

Feelings of guilt are especially prevalent following companion animal euthanasia. Owners often question whether they acted too soon or delayed the decision unnecessarily. These doubts may be exacerbated by societal messages that minimize pet loss, causing individuals to internalize blame and experience shame regarding the intensity of their grief [9]. Consequently, emotional pain becomes compounded by self-doubt and a perceived lack of permission to mourn openly.

Research has demonstrated that attachment to companion animals predicts the intensity of grief following their loss. Individuals with strong emotional bonds frequently report levels of distress comparable to those associated with the death of human family members [24]. Therefore, minimizing pet loss not only invalidates genuine emotional suffering but also ignores empirical evidence supporting the significance of these attachments.

Toward Greater Recognition and Validation

Increasing recognition of disenfranchised grief represents an important step toward promoting compassionate responses to pet loss. Mental health professionals, veterinary practitioners, family members, and communities play essential roles in validating bereaved individuals and acknowledging the legitimacy of the human-animal bond. Validation does not require comparing animal loss with human loss; rather, it involves recognizing that grief reflects the significance of the relationship rather than the species of the deceased.

Empathic listening, supportive communication, and opportunities for memorialization can help counteract feelings of shame and isolation. By acknowledging pet loss as a meaningful life event, society can foster healthier grieving processes and reduce the hidden burden associated with disenfranchised grief. Recognition of these losses ultimately affirms the profound emotional connections humans share with companion animals and promotes more compassionate responses to bereavement.

Self-Validation and Permission to Grieve

One of the most important components of coping with pet loss involves recognizing the legitimacy of one's grief. Because companion animal bereavement is frequently minimized by society, many individuals question whether their emotional reactions are excessive or inappropriate. Self-validation serves as a protective factor against shame and self-criticism by acknowledging that grief reflects the significance of the relationship rather than the species of the deceased [22].

Meaning Reconstruction and Sense-Making

Meaning reconstruction represents a central task of bereavement and involves integrating the loss into one's personal narrative and worldview. Neimeyer [25] proposed that grief disrupts fundamental assumptions regarding identity, relationships, and life meaning. Consequently, adaptation requires individuals to reconstruct meaning and develop new understandings that accommodate the absence of the deceased.

The death of a companion animal may challenge assumptions regarding safety, predictability, and one's role as caregiver. Bereaved individuals frequently ask existential questions such as "Why did this happen?" or "Did I make the right decision?" Meaning-making involves exploring these questions and developing narratives that emphasize love, compassion, and the significance of the relationship rather than focusing exclusively on suffering or guilt.

Many individuals derive meaning through reflecting on the joy, companionship, and personal growth their pets provided. Others find comfort in recognizing that euthanasia represented an act of compassion intended to alleviate suffering. Reframing the loss within a broader context of love and caregiving may facilitate emotional healing and reduce self-blame [25].

Continuing Bonds and Maintaining Connections

Contemporary grief theories challenge the traditional notion that healthy mourning requires detachment from the deceased. Continuing Bonds Theory suggests that maintaining symbolic and emotional connections with loved ones represents a normal and adaptive aspect of bereavement [18]. Rather than severing attachments, individuals often preserve meaningful connections that provide comfort and continuity.

Following the death of a companion animal, continuing bonds may be expressed through memories, photographs, journals, memorials, or conversations about shared experiences. Some individuals choose to celebrate birthdays, maintain favorite toys, or engage in charitable activities that honor their pet's memory. Others report experiencing ongoing feelings of connection through dreams or symbolic reminders that evoke comfort rather than distress [8].

Continuing bonds should not be interpreted as evidence of pathological grief. Instead, maintaining emotional connections often facilitates meaning-making and allows individuals to integrate the relationship into their ongoing lives. These symbolic bonds acknowledge that love and attachment continue beyond physical death and contribute to resilience during bereavement.

Memorialization and Rituals

Rituals serve important psychological functions by providing opportunities to express emotions, honor relationships, and create meaning following loss. Doka [22] emphasized that rituals are particularly valuable in cases of disenfranchised grief because they offer validation when social acknowledgment is lacking. Although companion animal losses are rarely accompanied by culturally sanctioned mourning practices, individuals frequently create personal rituals that facilitate healing.

