Pet Loss and the Elderly

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Introduction

• Growing awareness of the positive psychosocial benefits of companion animals – emotional, social, physical and psychological
• High rate of pet ownership in Australia – ACAC estimated 33 million pets in 2010
• Elderly share a particularly strong bond with their pets (Carmack, 1991)
• Pet Loss is significantly distressing for the elderly (Clement, et al. 2003)
• Meaning of pet loss for the elderly remains relatively unexplored
• Rapidly aging Australian population – 13% of population is aged over 65 year (ABS, 2010)

Hence it is necessary to explore the experiences of pet loss for the elderly to enable effective therapeutic interventions to those bereaved
Research Design

- An in-depth qualitative research design guided by a phenomenological framework
- Semi-structured one-on-one interviews
- Thematic content analysis (Creswell, 2013)

Participants

- 13 individuals (6 males and 7 females)
- Over the age 65 years
- Lost a pet in the last 24 months

Procedure

- Snowballing technique used for recruiting participants
- Semi-structured interviews were audio recorded
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim and all identifying information was replaced with a pseudonym
Data Analysis

✓ Reading for overall impression (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
✓ Themes and sub-themes were identified and data segmentation (Miles & Huberman, 1994)
✓ Data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994)
✓ Data verification – re-examining of themes, triangulation, member checking with 4 participants via telephone calls
✓ Thick description used to increase transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
✓ Comparing researcher’s interpretation and findings to previous literature (Creswell, 2009, 2013)
Findings

Some findings were consistent with previous literature while other were unique. Using thematic analysis the following themes and sub-themes were identified:

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Human-Animal Bond

Importance of Pets

- Companionship (Carmack, 1991; Winefield, et al., 2008)
- Emotional substitutes for absent family members (Butts, 2001)
- Fulfill need for nurturance and desire to be needed
- Motivate owners to be healthy and exercise (McColgan & Schofield, 2007)
- Physical protection (McConnell, et al., 2011)
- Emotional comfort (Butts, 2001)
- Socialisation (Rijken & Beek, 2011)

“It’s that quality of friendship I’m talking about, you know, my best buddy, someone that gives me a reason to get up in the morning, a reason to put a smile on my face, a reason to just go on in life. A pet is always there for you, no matter what.”
Human-Animal Bond
Attachment and Relationship with Pet

- Significant family members; friend and child (Carmack, 1991; Toray, 2004)
- Particularly close during stress and ill-health (Sharkin & Bahrick, 1990)
- Human-animal bond can have more depth than the bonds between humans (Sharkin & Knox, 2003)

For Ronald, his dog “...was a very good friend. He was just part of the family. We looked after him and he looked after us. It’s two ways, kind of a symbiotic relationship.”
Experience of Pet Loss

Grief Reactions

- Physical: crying, fatigue, sleep and appetite disturbance (Clements et al., 2003)
- Social: isolation, less motivated to socialise
- Cognitive: lack of concentration, preoccupation with deceased pet, hallucinations, confusion (Worden, 2009)
- Emotional: shock, sadness, relief, guilt
- Spiritual: questioning meaning of life and death (Wilson & Netting, 1987)
- Comparable to human loss (Roach & Nieto, 1997)

“Dollar [dog] was my everything and when she was gone, I mourned her, yes, like a mother would for a child.”
Experience of Pet Loss

Intensity and Duration

- Intensity and duration is dependant on:
  - Number of years of pet ownership
  - Time elapsed since pet’s death
  - Availability of social support
  - Form of death (natural, euthanasia, accidental)
  - Type of death (sudden versus expected)

(Archer & Winchester, 1994)

- Pre-existing pet

“I still miss Duke [dog] even now. I’ll be like this every day of the week, forever, because he was my puppy and I loved him. He’s just mummy’s little boy.”
Coping with Loss
Strategies

- Crying and talking to loved ones
- Reminders – scrapbook, household item, photographs (Clement et. al., 2003)
- Replacement pet – not practical because of housing restrictions, financial and health issues, age factor (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988)
- Rituals – burial ceremony, ashes in urns, building shrines (Gage & Holcomb, 1991)

“My wife and daughter stood around me, I dug it and everything like that, put her [cat] ashes in and said a prayer, a catholic prayer, and thanked God for the beautiful experiences she had given us...”
Coping with Loss

Social Support

- Social support aided in coping with loss (Weissman, 1991)
- Some amount of reluctance to talk to others (Durkin, 2009; Toray, 2004)
- Social support obtained only from close family members and those who currently or previously owned a pet
- Additional support from professionals – veterinarians, crematorium staff, psychologists

“We got cards from the family; and friends and neighbours, when they heard, only said they were sorry and that was it.”
Limitations

- Sampling bias – extremely distressed individuals missed or included those with strong experiences
- Predominantly dog owners

Future Directions

1) Longitudinal study – progress over time
2) Incorporate other animals like rabbits, birds, fish, mice
3) Specific age groups with the elderly group
4) Cultural and ethnic differences


