Transforming Trauma

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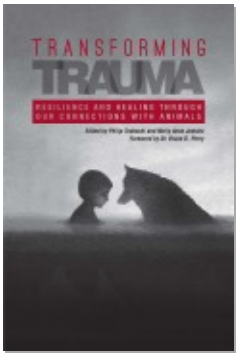

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CHAPTER 13

Loss, Grief, and Bereavement in the Context of Human-Animal Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Our relationships with animals can be a cause of trauma or a buffer against it. As this chapter will show, most human-animal interaction (HAI) research has explored the benefits of interacting with animals, especially in our homes and in therapeutic settings. Less scholarly work has focused on the effects for people when pets, therapy and service animals, wildlife, livestock, or captive animals are lost or, more specifically, pass away.

This chapter discusses trauma in the context of grief, while exploring the role of other animals in supporting humans through periods of loss. In particular, we consider the special challenges of losing an animal companion, including the social devaluation and stigma of pet loss, as well as the meaningful place of animals in the lives of vulnerable people and what the loss of those relationships brings. Further, we discuss how animals can support those in bereavement, as well as how the loss of a beloved animal can be in and of itself traumatic, especially if disparaged or minimized. Additionally, we consider recently publicized traumatic losses of certain wild and captive animals, and how their deaths galvanized thousands of people who never knew them, becoming a vehicle for grieving, as well as political and often racial commentary. Finally, through clinical insight and case examples from our experiences as counselors in both veterinary and

academic settings, we discuss potential ways to frame these experiences so as to not only protect those involved from enduring further trauma, but to also make loss an opportunity for growth.

TRAUMA IN THE CONTEXT OF LOSS

As discussed at length throughout this book, traumatic events are often so far outside previous or typical experience that one is often forced to revise his or her worldview in response. Some such events seem obvious (i.e., shootings, assault, watching your house burn to the ground). And yet, people react differently to similar misfortune. What is devastating to one can be inspiring and motivating to another.

Generally speaking, a traumatic event is one that overwhelms the person's perceived resources to cope with it. It is the kind of experience that can alter our memory functioning, and cause us to be hypervigilant of potential indicators of peril or misery. In small doses, attention to such warning signals can be protective. However, when they turn chronic or overwhelming, they become unmanageable and detrimental to a person's overall quality of life. For example, the traumatized individual may find that ordinary, everyday events or stimuli—such as a helicopter flying overhead, a comment heard on television, or a song playing on the radio—can trigger the traumatic memory in full force, disrupting normal activity, as well as mood (McCann & Pearlman, 2015).

The distinctly emotional, and often traumatic, pain that comes with losing someone we love (whether human or animal) is a universal experience, although grieving itself is highly subjective (Clements, DeRanieri, Vigil, & Benasutti, 2004; Saavedra Perez et al., 2015; Shear, 2015; Simon, 2013); an individual will process loss according to his or her own lens, including personal histories, supportive networks, characteristics of the lost relationship, and preferred or customary ways of coping (both positive and negative). The experience of grieving also typically varies depending on cultural upbringing, race/ethnicity, gender, economic resources, and religious or spiritual background.

Further, the manner in which we lose or say goodbye to someone (or not, in some cases) is also important. Some people will lose a loved one who gradually grows old and passes peacefully, while others will experience the shock of an unexpected or sudden loss, such as the suicide, homicide, or unexpected accident or illness of a friend or family member (Clements et

al., 2004). Other significant losses, such as through divorce or separation, the end of friendship, the regretful relinquishment of companion animals to shelters, or pets running away from home, may also be profoundly traumatic for individuals, both human and animal alike. Taken together, these myriad factors often influence opinions regarding how long the grieving process should last. Generally, strong emotional response within the first year of loss is typical, although some research indicates that a two-year timeframe is still considered to be a very "normal" grieving process (Simon, 2013).

However long the process lasts may not be as important as the integration of experience, which is highly individualized and expressive of the grieving individual (Corr & Corr, 2012). Most grief counselors and clinicians, in an effort to respect differences in how people experience and manage grief, hesitate to assign specific timeframes to such duration, but they do consider the level of negative impact that a grief experience is having on the patient's or client's life. Indeed, the full weight of experiencing loss is often substantial, and impacts a person in all aspects of living: mentally, spiritually, physically, socially, and financially (Corr & Corr, 2012). Grief changes the way we have been living life, regardless of whether the loss is of relationship, of job, of plans and dreams for the future, or of loved ones through death or other permanent separation. After loss, we are now faced with the absence of someone or something we expected would be present in our lives for a long time, possibly forever. Consequently, our perspectives and the stories we tell ourselves will (need to) shift, often in rather abrupt, unpredictable, and complex ways.

Moreover, significant grief and loss will nearly always adjust (or shatter, even if temporarily) a person's sense of self and reality, as the loved one or activity is no longer present in day-to-day life. Assumptions and routines may be altered or halted, which, depending on the circumstance and type of loss, can cause the bereaved to question one's purpose in life and even one's very existence (Shear, 2015). People may also grapple with the reality and uncertainty of their own mortality, whether it happens today or years in the future, when working through their feelings of loss.

COMPLICATED GRIEF

When grief turns from a natural, although difficult, response to a more complex experience leading to long-term challenges or adverse health effects, a person may be suffering from what is known as *complicated grief*.