Memorialization activities may include burial ceremonies, cremation services, memory boxes, photo albums, scrapbooks, written tributes, or donations to animal welfare organizations. Some individuals choose to plant trees or flowers in memory of their companion animals, while others participate in online memorial communities or support groups. These activities acknowledge the significance of the relationship and provide tangible reminders of love and companionship [8].

Family rituals are particularly beneficial because they allow individuals to share memories and collectively process grief. Rituals involving children provide opportunities to validate emotions and teach healthy coping strategies. Ultimately, memorialization

promotes emotional expression and facilitates the integration of loss into family narratives.

Social Support and Interpersonal Validation

Social support represents one of the most important protective factors during bereavement. Individuals who perceive emotional support from family members, friends, healthcare providers, or support groups generally demonstrate healthier psychological outcomes than those who experience isolation or invalidation [23]. Unfortunately, individuals grieving companion animals frequently encounter minimization and misunderstanding, limiting opportunities for emotional expression.

Supportive relationships provide validation, empathy, and opportunities to share memories without fear of judgment. Effective support involves active listening, emotional presence, and acknowledgment of the significance of the loss rather than attempts to diminish or rationalize grief. Statements that validate emotions and recognize the importance of the human-animal bond contribute to healing and reduce feelings of shame associated with disenfranchised grief [22].

Pet loss support groups, whether in person or online, offer unique opportunities to connect with others who share similar experiences. These groups provide normalization, social support, and safe environments for discussing grief without fear of criticism. Research suggests that support groups enhance coping and reduce feelings of isolation among bereaved pet owners [8].

Professional Counseling and Therapeutic Interventions

Although many individuals adapt to pet loss without formal intervention, others may benefit from professional support. Mental health professionals can provide safe environments for emotional expression, address guilt associated with euthanasia decisions, and facilitate meaning reconstruction. Cognitive-behavioral interventions, narrative therapy, and grief counseling have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and prolonged grief [25].

Narrative approaches are particularly relevant for disenfranchised grief because they encourage individuals to reconstruct personal stories and integrate loss into broader life narratives. These interventions emphasize strengths, resilience, and the enduring significance of relationships rather than focusing solely on pathology. Cognitive interventions may also help individuals challenge irrational beliefs and reduce self-blame associated with euthanasia or perceived caregiving failures.

Group counseling and pet loss support groups offer additional opportunities for validation and connection. Sharing experiences with others who understand the depth of the human-animal bond can reduce feelings of isolation and foster hope. In cases involving persistent yearning, severe functional impairment, or symptoms consistent with prolonged grief disorder, specialized grief therapy may be indicated [26].

Individual and Contextual Differences in Pet Bereavement

Although grief is universal, its intensity and expression vary according to attachment, coping style, prior losses, developmental stage, cultural beliefs, and available social support [16]. The nature of the relationship is particularly important in companion animal bereavement. For some individuals, a pet is one valued relationship among many; for others, the animal may be a primary attachment figure, daily companion, source of safety, or connection to an earlier life period or deceased family member. Loss may therefore affect not only emotional attachment but also identity, routine, social contact, and purpose. Sudden or traumatic deaths may produce different reactions than anticipated losses following prolonged illness, while euthanasia may add responsibility and moral uncertainty to otherwise expected grief [9, 25].

Cultural and family contexts also shape whether pet grief is expressed openly. Some families regard companion animals as full family members and create rituals similar to those used after human death, whereas others discourage prolonged mourning for an animal. Gender expectations, religious beliefs, prior experiences with death, and attitudes toward animals may further influence whether grief is disclosed or suppressed. Clinicians should therefore avoid assuming either that pet loss is necessarily devastating or that it is inherently minor. Assessment should focus on the meaning of the particular relationship, the circumstances of death, the individual's coping resources, and the degree to which grief disrupts functioning.

Family Communication, Ritual, and Self-Care

Because companion animals frequently occupy roles within family systems, their illness and death may affect several household members simultaneously. Involving family members in age-appropriate end-of-life conversations can reduce confusion and support shared grieving. When children are involved, direct explanations about illness, death, and euthanasia are generally preferable to ambiguous euphemisms such as “put to sleep,” which may create misunderstanding or anxiety [27]. Children may benefit from opportunities to ask questions, say goodbye, draw pictures, write letters, or participate in memorial activities. Adults likewise may benefit from discussing differing reactions to the loss rather than expecting all family members to grieve in the same way or on the same timetable.

