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MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

The Challenge of Grieving for a Pet at Work

Few employers offer pet-bereavement leaves, and owners are often afraid to ask for time off



By Sue

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It can be hard to imagine if you haven't been through it, but the death of a pet is a profound loss for many people. It can lead to such grief that some pet owners want employers to offer pet-bereavement leave.

Few do. Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, San Francisco, is one of the few employers that offer a three-day pet-bereavement leave. Founder Bill Kimpton brought his border collie, Chianti, to work with him starting in 1981, and the company has since supported "the special relationship humans have with their pets" by welcoming employees' and guests' pets at its hotels and providing pet insurance and bereavement leave for employees, says Mike DeFrino, Kimpton's chief executive officer.

Some units of Mars Inc., the big candy and pet-food maker, offer one day or more off, flexible hours or freedom to work from home after a pet's death, a spokesman says.

Other employers quietly grant bereaved pet owners time off case by case under other paid-time or sick-leave policies. Still, many grieving pet owners don't ask for it because they're too upset or afraid of eliciting eye-rolls from co-workers.



Jacqueline Schuck, of Los Angeles, adopted Penelope, a nine-year-old bulldog, to help her recover from the death of Maggie, another bulldog. Above, Ms. Schuck and Penelope. PHOTO: JACQUELINE SCHUCK

Registered nurse Jacqueline Schuck of Los Angeles missed her first day of work in 30 years after her bulldog Maggie died suddenly of lymphoma last year. "Maggie's loss devastated me like nothing else," she says. She withdrew from talking with co-workers after returning to her job reviewing medical cases and sometimes burst into tears at her desk. "It's very, very painful, and some people don't understand that. You're losing a creature that has been there for you with 100% unconditional love." She and her husband Antonio have since begun doing volunteer work for a bulldog rescue group.

Family-leave laws don't provide for time off for a pet's sickness or death, says Nonnie Shivers, Phoenix, an employment lawyer who has studied the topic. Some employers wonder where they would draw the line: If you grant leave after the death of a dog, what about a fish? A tank of fish?

Others fear a backlash among employees who might see a pet-bereavement policy as too lax or permissive. At Matt Faust's previous employer, some co-workers were incredulous when a colleague took a week off because his dog had died. Mr. Faust, a Chicago category manager for a retailing company, has had many pets and is saddened when they die, but he confines grieving to after hours, he says. He was proud of his mother, Joan, for making it to her job as an operations manager only a couple of hours late after the family's 11-year-old Corgi died early one morning two years ago. She was "incredibly upset," he says, but saw it is her job "to get through the day and be that team player" at work.



Matt Faust, a category manager for a retailing company, loves animals and was upset when Stuart, his pet Corgi, died two years ago, but he didn't take any time off work. PHOTO: JOAN FAUST

Dawn Elliott of Los Angeles, an administrative assistant, wanted to be home with her 17-year-old cat, Shaggy, on the day she'd planned to have him euthanized because of kidney disease. But she didn't feel she could object when her managers asked her to report to work before the appointment to prepare some reports, and to return afterward to take some mailings to the post office.

Taking Shaggy for euthanasia was a "horrible, horrible experience," she says. Ms. Elliott resented having to work, but she also was angry at herself for not insisting on staying with Shaggy. "I was just heartbroken" and cried often for weeks, Ms. Elliott says.

Co-workers often assume bereaved pet owners will get over their loss quickly and unwittingly belittle their feelings by saying, "I'm worried you're obsessing about this. You should be moving on," says Heather Merrill, founder of the New England Pet Hospice & Home Care, Boston, which offers end-of-life care and other supports for owners of dying pets. Others say, "It's only an animal. Just get another one." More helpful, Ms. Merrill says, is to say, "My heart goes out to you," or, "I want you to know I'm thinking of you, and I want to help." It is best to wait at least a month before bringing home a new pet, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Some bereaved pet owners are surprised or embarrassed by the intensity of their grief, thinking, "something must be wrong with me" if an animal could mean so much to them, says Linda Anderson, Minneapolis, co-author with her husband Allen of more than a dozen books on the bond between humans and animals.



