

Fixing the new pet dog blues

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A study on why owners of new dogs often have trouble connecting with their new companion has found a set of factors that may help prevent the phenomenon and has highlighted the need to be aware of "successor dog syndrome."

Dr. Jessica Oliva is a senior lecturer in psychology at James Cook University. She took part in a study interviewing a group of owners who had acquired companion dogs or assistance dogs to replace an old dog—but had trouble bonding with the new dog. The research is published in the journal *Anthrozoös*.

"We know in the Guide dog population, there is a higher return rate of handlers' second dog compared with any prior or subsequent dog pairings. This is known as second dog, or successor dog syndrome (SDS).

"We broadened our study out to include companion-dog owners as well as assistance-dog handlers, with the specific aim being to characterize the key features which define the syndrome in both populations," said Dr. Oliva.

She said the study found SDS is experienced similarly by both companion-dog owners and assistance-dog handlers, with some unique defining features for each.

"SDS was characterized by a strong bond with the previous dog, ongoing bereavement related to the previous dog loss, [negative emotions](#) related to the successor dog, and inability to bond with them," said Dr. Oliva

She said this appeared to be due to comparisons made between the successor and previous dog, and unmet expectations of the new dog.

"For companion-dog owners it was also characterized by a fear of getting hurt again; for assistance- dog owners it was an inability to trust the successor dog, differences in work ability, and a threat to their independence," said Dr. Oliva.

She said time since the loss of the previous dog, awareness of SDS and

support from the community also influenced the SDS experience.

"We recommend greater efforts to match owner and handler preferences with characteristics of the dog, more consideration of the time since the death or retirement of the previous animal and the level of grief the owner/handler is currently experiencing, and more awareness in society about the impact the death of a companion or assistance dog can have on their owner/handler," said Dr. Oliva.

She said it was notable that only one of the participants had heard of SDS before taking part in the study.

"There is an obvious need for more awareness of this syndrome to normalize it and provide necessary supports. Similarly, increased awareness of the key features of SDS through increased training of animal homing and rehoming staff may improve the outcome for both owners/handlers and [dogs](#)."

More information: Mikayla Disanayake et al, From Puppy Love to Pet Peeve: What Causes Second/Successor Dog Syndrome in Assistance-Dog Handlers and Companion-Dog Owners?, *Anthrozoös* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2023.2232660](https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2023.2232660)

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