

BEREAVEMENT FOLLOWING THE LOSS OF A COMPANION ANIMAL

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Introduction

- Presentation of a human-human bereavement model
 - Kübler-Ross (1969) : Shock, Denial, Anger, Negotiation, Depression, Acceptance
- A few human-animal bereavement models
 - Quackenbush (1985) : Denial, Anger, Guilt, Solitude, Resolution
 - Adams et al., (1999) : Comprehension, Interpretation, Justification, Gain of emotional stability, Reflection
- In today's North American society, companion animals are receiving increasingly more attention in the eye of the general population
- Accompanied by this broad-spectrum interest in companion animals has also been a considerable development in the area of scientific research related to various aspects of the interaction between humans and companion animals
- However, few of them are empirically validated

Research goals

- The majority of the publications that look at bereavement following the loss of a companion animal are mainly theoretical and based on anecdotes

Our research goals were:

- To determine which factors increase or decrease grief intensity
- To improve the weaknesses in past research while creating an empirical base regarding this phenomenon

Research hypotheses

First hypothesis:

Among the participants of this study, a greater amount of women, the elderly and individuals living alone or without children will suffer from a high intensity grief reaction.

Second hypothesis:

Among all of the participants, certain individuals will prove to have a higher grief reaction, particularly among those who will have suddenly lost their companion animal (non-anticipated death).

Third hypothesis:

Beyond attachment, variables including the owner's personality traits, psychological distress, loneliness and past life events can play an important role in the prediction of grief intensity.

Fourth hypothesis:

Participants having many negative past life events will be confronted to a higher grief reaction than those who will have little or no negative past life events.

Psychometric instruments

Seven questionnaires were administered:

1. Socio-demographic questionnaire (Lavergne & Daoust, 2002)
2. Pet Loss Questionnaire (Archer & Winchester, 1994)
3. Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (Johnson, Garrity & Stallones, 1992)
4. UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russel, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980)
5. NEO-FFI (Costa & McCrae, 1986)
6. Psychiatric Symptoms Index (Ilfeld, 1976)
7. Life Experiences Survey (Sarason, Johnson & Seigel, 1978)

Methodology

Clinics:

- 21/25 veterinary clinics participated
- Veterinarians presented this study to all of their clients
- Condolence cards were also handed-out
- Participant inscription in experimentation log book
- Experimenter weekly clinic visits
- Author contacted the owners by phone 4-7 days following the loss

Participants:

- Efforts were made to ensure that the deceased animal's *principal care-giver* was the one who participated in the study
- Efforts were also made in regards to the offering of a personalised approach during the data collection
- Data collection: February to October 2002
 - ◆ 361 owners were approached
 - ◆ 280 owners agreed to participate in the study
 - ◆ 198 owners completed and returned the questionnaire

Sample description

Sample characteristics:

- 121 women (61.1%), 77 men (38.9%) aged between 18 and 83
- 67.2% workers, 13.6% retired, 8.6% students, 7.1% stay at home person, 3.3% on unemployment
- 62.6% married or common law, 25.8% single
- Average income: \$30 750
- Dog ($N=108$) Cat ($N=90$)

- Average age of companion animal 10.22 years (SD 4.68)
- 54% of the owners had only one companion animal
- Deaths:
 - 54% euthanasia
 - 27.3% illness
 - 13.6% natural death
 - 5.1% accident
- 64.1% of the participants did not anticipate the loss of their companion animal whereas 35.9% did

Experimental Design and Statistical Analysis

- Cross-sectional experimental design
- Statistical analysis used to accomplish hypotheses testing:
 - Pearson Correlations
 - T-Scores
 - ANOVA's
 - Stepwise Multiple Regression

Study Results

Hypothesis #1 = Rejected

- Analysis shows no significant relation between the proposed socio-demographic variables and grief intensity
- The only significant socio-demographic variables are:
 - The type of companion animal (dog > cat)
 - Having at least one other companion animal (1 or more > 0)
 - The owners perception of his/her relationship to the animal (family member > companion > working animal > just an animal)

Hypothesis #2 = Accepted

- There is a significant relationship ($t = 3.39$; $df = 196$; $p = .00$) between death anticipation and the owner's grief intensity

Hypothesis #3 = Accepted

- Our regression analysis shows that attachment was found to be the principal variable which allows us to predict the owner's grief intensity (49.2% of the variance)
- However, when the owner's other variables were entered apart from the attachment variable an extra 9.2% of the variance was explained
- It should be mentioned here that influence of our depression and anxiety variables were not retained as they explained less than 1% of the variance; this appeared to us as being negligible

