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How much can you mourn a pet?



Many prefer to call pets companion animals

By Finlo Rohrer
BBC News Magazine

Some might think true grief is reserved for our fellow homo sapiens, but as a moving tribute from one British politician shows, the loss of a pet prompts real mourning.

Even in the UK, which has what is seen by many non-Britons as a slightly repressed attitude towards death, prolonged mourning and visible grief is considered normal for the death of a family member or a close friend.

But in a nation of animal lovers there are many who feel almost the same way about the loss of a pet, but whose emotions occasionally provoke raised eyebrows.

The writer, broadcaster and former Labour deputy leader Lord Hattersley wrote this week in a newspaper about his grief for Buster his canine companion of 15 years, who died in October.

"I sat in the first floor room in which I work, watching my neighbours go about their lives, amazed and furious that they were behaving as if it was a normal day," wrote Hattersley. "Stop all the clocks. Buster was dead."

Strong feelings

History is full of close relationships between man and beast. Read any history of Alexander and Bucephalus, his horse and constant companion, looms large. Much missed after his death at the Battle of the Hydaspes, a new city in what is now Pakistan was named after him. And what greater symbol of animal constancy can there be than Greyfriars Bobby, a terrier who supposedly spent 14 years faithfully attending his master's grave in Edinburgh.

Our animal companions provoke strong feelings.

"For anybody who has had a pet in their life they form a unique and very special member of the family, and remain so," says Margot Clarke, manager of the Pet Bereavement Support Service. "In terms of that very special bond that individuals share it's like any bond, once it's broken, individuals



There are famous man-animal partnerships from history

ANIMALS IN AFTERLIFE

Some in ancient Egypt mummified cats and thought they had afterlife Animal heaven frequently referred to in US and UK as 'Rainbow Bridge'

Comes from anonymous 1980s prose poem

It starts: 'When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to

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feel that loss. That is expressed as grief."

Many of those who contact the PBSS are disappointed by the reaction of those around them to their loss.

"They often trivialise that loss and don't recognise it as being special and unique," says Ms Clarke. "A lot of people say 'just get another pet'. But the time has to be right."

Established 16 years ago, the PBSS is a joint venture between the charity Blue Cross and the Society for Companion Animal Studies and provides what it terms "emotional support" - primarily by phone - rather than formal counselling for pet owners.

Link to others

"A lot of our callers say to us 'Gosh I didn't feel this bad when I lost my father or mother or sister'," says Ms Clarke.

It's a state of mind that Bob Nicholson can understand, having lost his dog Ivo, a Collie cross, after 16-and-a-half years. Mr Nicholson, of Fife, had raised Ivo from from a puppy to his death in September.

When Mr Nicholson, of Fife, had lost his father, the dog was there to help. When Ivo died, no-one was there. The dog had been a link to a father and a brother who had gone. Now that link was gone.

"It's left a massive hole in my life. I lost my father two years ago. When my dad died the dog was there. I felt a bit ashamed - losing my dog actually affected me more than when I lost my father."

The lack of understanding from some people is an aggravating factor. "Some people feel disdain [as] it was only a dog."

With the strength of these feelings, it is perhaps not surprising that many pet owners want to mark the death of their beloved animals. In Mr Nicholson's case he went to Dawn Murray, who runs the Pet Undertaker business from her home near Lanark.

She organises cremations, removing the bodies from the owner's homes or vets' practices in a special animal hearse, taking them to dedicated pet crematoria and then returning the ashes to the owners. About 200 owners a year book cremations and there is the occasional burial as well.

Range of animals

"The dog or the cat isn't just part of the family it is their family. It may be they want their pet treated with the same dignity accorded to any member of the family. If granny died in hospital you wouldn't leave the doctor to make the funeral arrangements."

It is not just cats and dogs that are commended to her. She has dealt with everything from newts and lizards to degus, chinchilla-like rodents.

People also call her for reassurance and practical advice. Two issues loom large over pet bereavement - people not being taken seriously, and the need to take time out to mourn.

"Most people they take the day off but most tend to tell a lie for fear of ridicule or that the boss won't understand," says Ms Murray. "They take a day of sick leave rather than admit to being off because of pet bereavement."

Many of those facing up to such sadness want spiritual reassurance. When humans die, many religious relatives have the consolation of their belief in an afterlife.

In the world of pet bereavement, this is often referred to as "Rainbow Bridge", based on a prose poem written by an anonymous author in

Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together'



“ I do not pretend that my grief was unique - I merely state, as a matter of fact, that nothing has ever caused me as much pain as Buster's death ”

Roy Hattersley

[Roy Hattersley's piece in the Daily Mail](#)



Many pets are regarded like family members

the 1980s. There are countless references to it on message boards and tribute sites.

"Rainbow Bridge is a mythical pet heaven," says Ms Murray. "The spiritual side of pet bereavement is powerful. [Those that believe in it] come from all walks of life - they are not wacky people."