Rituals are especially important when a loss is disenfranchised because they create acknowledgment in the absence of widely recognized social practices [22]. Burial or cremation ceremonies, memory boxes, photo albums, written tributes, planting flowers or trees, charitable donations, and sharing stories can provide structure for mourning and reinforce continuing bonds. These practices do not erase grief; instead, they give grief a socially and personally meaningful form. Memorialization may also help shift attention from the final circumstances of illness or euthanasia toward the broader history of affection, companionship, and care.

Basic self-care can support this adjustment. Grief often disrupts sleep, appetite, concentration, motivation, and daily routines. Maintaining nutrition, rest, physical activity, and contact with supportive people can protect functioning during periods of intense distress [23]. Mindfulness, journaling, breathing exercises, and other reflective practices may help individuals notice painful thoughts without treating guilt or self-criticism as unquestioned facts. Such strategies are most useful when they complement, rather than replace, emotional processing and interpersonal support.

Financial and Practical Dimensions of End-of-Life Decisions

End-of-life decisions may also be shaped by practical realities that receive insufficient attention in discussions of grief. Advanced diagnostics, hospitalization, surgery, chemotherapy, medication, and palliative treatment can impose substantial financial demands on families. Owners may subsequently judge themselves harshly if cost influenced treatment choices, even when the available options offered uncertain benefit or risked extending suffering. Financial limitations do not eliminate the emotional significance of the relationship, and clinicians and veterinary professionals should avoid framing treatment decisions in ways that intensify shame. Compassionate shared decision-making considers prognosis, quality of life, treatment burden, caregiver capacity, and financial circumstances together [28].

These practical considerations can become part of the grief narrative after euthanasia. Owners may repeatedly revisit whether another treatment, additional time, or greater financial expenditure would have changed the outcome. Supportive intervention can help distinguish realistic responsibility from retrospective self-blame and can redirect attention toward the totality of caregiving rather than a single end-of-life decision. When euthanasia is selected to prevent

unmanageable suffering, reframing the decision within the values of beneficence, compassion, and responsible caregiving may reduce moral distress while still allowing space for sadness and uncertainty.

Clinical Case Illustrations and Personal Narratives

Clinical case illustrations and personal narratives provide valuable insights into the complexity and diversity of grief experiences following companion animal loss. Although empirical research contributes to the understanding of bereavement processes, individual stories illuminate the emotional, relational, and contextual factors that shape responses to loss. Narrative approaches have long emphasized the importance of personal meaning-making and storytelling as mechanisms through which individuals reconstruct identity and integrate experiences of grief into broader life narratives [25].

Case illustrations also provide opportunities to examine how theoretical concepts such as disenfranchised grief, continuing bonds, meaning reconstruction, and posttraumatic growth manifest in real-world settings. Because grief experiences are highly individualized, these examples should not be interpreted as prescriptive or representative of all bereaved pet owners. Rather, they illustrate common themes that emerge throughout the bereavement process and demonstrate the importance of compassionate support and validation. The following composite cases are based on themes consistently identified in the literature and clinical practice and do not represent actual individuals.

Case Illustration 1: Euthanasia-Related Guilt and Self-Blame

Margaret, a 67-year-old widow, shared her home with Daisy, a 14-year-old Labrador Retriever who had provided companionship following the death of her husband several years earlier. Daisy developed progressive osteoarthritis and eventually was diagnosed with terminal hemangiosarcoma. Despite multiple treatments and palliative interventions, Daisy's quality of life deteriorated significantly. Following extensive discussions with her veterinarian, Margaret elected euthanasia.

Although Margaret understood intellectually that euthanasia represented the most humane option, she experienced persistent guilt and questioned whether she had acted prematurely. She repeatedly replayed the events surrounding Daisy's death and worried that she had "betrayed" her faithful companion. Feelings of responsibility were intensified by the fact that she had actively consented to the euthanasia procedure, creating moral distress and self-doubt.

