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# Pet Loss and the Elderly

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# Introduction

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

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






# Research Design

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

## Participants

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

## Procedure

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

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



# Findings

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

## **Human-Animal Bond**

- Importance of Pets
- Attachment & Relationship with Pet

## **Experience of Pet Loss**

- Grief Reactions
- Intensity and Duration

## **Coping with Loss**

- Strategies
- Social Support

# Human-Animal Bond

## *Importance of Pets*

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

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

# Human-Animal Bond

## *Attachment and Relationship with Pet*

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

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





# Experience of Pet Loss

## *Grief Reactions*

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

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

# Experience of Pet Loss

## *Intensity and Duration*

- **Intensity and duration is dependant on:**
  - ✓ **Number of years of pet ownership**
  - ✓ **Time elapsed since pet's death**
  - ✓ **Availability of social support**
  - ✓ **Form of death (natural, euthanasia, accidental)**
  - ✓ **Type of death (sudden versus expected)**  
(Archer & Winchester, 1994)
  - ✓ **Pre-existing pet**

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

# Coping with Loss

## *Strategies*

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

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

# Coping with Loss

## *Social Support*

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

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



# Limitations

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

# Future Directions

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

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