Very loosely inspired by the Norse legend of Bifroest, the "rainbow bridge" represents the notion that owners will meet their pets again after death in a joyous reunion.

It may be argued that it fills a gap left by the treatment of animals in some mainstream religions.

"The churches have been slow to recognise the spiritual significance of the human-animal bond," says Rev Prof Andrew Linzey, an Anglican priest and director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics.



Cremations and even burials are wanted by some owners

"When a companion animal dies, we feel a natural sense of dislocation and loss. The churches should offer us rites to help us deal with our bereavement."

Prof Linzey addressed this issue when he decided to bury his beloved dog Barney in the garden. As it seemed there were no prayers or liturgies specifically for the death of pets, he wrote the book *Animal Rites*.

And of course, there is something near unique about pet bereavement - the issue of euthanasia.

Many pet owners have had to make a decision that only tiny numbers ever have to make about a human relative - the decision to end a life, with all the guilt that that entails.

Send us your comments using the form below.

My condolences to anyone reading this who has lost a pet. I remember calling into work once and admitting I was in bits as my cat had died. The colleague who answered the phone said, "it's only a cat, Debbie!" and I could hear laughter in the background. I will be inconsolable when the only cat I have now dies but I'll know where to turn for genuine support.

D Young, London

We lost our Labrador Dibley on 23 December. He was in his fourteenth year. He was a real character and definitely considered a member of the family, his death has left a big hole in our lives and it spoilt Christmas. I must admit that I feel more grief at the loss of Dibley than I did when my mother died at the age of 90.

Chris Newcombe, Newchurch, Kent

Roy Hattersley evidently surprised himself at the depth of his grief for Buster. It is however well documented that the scale of grief for pets is a deep as that compared to loss of a human loved one. Mr Hattersley may take some comfort from the fact that evidence suggests that whilst the grief he feels is just as deep as if it were a human, the duration of grief will not be as long.

As a veterinary surgeon myself, most days I probably put an animal to sleep, and usually this is to end suffering by the animal. So in a strange way, euthanasia itself does not upset me, but the emotional reaction from the owner does. I am often struck by the number of people who say that they don't want to see their animal suffer which is why they have made that decision. They will often add that they wish the same decision could have been taken for humans, perhaps they have had a relative who suffered during terminal illness. In that sense, I see it that animals are the lucky ones.

Pamela Singleton, Harrogate North Yorkshire

Losing a pet can feel like you've lost a member of the family, you can get griefstricken but then when you actually do lose a member of the family you realise you were having yourself on. Most people get over the death of a beloved dog within a few months, if you have a normal functioning relationship with a family member and then they die then it's a completely different ballpark.

David Godfrey, Reading

I agree with Mr Nicholson of Fife, when our chocolate labrador died over a year and a half ago it affected me much much more than when my mum died four years before that. In fact I was just talking to a neighbour who also has dogs about this 15 minutes ago and that was

the very thing we were discussing and she said that it is true but it is a different kind of grief. We have another labrador now but will never forget Bramble.

Liz Smith, Glenrothes, Scotland

Before getting a cat of our own, I failed to understand the depth of attachment that one has. When our cat was diagnosed with cancer after 10 years and we decided to have her euthanized, it hit me like a ton of bricks. My wife and I were distraught for some time. Several friends passed on the Rainbow Bridge poem. As a Catholic Christian, I was raised with the belief in an afterlife, but not for animals. I am pleased to see that one local Anglican church has been doing a blessing of animals for years now, and that attendance is increasing each year.

Ken O'Brien, St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada

My husband and I moved to the UK six years ago from Canada and we brought our Doberman Jack with us. In the first lonely years living far away from family and friends it was just the three of us here. When Jack died nearly three years ago the feeling of isolation and grief was overwhelming and as in the above article we felt the need to lie and cover up our mourning. The look on peoples faces if we were to admit the depths of our depression because of the loss of a dog was pretty clear. "It is just a dog."

We were once, however, able to give to a stranger the support and understanding that friends of ours were not able to give us. We met an older lady in a park in Edinburgh one Christmas when they had a dog sleigh event on. There were lots of happy people and happy dogs enjoying the spectacle and somehow we struck up a short but heartfelt conversation with this woman who had just lost her dog. We told her it was okay to grieve and to honour the memory of a beloved friend. We were able to commiserate with her and that it was no mean thing to be brought low by such a loss.

Aizlynn Johnston, Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK

I lost my dog after 14 years. My partners also had recently left me and my dog was all I had left, and to lose him caused me more pain than losing my partner of 15 years. Jess was always there and showed that he loved me. Ever loyal. When he went I just went to bed and stayed there thinking there was no point to anything, almost like depression. People who have no pets just don't understand, the big hole that it leaves.

Laura Farren, Nuneaton

I couldn't agree more with these sentiments. I lost my two gorgeous cats in 2009 - one in May and the other in August, both 22 years of age. I was absolutely distraught, but also very angry at those who suggested that I should get "replacements" as soon as possible. No one liked my retort of "and you'd replace a deceased sister or brother with another?". The grief, I am learning, doesn't really go away - you just cope with it better as the weeks go by.

