

# Grief over death of animal companions needs to be taken more seriously, says researcher

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Grief over the death of a beloved pet needs to be more recognized and respected, new University of Alberta research suggests.

A study of women 55 and older living alone revealed intense feelings of sorrow after losing a companion animal, but they were careful about who they shared their feelings with, fearing a dismissive response, said Cary Brown, an occupational therapy professor in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine and one of the paper's authors.

That "disenfranchised grief" is a concern for [older women](#) living alone as one of Canada's largest and fastest-growing demographics, and can make this already vulnerable group more susceptible to wellness issues, Brown suggested.

"Many of the women chose to stay home and grieve alone, only telling a few close friends or family about the death. One of the women was told, "Oh come on, it's just an animal." People would never say that to someone who had lost a spouse. So instead of normalizing the grief and being able to talk about it, they shut down and feel worse and worse.

"When you're grieving, the last thing you want to have to decide is who you tell. You're already upset and you don't want to have to pick and choose. It's a sad reflection on society that [people](#) would feel inhibited to talk about their loss."

Already faced with age-related challenges of less income after retirement, housing changes, smaller social circles and declining health, the loss of a pet can further affect a person's physical and emotional well-being.

"For some people, the loss of a companion animal at that stage of their life could be the tipping point for what was keeping them healthy," Brown noted.

"If they used to go for walks with their dog, there's now no reason for that health-promoting daily walk and social interaction with people you

meet. The sense of purpose is huge when an animal depends on you; caring for them gives purpose and meaning in life. These things keep us well in the community, aging in place, and decrease the risk of depression, isolation and general deterioration."

The study, conducted by a team that also included researchers from the Faculty of Nursing, helps address a gap in understanding companion animal grief as a health risk.

The study confirmed the team's suspicions of that type of grief having a negative impact, said Brown, noting that followup research will be launched to include male seniors to see whether they mourn as deeply and experience the same disenfranchised grief as their female counterparts.

Most of the study respondents lived with their pets for 13 or more years, and while believing they did the right thing in euthanizing their suffering companions, their grief was still deep. Most of them rated it 10 out of 10 in severity for weeks or months after the death.

In addition, all of the participants felt that not everyone would understand their sorrow and were somewhat reluctant or embarrassed to share their feelings, Brown noted.

"These women felt they were basically on their own in dealing with their grief."

It's important that society legitimize that sorrow, Brown said.

"The grief from the loss of a [companion animal](#) is real, it can be significant, and we can't make people feel dismissed or that there is something wrong with them. The people around us don't need to share our grief, but they need to be supportive."

While veterinarians often bear the brunt of consoling their clients, [education programs](#) for health-care professionals, [social workers](#) and other forms of bereavement services such as online support groups should also be developed, along with public awareness campaigns and affordable support programs for those mourning a pet, the study authors recommend.

"There are a range of supports for people who lose a spouse or child, and we also need to incorporate an acknowledgement of grief for pets into our understanding of what well-being is," Brown said.

"Once there is public awareness and more visible supports for people, disenfranchised grief won't happen as people get used to the idea that this is real [grief](#) and that those who experience a loss need our acknowledgement and caring."

**More information:** Donna M Wilson et al, Older women's experiences of companion animal death: impacts on well-being and aging-in-place, *BMC Geriatrics* (2021). [DOI: 10.1186/s12877-021-02410-8](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-021-02410-8)

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