A traumatic loss can lead to expressions of complicated grief, which primarily include intrusive or uncontrollable thoughts about the deceased or individual who is no longer present (Saavedra Perez et al., 2015; Shear, 2015; Simon, 2013; Supiano & Luptak, 2013). In other words, a person with complicated grief tends to ruminate on the loss, and his or her pain associated with it. These thoughts and memories may take on a repetitive or cyclical pattern and can significantly lessen the bereaved person's quality of life, causing increased suffering or negative consequences to occur (Clements et al., 2004; Shear, 2015; Simon, 2013). For example, grieving may be so intense as to cause someone to stay home and miss multiple days of work due to feeling overwhelmed and unable to function. As a result, the person might experience the additional losses of their job, financial security, relationships with valued colleagues, and sense of professional purpose or identity.

One of the primary theoretical perspectives underlying complicated grief is that of Bowlby's Theory of Attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Within his work, Bowlby summarizes that it is the level of perceived attachment between individuals that dictates the strength of that particular bond (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Hence, it may be suggested that with stronger bonds or attachments comes greater risk of complicated grieving when the bond is broken or lost (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Brown & Symons, 2016).

As suggested below, the levels of perceived attachment between humans and their pets may arguably be greater than that between humans in certain cases, thus highlighting the potential for complicated grief when a beloved animal is lost (Brown & Symons, 2016). Those who are socially isolated or who have come to depend on their pets for comfort and companionship may find themselves doubly bereaved when the loss of their animal companion compounds other emotional pains.

The following case study exemplifies how a complicated grief response to animal loss can manifest, especially in cases where the bereaved individual was isolated socially, and relied heavily on her pet for support and relationship.

CASE STUDY

Cindy is a 32-year-old working professional who finds community in regularly attending religious services, as well as bringing her dog, Sage, to the dog park every day after work. Cindy spends many hours at the office, and is fortunate enough to be able to

bring Sage to work with her. In fact, Sage goes almost everywhere that Cindy does and serves as an important and constant companion in her life. Although she gets out for religious services, Cindy is busy, and her social circle is fairly small.

One day, Cindy has an important meeting at the office and is unable to bring Sage with her. When she returns home, she is shocked and dismayed to find Sage lying on the floor, not breathing. Cindy rushes to the veterinarian, but Sage's life unfortunately cannot be saved. Immediately, Cindy is distraught with all-encompassing grief, unable to grasp that her best friend and primary companion is suddenly gone. She blames herself for leaving Sage on that day, and feels desperately alone as she continuously contemplates what she could and "should" have done differently.

Eventually, months pass and Cindy hardly leaves her home, much less her bed. Social isolation, changed routines, and longed-for and painful memories of Sage have collectively decreased her quality of life and engagement in the world. She has used up her time off from work and is late on deadlines, while the caliber of her work and work ethic suffers immensely. Soon, Cindy's employer fires her due to her diminished work performance. This only makes her feel worse and more isolated, as she refuses visitors over the shame of her grief and losing her job. As a result, Cindy starts to fall behind on her bills (including rent), and her health suffers due to inconsistent and unhealthy eating patterns.

Depending on an individual's grief reaction, it can be very normal to stay in bed for days, if not weeks, during the acute phase of grief or period of time directly after a loss event (Diminich & Bonanno, 2014). However, in the case study above, Cindy's prolonged duration of grieving over Sage's passing led to increasing complications. Notably, a grief reaction can be frequently compounded with other previous experiences of loss, and whether or not the individual has adequately processed these. It is reasonable, then, to assume that Cindy may have been struggling from compounded loss, with potential factors such as a recent divorce, loss of a parent, or failure to be promoted at work, underlying her relatively intense response.

When working with clients who are experiencing complicated grief, it is important to first ensure that their basic needs of living are being met. As such, checking on eating and sleeping habits, safety, shelter, and

hygiene can be important. In the beginning, small tasks can feel like major accomplishments.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ANIMALS, ANIMAL BONDING WHEN GRIEVING, AND ANIMAL LOSS

Increasingly, studies and polling have indicated that humans believe their pets serve integral and meaningful roles as members of the family, including as surrogate children (Cohen, 2002; Field, Orsini, Gavish, & Packman, 2009; Harris Poll, 2015; Parker, 2016). Likewise, research shows that pets often improve the functioning and quality of our lives, including overall emotional well-being, physical health and activity, and social connections with others (Fine, 2015; Suthers-McCabe, 2001). Indeed, many turn to their pets as sources of secure and reliable connection, often giving them human-like characteristics (see "surrogate children" above) in order to fulfill this need (Field et al., 2009).

Trends such as these suggest an increasing attachment (Bowlby, 1969/1982) expression among humans for our pets and other animals. Pet owners often expend significant time, money, and other resources to keep their animal companions happy and comfortable (Cain, 1985; Josephson, 2015). Likewise, many people form strong attachments to animals that do not live with them. In a study of how clients at a large, urban veterinary teaching hospital view their social network, both men and women often included their friends' pets as part of their support system (Cohen, 1998). As we discuss later in this chapter, these attachments may even extend to wildlife, as well as livestock and captive animals.