Paul, Manchester

I found out on Monday that my beagle has cancer. The prognosis isn't good and if we're lucky we'll have him for another couple of months. He had an operation on Monday and we've brought him home today. He's lying very quietly on the sofa, obviously in some discomfort, and I can't explain to him why we let this happen to him. I can't explain that if he eats I can give him a painkiller that will help. And I know that sometime in the weeks ahead, no matter how much it hurts, I am going to have to let him go. I have lost both my parents, but this is the worst pain of all.

Fiona, Worthing

I lost my dog just over two years ago, she had a heart condition and died very suddenly. It was a very upsetting time for me and my husband, as our constant companion and larger than life character she left a large gap in our lives. Anyone who has never had a pet cannot understand the bond you have and how much of an individual they are. She was always there to cheer me up or offer me some quiet time, she always seemed to know how I was feeling. I think she knew she was dying as she spent the previous night sitting constantly by my feet wanting to be made a fuss of; I duly obliged and am thankful that I did as that was the last time I saw her alive. I still think about her and have only now taken the step of another dog after all this time.

Michelle Stevens, Exeter

So it's not just me! I'm relieved to know others have worried about being thought "silly" for feeling genuine bereavement for pets. My husband and I had the good fortune to be off work anyway when our last cat was euthanised, which meant we didn't have to lie, but neither of us was in a fit state to attend work anyway, after having held her as she slipped away, and then buried her under her favourite spot in the

garden. Someone who can't feel bereavement for a pet probably shouldn't have had one in the first place.

Polly, Glasgow

I have never cried over family or friends deaths, but have cried over every one of my dogs that have gone. My best friends have always had four legs and a fur coat. From them I have had more love and affection than from any human. They have all had the dignity of a proper burial.

JB Weightman, Carlisle, Cumbria

My dog will never lie to me, steal cheat or deceive me. It's feelings are always clear, it's joy when we come through the door, the fear when idiots set off fireworks. Unconditional. No, it is not a child, it is not a human, but it is no less special to me. The death of a friend or relative is often bound up with issues that remain, some good, some bad. My dogs life has only shown me the good ones. What friend would say to another "It's just a dog" ? They're no friend at all.

Gary

My beloved cat Potter disappeared last summer, we don't know if she has found a new home somewhere else, or died in the woods surrounding our house. How does one deal with this sort of open ended bereavement? People rarely have to deal with a loved one disappearing, but how many times have pet owners suffered this?

Steph, Portsmouth, UK

I completely understand, I lost my cat last year after 10 beautiful years together - three of which she only had due to me being convinced against the advice of my vet that she could survive a cancer op. I felt completely bereft when she died. Couldn't eat, couldn't sleep. The last time I felt like that was when my dad died. I suppose because you are so responsible for all aspects of their welfare there may be a little guilt when they finally die. I still miss her.

Claire, Stone, UK

We lost our beloved 13-year-old black Labrador Susie a couple of years ago. It was honestly worse than losing either of my parents. I know that sounds crass, but she was in our lives constantly and her loss was just shattering.

David, St Albans

When our cat was run over, I cried for three days and felt people thought I was being stupid mourning "just a cat". But it was like a personality had been ripped from our lives and the house was so quite without him. I still expect him to run into the house, even a year later.

Deborah, Yorkshire

Whilst the death of a pet can be very upsetting it can't begin to compare to the grief felt by the loss of a close family member or friend, particularly if that person died in tragic circumstances or at an untimely age. I believe that people who suffer more from the death of an animal have clearly never made truly successful or meaningful connections with their fellow humans.

Nicola, London

I was the owner of two of the most beautiful dogs until last September when Lulu my 11 year- old Cocker Spaniel died of cancer. I cried, unashamed of the grief that my wife and I had for our darling dogs. They had become such an important part of our life that even now I miss her and a tear often forms when I see a photo of my beloved Lulu.

Jon Turner, Sunbury-on-Thames

One of my cats, who was 16, had to be put down about five months ago and I was devastated. Most people didn't really understand why I was so upset. I found the simplest thing to compare it to was a person who had been in my life that long dying. Some people still didn't seem to understand. They thought I was being irrational and even told me so. Yet I'm sure if they had a loved one die after that long they would be upset. I don't see what makes it any different, just because the pet can't talk back to you, doesn't mean they don't love you back.

She had had thyroid problems and the medication wasn't working for her and one morning she was so ill that she was taken to the vet, but she wouldn't have survived longer than a couple of hours so was put to sleep. Unfortunately I was not around and couldn't get back in time. I went back to the vets later in the afternoon to see her body and say goodbye. The vets organised a cremation, and she is now sitting in the lounge in a green box next to a picture. My other cat is 16 1/2 now and I don't want to separate them so she will remain in the lounge.

Vikki, Hayling Island