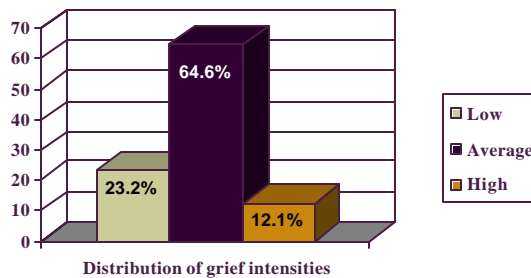
Hypothesis #4 = Accepted

- Indeed, the participants who had a lower level of grief ($M = 53.26$) evaluated more positively ($F = 4.22$; $df = 2/195$; $p = .018$) the entirety of their major life events when compared to the group of participants who were confronted to a higher grief intensity ($M = 46.63$)
- The participants who were confronted to a higher grief reaction ($M = 55.99$) had more negative past life events ($F = 9.53$; $df = 2/194$; $p = .000$) than those who had a moderate grief reaction ($M = 50.44$) and a low grief reaction ($M = 45.66$)
- Vis-à-vis the high grief intensity group, individuals had a greater tendency to check-off:
 - Conjugal separation
 - Changes in closeness of family members (increase or decrease)

- Sleep disturbances
- Participants from all three grief intensities (low, moderate & high) do not significantly differ when considering the number of positive life events

Discussion

- The greatest challenge in this research was having to deal with the study's sensitive nature
- 71% participation rate



- Grief intensity distribution ⇒
- Contrarily to past research (Adams, Bonnett & Meek; 2000) type of companion animal death is not significantly related to grief intensity
- As seen in past research, attachment is the variable that plays the most important role in the determination of the owners grief intensity
- Beyond attachment, our study demonstrates the owner's level of neuroticism also contributes to the prediction of grief intensity
- Although this has not received much attention in the study of human-human grief, Sanders (1989) has suggested that a high *level of neuroticism* and a low level of control contributes to the increase in grief intensity
- Concerning our fourth hypothesis, few studies have concentrated on the variable of past life events and it's relation to grief intensity
- Given the fact that the past life events variable has only been recently considered in this field of research, this hypothesis necessitates further investigation

Implications for Practice

- 52% of Canadian households have a family companion animal
- Emerging trends in companion animal ownership are demonstrating a shift in the proportion of people who own pets
- More companion animals = a higher frequency of companion animal grief
- Our results show that psychologists, social workers and psychiatrists face practical and clinical implications as they must offer support to these bereaved individuals
- Results show that grief validation and support must not only be given to women and children
- Mental health practitioners are poised to enhance their sensitivity to bereavement issues including the ones related to companion animal loss
- Implications for practicing veterinarians and students in veterinary medicine
- Establishment of client-sensitive communication skills
- We need to recognize and render legitimate this type of grief

Future Research

- Longitudinal studies would help to better understand the length and the nature of this type of grief reaction
- The use of different psychometric questionnaires would be beneficial:
 - Questionnaire on grief intensity with sub-scales
 - Better evaluation of the duration of grief symptoms
 - Evaluation of personality disorders rather than personality traits
 - Assessment of pathological grieving
 - Future research should try and include the use of qualitative measures
- Further explore what differences exist between the grief intensities following the loss of a dog versus the loss of a cat
- We should further look at the symbolism attributed to the companion animal (best friend, child, family member, etc.) and its correlation with normal and pathological grieving
- Other variables deserving further research:
 - The length of the animal's illness prior to its death (long-term care brought to the animal)
 - The study of social support rather than loneliness
 - Cultural differences associated to the grief process (Francophones versus Anglophones)
 - Companion animal grief and the visually impaired
 - Grief following companion animal loss and individuals who are greatly involved with companion animals (ex.: Animal assisted therapy, etc.)
 - The links between the type of death (anticipated or not) and grief intensity

General conclusions

- As seen previously, many individuals in our society develop a strong bond with their companion animals
- This study has allowed us to precisely determine which factors contribute to the increase of an owner's grief intensity following the loss of a companion animal

Review: Important factors leading to the prediction of grief intensity have been identified:

1. The type of companion animal
 2. The number of companion animals in the household
 3. The owner's perception regarding his/her relationship with the companion animal
 4. Death anticipation
 5. Attachment
 6. The owner's level of neuroticism at the time of the loss
 7. The amount of the owner's negative past life events
- An overview of these results clearly demonstrates that grief following the loss of a companion animal is an undeniable and omnipresent reality
 - A better comprehension of this type of grief will hopefully lead to a greater recognition and a profound respect for individuals who are bereaved following the loss of their companion animal