Margaret's experience illustrates the phenomenon of euthanasia-related guilt described in the literature [9]. Through grief counseling, she gradually reframed euthanasia as an act of compassion rather than abandonment. Cognitive restructuring and meaning-centered interventions helped her recognize that her decision was motivated by love and the desire to prevent suffering. Over time, Margaret was able to maintain positive memories of Daisy while reducing excessive self-blame and integrating the loss into her ongoing life.

Case Illustration 2: Disenfranchised Grief and Social Isolation

Jason, a 32-year-old software engineer, had adopted Milo, a rescue cat, during a period of depression and social isolation. Over the next 10 years, Milo became a central source of companionship and emotional support. Following the cat's unexpected death due to renal failure, Jason experienced profound sadness and difficulty concentrating. However, when he attempted to discuss his grief with coworkers and acquaintances, he encountered dismissive comments such as, "It was only a cat," and "You can always get another one."

These responses caused Jason to suppress his emotions and withdraw from others. He became increasingly isolated and began questioning whether his grief was excessive. Although he longed for understanding, he feared appearing irrational or overly emotional. His experience exemplifies disenfranchised grief, wherein losses are not socially recognized or validated [10].

Participation in an online pet loss support group provided Jason with opportunities to share his experiences with others who understood the significance of the human-animal bond. Through these interactions, he discovered that his emotional responses were common and legitimate. Validation from others reduced feelings of shame and isolation, allowing him to express grief openly and gradually reengage with social relationships. This case highlights the protective role of social support in mitigating the effects of disenfranchisement [8].

Clinical Implications of Case Narratives

Collectively, these case illustrations highlight the diversity and complexity of companion animal bereavement. Themes of attachment, guilt, social validation, meaning reconstruction, continuing bonds, and resilience emerge consistently across experiences. These narratives underscore that grief following the death of a companion animal is neither trivial nor pathological but rather reflects the depth and significance of the human-animal bond.

For mental health professionals, veterinarians, and support networks, these cases emphasize the importance of empathic listening, validation, and individualized interventions. Recognizing the unique challenges associated with companion animal loss allows clinicians to address disenfranchised grief, support adaptive coping, and facilitate healing. Ultimately, understanding personal narratives reinforces a central principle of grief theory: the intensity of sorrow reflects the capacity for love, attachment, and meaningful connection.

Clinical Implications for Mental Health Professionals

Mental health professionals are uniquely positioned to address the complex emotional experiences associated with companion animal loss. Social workers, counselors, psychologists, and marriage and family therapists frequently encounter clients whose grief has been dismissed or misunderstood by others. Therefore, clinicians must recognize companion animal bereavement as a legitimate source of distress and avoid minimizing the significance of these relationships [16].

Validation represents one of the most important therapeutic interventions when working with bereaved pet owners. Empathic listening, emotional presence, and acknowledgment of the significance of the loss help reduce shame and foster trust within the therapeutic relationship. Clinicians should recognize that grief intensity reflects attachment and meaning rather than the species of the deceased. Providing clients with permission to grieve openly may alleviate feelings of isolation and facilitate emotional processing [22].

Assessment should include exploration of the circumstances surrounding the loss, attachment patterns, coping resources, social support, and the presence of guilt associated with euthanasia decisions. Clinicians should also evaluate symptoms of depression, anxiety, traumatic stress, and prolonged grief disorder when emotional distress persists or interferes with functioning [26]. Particular attention should be devoted to individuals experiencing multiple losses, social isolation, preexisting mental health conditions, or significant dependency on companion animals for emotional support.

Evidence-based interventions, including grief counseling, cognitive-behavioral approaches, narrative therapy, and meaning-centered therapies, may facilitate adaptation following pet loss [25]. Narrative approaches are particularly valuable because they allow individuals to reconstruct personal stories and integrate loss into broader life narratives. Cognitive interventions may help challenge irrational beliefs, reduce excessive self-blame, and promote self-compassion. Group counseling and pet loss support groups further provide opportunities for normalization and interpersonal validation.