Importantly, such connections with companion, emotional support, therapy and service animals, as well as those we merely observe in nature or through media, can provide unique healing to those suffering with the effects of loss. For example, in cases of human loss, our pets can offer us a comforting presence and strong impetus to begin moving through the stages of grief. As pet owners, we typically structure our day by the needs and routines of our animal companions. We wake, feed, walk, touch, play with, talk to, and express affection for our pets, all of which can be incredibly comforting and uplifting. What is more, providing care for our animal companions grounds us in what is still good and important in life. In essence, animals may force us to take the first necessary steps toward healing and recovery.

However, when a beloved animal passes away or is lost, it is the absence of these very characteristics that often pains us the most. The trauma of losing a pet is profoundly life-changing for many, especially given the length and depth of most human-pet relationships. Increasing evidence has shown that the death of a companion animal can be just as severe and prolonged as the death of a human counterpart or loved one (Clements, Benasutti, & Carmone, 2003). Particular challenges can arise when an animal passes away due to his or her role as innocent and dependent in the relationship/family, as well as the person's role as primary guardian responsible for the animal's survival and well-being (Podrazik, Shackford, Becker, & Heckert, 2000). Feeling responsible for the loss or losing one's purpose of caregiving likely complicates the bereavement response of a grieving individual (Lagoni, Butler, & Hetts, 1994), especially if the animal was ill or injured and required the owner to administer at-home medical treatment prior to death.

Likewise, the loss of an animal companion can disrupt our daily schedules and routines, our social and family lives, our degree of loneliness, and even our sense of meaning regarding getting up in the morning or leaving the house (as observed in the case study with Cindy and Sage) (Lagoni et al., 1994). Importantly, a potential risk for retraumatization and complicated grieving exists when the pain that comes from losing an animal is discounted, ridiculed, or disregarded by others. Feeling uncertainty or guilt regarding the unique decision to euthanize a pet can also heighten any trauma associated with the overall loss (Adams, Bonnett, & Meek, 2000).

THE IMPACTS OF COMPANION ANIMAL LOSS FOR SELECT VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Elders

Older adults in American society and throughout the world often suffer unique social disadvantages. They may live without human companions, physical touch, or structure in their daily lives. Children move away, partners and friends die, and chronic illness, pain, and disability make going out difficult. Financial constraints can also limit social activity. As a result, older people frequently become isolated from their broader community (Valtorta & Hanratty, 2012).

Pets and animal relationships can help fill many of these social needs. For example, pets curl up with you on the couch, and are excited to see

you when you return home or rise in the morning. Moreover, elders who live alone can talk to, and be affectionate with, their companion animal. Research indicates that interacting with animals helps alleviate loneliness and supports mental health in older adults (Banks & Banks, 2002; Fick, 1993), with one study finding that adults over 60 years of age who had a pet were 36% less likely to report feeling lonely than non-pet owners (Stanley, Conwell, Bowen, & Van Orden, 2013).

To date, research has also indicated the positive health impacts of pets for elders, including reduced agitation and other symptoms associated with dementia (Bernabei et al., 2013; Johnson & Meadows, 2002). Dogs, in particular, may provide the impetus for mobility and routine, and their need for exercise and nourishment presents older adults with a purposeful, healthy outlet. In fact, studies show that people who walk their dogs get more exercise and even walk faster (Curl, Bibbo, & Johnson, 2017). Likewise, one long-term study found a relationship between current or previous pet ownership and improved cardiovascular disease survival among older adults (Chowdhury, Nelson, Jennings, Wing, & Reid, 2017), while another noted increased eating and better nutrition in those with Alzheimer's disease when in the presence of aquarium fish (Edwards & Beck, 2002).

After losing a pet (primarily via moves to assisted living environments or through the pet's death), older adults of a certain age, health status, or ability level may feel it is inappropriate to adopt another. Indeed, while walking is beneficial for both people and dogs, some research indicates that dog walking among older adults is not very common (Thorpe et al., 2006). Since elders cannot predict the future, and may not know of anyone who could care for the pet after they become ill or pass away, adopting again may be daunting. For many older adults, this can mean that when a pet dies, it is the end of their pet keeping life and the myriad benefits that come with animal companionship. While some older people may feel relieved to shed the responsibility of pet keeping, for others, the consequences of losing that affectionate focus may be severe.

Children

Pet loss may also have a significant effect on children, as relationships with animals are often monumental for their healthy development (Melson, 2001). In one of the author's clinical experience, the death of a pet is often a child's first exposure to losing someone close to them. While US society

is generally more open about death than it used to be, many parents may still be reluctant to openly discuss the impending or actual loss of a family pet with their children due to discomfort or uncertainty of what to say. For example, parents may conceal the pet's death until the child returns home from camp, or downplay the circumstances of the pet's death to make it easier for the child to understand and cope with the loss.

Additionally, parents may remain stoic for the perceived benefit of their children, which could inadvertently leave the children feeling alone in their grief, and that the life and loss of their pet is not important. In such cases, children may also wonder how people would react if something tragic happened to them, and could be concerned because they seem to be more emotionally distraught about the loss than other members of the family (Fudin & Cohen, 1988). Overall, such research and clinical findings demonstrate the importance of having forthright, age-appropriate discussions with children about animal loss in order to assist them through the necessary grieving process.