A memorial and garden that Flora Nguy created for Melon, one of her Shih Tzus. PHOTO: FLORA NGUY

Property manager Flora Nguy made it to an important meeting the day after she and her husband had to have their Shih Tzu Melon euthanized for spinal problems, but she had trouble concentrating at

work that day. "I kept looking at pictures of Shih Tzus online. I started thinking, 'Oh my God, I've lost my mind,'" Ms. Nguy says. Fearing she would burst into tears if she tried to explain, she sent an email to her friends at the office, saying, "please don't try to comfort me," she says. For about a month afterward, "I didn't want to talk to anybody."

She sought counseling from Sandra Grossman, a pet-loss counselor and co-owner of PetLoss Partners, Los Angeles. Dr. Grossman encouraged her to create a garden and a memorial for Melon in the back yard of her La Puente, Calif., home. A growing number of therapists recommend maintaining a bond with memories of a pet, rather than trying to detach from those feelings. Ms. Nguy also joined a pet-loss support group organized by Dr. Grossman. Telling stories about a pet to people who sympathize with your loss can be healing.

Nearly 1 in 3 people feel grief and sadness for at least six months after the death of a beloved pet, according to a 2009 study of 106 pet owners in the *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, a peer-reviewed journal. About 20% exhibit the same numbness, shock, disbelief, guilt or anger as people grieving another person's death.



Lisa Conklin's employer gave her time off from her job to take her elderly cat, Bud, to cancer treatments, and later to grieve his death. PHOTO: LISA CONKLIN

A few pet-lovers have more profound symptoms, such as depression, anxiety or a loss of meaning in life. Most vulnerable are those who live alone or don't have children, research shows, and they're growing in number: Some 27% of U.S. householders live alone, up from 17% in 1970, the Census Bureau says.

Most bereaved pet owners need a few days to a week away from work to get over the initial shock of their loss, Dr. Grossman says.

A growing number of pet-friendly employers allow pet owners time off not only for bereavement but to take their pets for medical treatment. Nikki Kowalzyk, a project manager in San Francisco for Maxwell Health, Boston, takes time off as needed to take her French bulldog, Oliver, to the vet for persistent health problems. Maxwell Health, a provider of an operating system for employee benefits, allows employees to bring pets to the office.

Lisa Conklin's employer, Replacements Ltd., a china and silverware retailer, allowed her to take her ailing cat, Bud, for frequent cancer treatments for several months, says Ms. Conklin, public-relations manager for the company, which encourages employees and customers to bring pets to its Greensboro, N.C., store and offices. Her boss also told her to return early from a business trip to be with Bud before he died three years ago. "This company recognizes the loving bond we have with our pets," she says. She took a week of vacation after Bud's death "to deal with the immediate shock," Ms. Conklin says.



Rich Lang, right, of Palo Alto, Calif., with Brady Dalton and their late pets, miniature dachshunds Corey and Rona. PHOTO: CHRISTY LANG

After Sharon Rowley's cat, Elliott, died last year, she took two days off from her job as a senior director at Kimpton. Ms. Rowley lost focus while sitting in a meeting the next day, however. "People were talking about a really serious thing, and I was thinking, 'I just don't care at all.' "

Her boss noticed her sadness and suggested she take off the rest of the day. By the next day, Ms. Rowley says, “I pulled myself together.”

Office life can be therapeutic if friends there sympathize with your loss. Rich Lang took one to three days off work after his two miniature dachshunds died within six months of each other. He found it helpful each time to return to work at his company’s dog-friendly campus and “to talk about it with people I knew cared,” says Mr. Lang, a senior vice president of VMware, Palo Alto, Calif., a virtualization software company. As fellow dog-lovers stopped by his office, he says, “my assistant asked me why so many people were coming out of my office crying.”

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