Mental health professionals should also recognize cultural and spiritual factors that influence mourning practices and meaning-

making. Sensitivity to individual values, religious beliefs, and family systems contributes to culturally responsive and person-centered care. Ultimately, clinicians who acknowledge the legitimacy of companion animal grief help create therapeutic environments in which healing and resilience can emerge.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Companion animal loss represents an important issue for social work practice because of its implications for emotional well-being, family functioning, and quality of life. Social workers practicing in healthcare settings, schools, hospice programs, mental health agencies, and private practice may encounter individuals and families grieving the death of companion animals. Recognizing the significance of these losses aligns with the social work profession's commitment to dignity, worth, empathy, and person-in-environment perspectives [29].

Social workers are particularly well positioned to address disenfranchised grief through advocacy, psychoeducation, and supportive counseling. Educational efforts aimed at increasing public awareness of companion animal bereavement may contribute to greater societal recognition and reduce stigma associated with pet loss. Furthermore, social workers can advocate for bereavement policies, support groups, and interdisciplinary collaborations that acknowledge the importance of the human-animal bond.

Family-centered approaches are equally important because companion animal loss affects multiple members of the household. Children, older adults, and individuals with disabilities may experience unique vulnerabilities that require developmentally and culturally appropriate interventions. Social workers can facilitate communication, encourage rituals and memorialization, and promote resilience within family systems.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although interest in companion animal bereavement has increased substantially over the past several decades, important gaps remain within the literature. Additional longitudinal studies are needed to examine the trajectories of grief following companion animal loss and to identify factors that contribute to resilience or vulnerability to prolonged grief disorder. Research investigating cultural differences in attitudes toward pet loss and mourning practices would further enhance understanding of diverse bereavement experiences.

Future investigations should also evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to address disenfranchised grief, including support groups, telehealth counseling, narrative therapies, and meaning-centered approaches. Given the growing integration of animals into healthcare and therapeutic settings, further research examining grief among service animal handlers, therapy animal partners, and individuals involved in animal-assisted interventions is warranted.

Additionally, increased attention should be devoted to veterinary professionals and the emotional consequences associated with repeated exposure to euthanasia and client grief. Understanding factors associated with compassion fatigue, burnout, and resilience may contribute to improved professional well-being and enhanced quality of care.

Limitations and Future Research

The literature on companion animal bereavement remains limited by frequent reliance on convenience samples, self-report measures, and underrepresentation of culturally diverse populations. National U.S. surveillance does not provide a complete estimate of euthanasia across both shelters and private veterinary practice, and no definitive national percentage describes how many U.S. pet owners experience clinically significant bereavement after pet death. Future longitudinal research should examine grief trajectories, cultural differences, euthanasia-related guilt, service-animal loss, and the effectiveness of support groups, telehealth, narrative interventions, and meaning-centered approaches. Greater attention to veterinary professionals' exposure to euthanasia and client grief is also warranted.

Conclusion

Companion animals occupy unique and deeply meaningful places within human lives, providing companionship, emotional support, and unconditional affection across the lifespan. Consequently, the death of a beloved companion animal often produces profound grief reactions that mirror those observed following the loss of human relationships. The experience of pet loss becomes particularly challenging when grief is disenfranchised and individuals encounter social messages that invalidate their sorrow.

This manuscript has demonstrated that companion animal bereavement is characterized by complex emotional responses influenced by attachment, euthanasia-related guilt, social support, and meaning-making processes. Contemporary grief theories emphasize that healing does not require forgetting or relinquishing bonds with the deceased. Rather, adaptation involves integrating the loss into one's life while preserving meaningful connections and reconstructing personal narratives.

Mental health professionals, social workers, veterinarians, and communities have important roles in recognizing and validating companion animal grief. Through empathic support, evidence-based interventions, and compassionate communication, professionals can help bereaved individuals navigate loss and foster resilience. Increased awareness and societal acknowledgment of companion animal bereavement have the potential to reduce the burden of disenfranchised grief and promote healthier adjustment.

Ultimately, grief reflects the capacity to love. The sorrow experienced following the death of a companion animal is a testament to the profound bonds humans share with the animals who enrich their lives. Recognizing and honoring these relationships affirms not only the significance of companion animals but also the enduring human capacity for attachment, compassion, and healing.

Conflicts of Interest: The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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