Traumatized Individuals

People with existing trauma histories may also have a particularly difficult time coping with the loss of a pet. Trauma has long-lasting effects, which animals can help relieve. For example, veterans often rely on service dogs for guidance and protection, both at home and in public settings (Brulliard, 2018). Other individuals who have experienced trauma simply appreciate the comfort of safe touch, undemanding companionship, and the opportunity to socialize with ease that comes from being in the presence of trusted animals. The loss of such important social support not only causes grief, but may also trigger setback for people already coping with the present threat or aftermath of trauma.

Of note, animals can also be the cause of trauma. An individual may have been hurt by an animal or witnessed one being harmed or injured. In fact, accounts of people reporting symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTS) after seeing and hearing their animals in pain have been documented (Watters, Ruff, & Jamora, 2013). In addition, forced separations from pets—whether through the trauma of natural disasters or family violence, for example—only intensify the devastation of losing that animal relationship. It is hard to accept that any one of us—young or old—may face unexpected changes in living arrangements (including homelessness) that require the relinquishment of a pet.

Attachment to pets can be so strong that people are often reluctant to leave their animals behind when natural disaster strikes, even if staying with them greatly endangers their own safety (Hunt, Al-Awadi, & Johnson, 2008). Likewise, adolescents living on the street are more likely to engage in treatment if provisions are made for their pets (Rew, 2000). And people faced with the threat or actual harm to pets by an abuser (i.e., in select cases of domestic violence and child maltreatment) often choose to stay in personally abusive situations rather than abandon their pet by fleeing to a nearby shelter that does not allow animals. Encouragingly, the Urban Resource Institute in New York City recently made national news for opening three shelters that include pet-friendly apartments for individuals and families escaping abuse at home (Newman, 2016). Special attention and accommodations must be paid to those with preexisting psychological injury who face further traumatization through the loss of a pet or other animal to whom they are attached.

CULTURAL STIGMA OF GRIEVING THE LOSS OF ANIMALS

The loss of pets continues to be devalued as compared to human death, despite ample evidence demonstrating the often important role that animals play in our lives. Further, there exists a relative lack of research concerning specific impacts of losing a pet, which is unexpected given the growing recognition of close human-animal relationships as central to many people's health and well-being. While mental health professionals and scholars have been working in the HAI field for over 50 years, research pertaining to the effects of animal loss among veterinarians, social workers, and other relevant practitioners also remains limited.

Some faced with the loss of a beloved animal have recently fared better through increasingly supportive resources and networks. Today, there are now sympathy cards specifically designed for pet loss, online supportive chat groups, and opportunities to connect with others who are grieving via social media. Recently one man made a post through Facebook, asking for fellow dog lovers/owners to join him at the beach for his dog's last visit before euthanasia. As a result, hundreds of people and their dogs—many of them strangers—showed up, offering their support through signs and warm embraces. A video recording shows the man expressing his gratitude for those who came to the beach, as well as for the many more who wrote to him from around the world (ABC News, 2016). Furthermore, select

veterinary settings offer mental health care services to clients in an effort to help those coping with animal illness and injury, natural and unexpected death, and the unique decisions and emotions concerning pet euthanasia.

Yet, even with these promising developments, people who have lost their pets too often feel pressure, even subtly, to justify the depth of their pain and grief, or even of the connection once shared with the animal itself. This process of advocating for something dear that will never return, all while receiving support that lacks in comparison to reactions to human loss, can be incredibly heartbreaking. Additionally, depending on the animal's species, those who are grieving may experience a response that reflects a further hierarchy of loss, such as, "I could understand being so upset if it were a dog, but a bird?" Others may also find their wish to be buried alongside their pet's remains halted by legal restrictions, although New York State has just recently allowed pet ashes to be buried in human caskets (Maslin, 2016). According to the Green Burial Society (Green, 2017), a handful of states have introduced bills to allow for joint burial, but most of those few are either currently pending or have failed to pass.

In the United States today, many do not experience death or the normalization of the death process on a regular basis. Thus, clients may have an underlying uncertainty or dread when faced with an impending death, regardless of whether this death is of a human or companion animal. When a death occurs, many cultures and communities have a prescribed way of memorializing a grief experience and beginning the steps to process through a loss. When faced with the loss of a companion animal, some people face no cultural norm for pet memorialization. In some cases, they may feel guilt or shame for even considering it to be a devastation or trauma on par with the loss of human life (Turner, 2003).

The presence of guilt may also be strong when difficult euthanasia decisions need to be made; indeed, this may be the only or first situation where an individual is called upon to make such a permanent and heartbreaking choice about ending the life of someone he or she loves. There appears to be a lack of scientific evidence regarding the impact of euthanasia decisions on the bereavement process (Podrazik et al., 2000). It has been historically presented that having to process through a euthanasia decision and procedure may cause significant emotional distress, including depression, guilt, and anxiety (Adams et al., 2000; Podrazik et al., 2000).

Although research is limited in this area, it is the authors' experience that guilt plays a strong role in the grief experienced by pet owners. Anecdotally, there are often questions and personal turmoil regarding

making the right choice or whether it is the appropriate time to move forward with euthanasia. Understandably, many want to hold on to their companion animal for as long as possible. After their animal has passed, some may believe that they killed their pet or, conversely, that they waited too long to act, both of which can cause people to internalize the pain and blame themselves. However, a common and helpful reframe may be to view euthanasia as a truly humane gift that we can provide to our beloved animal companions, one that reduces their pain and suffering without causing or prolonging distress.

Given these unique factors, it may be even more important for those grieving the chronic illness, death (both actual and anticipated), and loss of a companion animal to receive appropriate support through their communities or via professional intervention. With specific and proper training, mental health and other helping professionals—such as social workers, therapists, and counselors—can guide those experiencing pain and grief through critical decision making (i.e., regarding the medical treatment and euthanasia of a companion animal); memorialization, burial, and cremation; normalization of the loss experience; and reflective listening focusing on life review (or the thoughts and memories of the pet throughout their lifetime), including other ways to conceptualize the loss and its meaning for them**.** The bereavement or trauma experienced by the loss of a companion animal is profound and impactful, and should always be considered as such by any helping professional or practice.

THE LOSS OF A WORKING ANIMAL

The involvement and potential benefits of animals in healing applications for humans in distress is well documented. Pets, as well as service and therapy animals, increasingly assist people with disabilities, comfort those traumatized by personal and large-scale disaster, and provide cheer when times are too hard to bear (Brown & Katcher, 1997; Yorke, 2008). Recently, increasing evidence has shown that animals present a form of perceived unconditional love and authentic support to the homes and facilities in which they live and work (Bryan et al., 2014; Clements et al., 2003; Suthers-McCabe, 2001), including a nonjudgmental presence that can be crucial for helping professionals foster rapport and therapeutic benefit for clients through animal assisted intervention (AAI). Notably, the loss of an

AAI service or therapy animal can greatly affect not only his or her handler, but also all those whom the animal is trained to help.

Service Animals

Service animals (either dogs or miniature horses) are trained to assist someone with a disability (either physical or psychiatric) by performing specific tasks that the person would not otherwise be able to do alone, such as opening doors, retrieving medication, and alerting to the onset of a panic attack. One service animal can impact many lives and even help foster relationships between people. For example, people with service animals have reported that more people speak to them, and engage in more topics of conversation, when they are with their service animal (Eddy, Hart, & Boltz, 1988; Mader, Hart, & Bergin, 1989). According to handler Bob Vogel, when he is with his service dog, Schatzie, conversations with others are improved: "Trite comments like 'no speeding' and 'you are such an inspiration' are replaced by compliments about your beautiful dog and its stellar obedience" (Vogel, 2014, para. 1). Vogel adds that Schatzie wakes his (able-bodied) daughter from bad dreams, and often joins the two of them in mobility events. Overall, it is important to note that, while service animals help their handlers execute critical tasks, they are not mere "tools"; in addition to helping the person with a disability navigate through the world, service animals also provide comfort and, as described above, attract friendly company (Mader et al., 1989).

Losing a relationship with a loyal and affectionate companion who provides constant support—both vital and emotional—can devastate. Large breed service dogs who are able to pull a wheelchair or navigate through city sidewalks typically need to retire by age ten, after a working life of seven to eight years (Finke, 2010). Service dog retirement often leads to painful separation or a change in the previous human-animal relationship (Fischler, 2014).

Additionally, once a service dog retires and becomes a pet without legal recognition, it may become subject to housing rules that forbid pets, potentially leading to a need to rehome the dog. Even if dogs can stay in the family, they may be confused about the change in their role and relationship with their person (e.g., being left behind at walk time could be puzzling or potentially stressful) (Fischler, 2014). A group of experienced service dog handlers recently described what led them to retire service animals with whom they felt close, and how hard the process was

to accept (Fischler, 2014). Becky Barnes Davidson, partnered with her Golden retriever, Rowan, explains, "People who don't work with a guide don't understand the depth of emotions we share with them. A pet dog isn't going to retire. When you say goodbye to a pet it's one thing, but a guide who has been with you 24 hours a day and has traveled everywhere with you is a lot different" (Fischler, 2014, para. 51).

Whether a retired service dog stays with the handler as a pet or moves to a new home, eventually there will be a permanent separation when the animal passes. Vogel described his painful discovery that Schatzie had incurable cancer with perhaps hours to live, by saying: "Surgery was out—I wouldn't put her through that kind of trauma. I was at the point that every dog person dreads" (Vogel, 2014, para. 6). Notably, Vogel chose euthanasia to prevent or limit any further discomfort or distress for Schatzie. However, judging from his self-described sobbing for hours after losing her, that choice was a heartbreaking one for him to have to make.

Therapy Animals

Working as an AAI practitioner to help enrich the lives of others can be an incredibly rewarding experience. Many individuals have an underlying passion for both humans and animals when they enter AAI practice. Few clinicians, however, have considered the powerful impact of losing their therapeutic animal partner, and continuing their practice alone, after bonding and working closely together as a team with clients. In the case study, we describe such an experience, told from the perspective of one of this chapter's authors.

CASE STUDY

It was just another day of work at my local equine organization, and the morning was sunny and crisp. Per usual, I was checking the herd before partnering with a selected horse, Wilma, to help guide a family therapy session with clients. Wilma was a beautiful choice for this family due to her rock solid nature, comforting presence, and patience. She was a "go-to" for many challenging families, as well as children with attachment concerns and complex diagnoses. In particular, Wilma did not typically present with discomfort when heavy human emotion or raised voices characterized a session. This family struggled with two children who

expressed difficulty concentrating and were easily distracted. The parents had large levels of tension between them and often became frustrated when trying to engage with each other or their children.

To my dismay, when I went to find Wilma that morning, she was lying down in the field, not moving. She had passed at some point overnight. Unfortunately, the cause and circumstances of her death were unknown, but raised concern as she was not an extremely old horse. I was consumed with my own grief over the loss of Wilma, as I had been growing as a clinician with her for over four years, and we had come to trust each other. She was my friend. After the initial shock, I realized that in 20 minutes the family was about to arrive, expecting to work with her. How then, would this situation be handled?

In what follows we describe several clinical considerations for properly managing situations such as those described in the above case study. That is, how AAI practitioners may be gentle with themselves and their own feelings of grief, while properly supporting their clients in coping with the loss of a therapy animal through careful preparation and necessary precautions:

1. At the start of therapy with clients, begin therapeutic rapport building with a discussion of endings. Even if the clinician is not talking about death, per se, there may be times when an animal may not be available to participate in a session. For example, the animal may be sick, injured, or simply not in the mood to participate that day (i.e., showing signs of anxiety, fatigue, annoyance, withdrawal); whatever the reason may be, the animal's preferences should be respected. In preparation of such situations, AAI clinicians should create therapeutic interventions that do not include the animal, such as biofeedback or mood/feeling inventories that use animals as examples.
2. Have a plan implemented should a medical emergency happen with the therapy animal partner. Whether AAI involves a canine, horse, or smaller animal, being ready in an urgent or stressful situation is extremely important. One's rational mind can become overwhelmed during shock or crisis, making an

existing, documented plan to address the animal's well-being and client concern essential. For example, have veterinarian contact information available at all times, and write down the "steps" to take for assessment of the animal's condition.

3. Have conversations ahead of time with clients to let them know what the steps may be in case of an animal medical emergency during session or, less urgently, if the AAI animal partner cannot attend session that day. Having these conversations with clients in a manner that supports a healthy processing experience for them can help integrate their work into practice by modeling it yourself. Important components of these client discussions will be to promote creation or engagement of healthy coping skills. Reflecting on past losses may also be useful in helping clients prepare for future medical emergencies involving either their human or animal loved ones.
4. Take time to consider what memorialization and euthanasia options might look like when the time comes. Although it may be extremely difficult to think about the loss of a beloved companion and therapeutic partner, this process is very important. Being ready with one's own assessment of animal suffering and what memorialization to pursue can reduce the amount of anxiety (and plausibly panic) during a crisis or emergency.
5. Carefully consider the level of disclosure with clients in the event that a therapy animal becomes ill, is injured, or dies outside of their presence. This will, of course, vary depending upon the client's particular situation. Such questions as, "How will you hold your own heart throughout the grieving process, and hold the heart of your client in a clinically appropriate way?" may be particularly pertinent for practitioners. If the therapy animal is also the clinician's family pet, this may be even more important to consider, as personal grief and impact will be pervasive. Additionally, when clinicians integrate their own companion animal into their clinical identity and professional self, their clients will likely grieve the impact of this loss. Clients may mourn in unhealthy ways due to their coping mechanisms and diagnostic influence—the very reasons they came to therapy in the first place.

6. Have a "back-up" plan. Should something happen to the animal, know how clients might be contacted and informed. Additionally, be prepared to engage with the client on your own, without the assistance of a therapy animal.
7. Evaluate whether or not to cancel sessions due to personal distress or the need to support other companion animals and family members. A clinician who forces himself or herself to engage in work while facing his or her own intense grief may be doing a disservice to themselves and their clients. Thus, taking time for self-care is not only essential for the therapist, but may model the importance of doing so for the client(s). Furthermore, other animals who shared their lives with the deceased or ill therapy animal may likely be experiencing their own sense of loss and grief, so it would be inappropriate to ask them to "stand-in" or engage in therapeutic work with a client. Only if the clinician feels they are able do so safely and professionally should sessions continue.

MOURNING FOR WILDLIFE, LIVESTOCK, AND CAPTIVE ANIMALS

While the loss of pets or working animals touches the lives of those who knew and loved them well, the publicized mistreatment or killing of lesser known animals in the wild, in captivity, or on factory farms (e.g., through hunting, poaching, slaughter, etc.) often cut just as deep, and cause a number of reactions from hundreds, if not millions, of people. In this section, we discuss these various reactions in the cases of Cecil (a wild lion) and Harambe (a captive gorilla), and the complexity of grieving the loss of these particular animals.

On July 1, 2015, a "trophy" hunter shot (with an arrow) and killed a lion, who normally lived in a protected sanctuary, on private land. Cecil was a well-known lion to researchers and the public alike. Once the hunter's name was released, reporters, animal lovers, activists, and the courts pursued him with outrage, thereby forcing the closure of his dental practice. Cecil became a worldwide concern, with over 695,000 social media hits and approximately 94,000 hits in the editorial media between July 1 and September 30, 2015 (Macdonald, Jacobsen, Burnham, Johnson, &

Loverage, 2016). The loss of Cecil was felt on a profound level for people all across the globe.

Much like Cecil, another tragic shooting in 2016 demonstrated that the death of an animal, even one previously unfamiliar, can be traumatizing for those who witnessed it, those who read about it, and those who were affected by the conversation and symbols that came of it. Harambe, a 17-year-old endangered lowland gorilla, was the pride of the Cincinnati Zoo. On May 28, a 3-year-old boy climbed a fence and fell into the moat surrounding the gorilla exhibit. Much to the concern of onlookers, Harambe proceeded to drag the child around the enclosure. People had varying opinions regarding Harambe's behavior, and the motivation behind it. Despite their great affection for the gorilla and his potential valuable role in replenishing the species, the zookeepers felt the need to end Harambe's life in order to protect the child. Since Harambe's interaction with the child took place in front of dozens of zoo patrons, video surfaced early. Within hours, the public had turned on both the zoo and the child's parents as responsible for the tragedy. In an outpouring of rage and grief, social media commenters accused the parents of failing to adequately supervise their child (McPhate, 2016a).

Harambe's death deeply distressed both eyewitnesses and people who learned of it later. Onlookers worried about what might happen with the boy, but they also felt sorrow for the gorilla. Brittany Nicely, a mother who happened to be present with her family, posted online, "Witnessing this situation and hearing them shoot him has been one of the most horrific things I have ever been a part of" (Shammas, 2016, para. 6).

The staff of both the zoo where Harambe was raised as a young gorilla, and the one where he lived and died, needed support. One zookeeper remarked, "We're the ones who took the loss on this . . . it doesn't affect anyone as much as it does the people here at the zoo" (McPhate, 2016b, para. 32). The director of Harambe's original zoo, Jerry Stones, who had raised Harambe nearly all of his life, was perhaps the most grief-stricken (Bult, 2016): "An old man can cry, too . . . Harambe was my heart. It's like losing a member of the family" (para. 5).

In addition, the large-scale grieving response to the deaths of Harambe and Cecil also triggered other forms of heartache and anger, particularly in regard to race and racial tensions. For example, for some in the Black Lives Matter movement and other social justice communities, the outpouring of grief and media coverage for Cecil and Harambe felt disproportionately

large (and thus disrespectful and hurtful) in comparison to the concern over the many recent and tragic killings of black men, women, and youth by police officers. A tweet from Roxane Gay, a renowned Haitian American writer, professor, and commentator, exemplified much of these sorts of feelings: "I'm personally going to start wearing a lion costume when I leave my house so if I get shot, people will care" (Adams, 2015).

At the same time, much of the news and social media backlash against those grieving Harambe and Cecil criticized or disparaged the legitimacy of these emotional reactions, thereby echoing common stigmas associated with animal loss (i.e., "People are dying. PEOPLE"; "It's a gorilla, get over it") (Blatchford, 2016; Young, 2015). Not surprisingly, political commentators on both sides of the aisle used these particular animal deaths for their own purposes, and much painful and, in some cases, racist debate ensued. Some in the media proposed that people may be more vocal about the death of an animal than that of a black person because doing so is relatively apolitical. According to Joshua Adams (2015), a writer with the *Huffington Post*, "There's a huge risk in saying #BlackLivesMatter, on social media or elsewhere. There's zero risk in mourning a lion. Even if we don't agree with one or the other or both, let's stop acting like we don't know exactly why we talk about certain issues and not others" (para. 10).

While Adams' point is well taken, many would argue that expressing pain about the loss of an animal, particularly our own as previously discussed here, is not always safe (at least emotionally) or met with respect and understanding either. This heated debate, while certainly useful in many respects, undoubtedly reinforced or triggered further grieving on both "sides" of the argument.

FOSTERING RESILIENCE AFTER ANIMAL LOSS

As the authors have discussed, preparing for the loss of a pet, service, or therapy animal—or even livestock, wild (like Cecil), or captive (like Harambe) animals—can help clients and practitioners recover and cope with the grieving process. Practitioners may receive questions and inquiries from anxious pet owners about quality of life decisions, euthanasia choices, and what to do should the "time" come. Clinicians, even those without a pet loss or AAI specialty, should be familiar with the impact of companion animal loss and its unique influence on the bereavement and

quality of life for clients. As stated within this chapter, normalization of a commonly stigmatized experience of loss is extremely important, as is having resources available regarding grief, support, emergency preparedness, and memorialization.

Additionally, clinicians should be familiar with signs of complicated grief and complex bereavement, and be able to recognize when referrals to trauma specialists are warranted. In addition to reviewing the clinical considerations offered in this chapter, practitioners should tailor specific solutions according to the client population they are serving. Elders, for example, who can no longer have a personal pet may benefit from caring for the animal companions of neighbors. Likewise, they may participate in animal-assisted activities or receive visits from family pets. While some elders may be relieved to have less responsibility after the last pet dies, others may be reminded of their own mortality. Clinicians should be open to all possibilities, and be prepared to respond. Practitioners can also help older adults with their grief by reminiscing and finding meaning in their animal relationships.

Likewise, children need honest communication about animal loss delivered in age-appropriate language. Parents and clinicians need to explain what death is, why euthanasia may be the best and most humane choice, and what will happen to their beloved animal's remains. When appropriate, children should be offered a chance to say goodbye or perhaps be present for the pet's last moments. The animal should also be actively remembered, not forgotten or disregarded just because he or she has passed. Pictures of the pet or their treasured objects and toys should also not be disposed of if they are important to the child (Tousley, 2017). In addition, since death in some form will inevitably enter every child's life, adults should be prepared for discussions about death with books, videos, and other resources designed for children of different ages (Fudin & Cohen, 1988).

The loss of a service animal often means more than the loss of a meaningful relationship. In addition to officially trained service dogs, many people live with animals who provide help or feel therapeutic. Without them, the person may be unable to cope with anxiety, or easily navigate and engage with the social world. When such an animal dies, the bereaved person often cannot wait for his or her grief to subside. Helping professionals should give mourners an opportunity to describe their relationship and loss, while simultaneously helping them locate and bond with a new

animal (either service or companion) when the time is opportune (Cohen, 2015). Likewise, losing a therapy animal can be devastating for the handler and client. Taking time to grieve is important for AAI handlers and therapists in order to best support and serve their clientele through this loss, as well as other life challenges.

The loss of an animal can also present opportunities for growth. Researchers have begun to examine resilience in the face of stress, including the death of a loved one. There is growing evidence that most people survive potentially traumatic events without developing significant, long-lasting mental health disorders. In one study of women who had been physically assaulted, two factors predicted resilience: 1) the feeling that one is in control of life's circumstances and 2) social support networks (Rusch, Shvil, Szanton, Neria, & Gill, 2015). As such, in the case of trauma related to animal loss, mental health professionals might direct the bereaved to services such as pet loss support groups. These could provide a safe place to explore how much influence the grieving person had over his or her animal companion's medical situation. These services can also help clients acknowledge control, while recognizing that all living things will die, no matter how much they are loved. In a group setting, whether formal or ad hoc, the grieving person can also receive the social support that research shows can help.

The authors have been asked about whether or not the presence of a therapy or comfort animal, or someone's personal pet, in pet loss group meetings is helpful. To some degree, this is a matter of clinical judgment, based on where the participants in the group are at in terms of grieving and recovery. Funeral homes have begun to include a friendly dog in the office or even during the ceremony (Lu, 2015), because mourners may find it soothing. However, in a pet loss situation, seeing someone else's pet companion may only intensify one's own lack or loss of relationship, so involving animals in these applications should be done so cautiously.

Resilience and growth after the loss of a significant human-animal relationship will be a fruitful area for further research. One of the most recent studies to explore this focus specifically is a paper by Packman, Field, Carmack, and Ronen (2011). After losing a beloved pet, some study participants reported an improved ability to relate to others and feel empathy for their problems; an enhanced sense of personal strength; and a greater appreciation of life (Packman et al., 2011).

DISCUSSION

Everyone's life includes a certain amount of pain and suffering. For many, animals not only improve everyday existence, but also serve as a comfort during the worst that life has to offer. In addition to the pleasures of touch, companionship, and humor that pets provide, some animals serve a formal therapeutic function. They allow people with disabilities to function more easily, while restoring physical and mental well-being to people recovering from illness, injury, and emotional pain.

In cases where life's events overwhelm a person's resources, trauma may occur. Animals can either be at the root of that trauma or part of the healing process. One treasured animal may die, retire from service or therapy work, or run away, causing immense pain. Another may come into one's life and transform it for good. The loss of such a buffer to hardship and difficulty uncovers old wounds and creates new ones. Therapists, counselors, and other helping professionals should be prepared to work with those whose interactions with animals form an important function in getting through the challenges of day-to-day life. Such institutions as the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver in Colorado, and the Argus Institute in Fort Collins, Colorado, all provide important academic professional training resources in this area for interested practitioners.

As this chapter demonstrates, our relationships with animals have also changed over time. Some animals have lived peacefully with us for thousands of years, while others have been subjected to maltreatment and violence. In recent times, some animals have moved from working partners to pets to members of the family. This affection for companion animals has perhaps changed how we view the natural world. The earth finds itself under stress from climate change. Current communication technology and social media allow us to learn about remote events and happenings from afar in ways we never could before. The death of a lion in Africa and the shooting of a gorilla in another city become worldwide knowledge, the cause of grief and pain, the focus of heated political rhetoric, and spurs to action. As a result, more people seem passionately interested both in individual animals and in the larger issues of animal keeping and species preservation.

The HAI field continues to be rich with opportunities for learning. In particular, scholars need to further explore the specifics of grief and

mourning after various types of animal loss. Potential questions for future discussion include the following: What effects do different animal relationships have on the nature, duration, and recovery from grief? Under what circumstances does the death of a loved one (either human or animal) become a trauma? How can the pain of animal loss be more broadly accepted as legitimate and life changing for those in mourning? How can animals best help humans recover from the trauma associated with loss? Which animals (i.e., species) are best suited for this type of work, why, and how can we best protect their welfare needs in the process? Can our affection for individual animals inspire a wider concern for other living things? The authors hope that the many social workers, counselors, and other practitioners working in the field of HAI can continue to partner with researchers to explore these and other questions, thereby validating the impact of these powerful relationships, as well as the tremendous grief that comes from losing them.

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