

Creating Compassionate Workplaces

Pet Bereavement - A guide for employers



This resource for employers has been produced as an aide to providing compassion and understanding towards employees experiencing the loss, or anticipated loss, of a companion animal.

Many employers and businesses can face financial burdens as a result of new employment rules and regulations, with discussion around whether Pet Bereavement Leave should be implemented causing perplexment and being met, by some, with disdain.

Unless people have enjoyed a bond with a pet, they may not fully appreciate the profound impact of this type of loss. If not handled with sensitivity by management and colleagues, pet bereavement becomes a disenfranchised loss, potentially leading to ill health with loss of productivity and consequent economic implications for business.



Those who have endured the loss of a much-loved companion animal will understand the pain only too well. However, those who have not experienced this form of grief, may find it hard to comprehend. Research demonstrates that the loss of a pet can have as much impact as the loss of a close human relative.

Gail Mackenzie-Smith wrote:

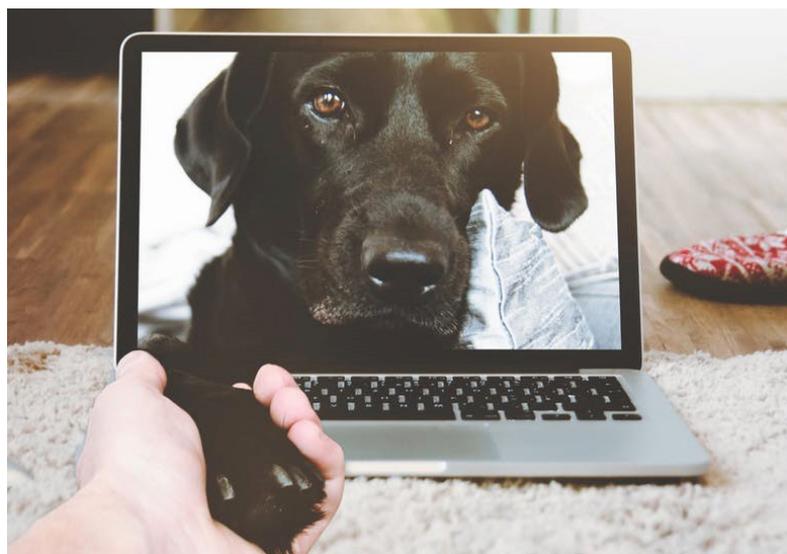
*"Human relationships are complex; love given, love revoked, love abused, neglected, tested, stretched. Human love comes with baggage and that baggage is left here when someone we love dies. We can dig through it, maybe chuck a few threadbare items away but that suitcase will never be emptied. But animals have no baggage. They enter our lives pure and unburdened and leave the same way. They love us unconditionally."*¹

In people with a diagnosis of severe mental illness, pet relationships can be a source of reliability, positivity and vibrancy, often not available from other personal support networks. Self-esteem can be bound up with relationships with animals, meaning the loss of a companion animal can be devastating to them and can impact on their self-care; a loss that is rarely acknowledged in mainstream health care.²

The fact that the human-animal bond is unconditional and unambiguous usually results in a more rapid manifestation of grief which may seem overwhelming to the individual and can impact on their whole life structure. Some colleagues may give what they see as helpful advice, such as "It was only a cat", "Get another dog" and "Get over it". Such insensitive comments, given with the best of intentions, are perceived as cruel, causing the grieving person to feel isolated, depressed and very alone with their grief. Other colleagues may actually laugh at, and ridicule, a person in such grief. These behaviours cause mental anguish and can precipitate serious illness. However, being kind and showing compassion is very supportive and usually shortens the period of grief.

We appreciate the needs of employers to have a reliable, functioning and productive workforce. Under UK Employment Law, employees are entitled to take time off for dependents, including emergencies and unforeseen circumstances. Dependents include a spouse, partner, child, grandchild, parent, or others who depend on their care. Employers are now increasingly recognising pets as dependents.

You may appreciate the strength of the human-animal bond and already have a written policy for compassionate leave for pet bereavement. If not, we hope this guide will help you to provide a compassionate approach to staff experiencing this loss. An approach that makes employees feel they are understood and appreciated and may just need a little space and time to grieve, will be welcome. Whatever their coping mechanism people grieve, and they still grieve whether it's for the loss of a human or an animal and this grief can be intense for both - grief is grief. Compassion, empathy and understanding through difficult times will help to create a loyal and productive workforce.



What can you do as an employer?

The impact of pet bereavement must not be underestimated:

1. Understand that your employee will be distracted and not as productive as usual and that they may need some time to grieve, be that through taking paid leave, unpaid leave, or compassionate leave.
2. If possible, ask the employee if they would like to take a step back from any customer facing roles for a while, so they feel under less pressure.
3. Have a 'quiet space' where they can retreat if they need a little time out to compose themselves.
4. Don't allow colleagues to mock or belittle their loss, even if they find it hard to comprehend.
5. Consider introducing compassionate leave for pet owners experiencing bereavement.
6. Inform them about pet loss resources available via the SCAS website.³
7. Provide the Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service contact details.⁴
8. Provide a list of Pet Bereavement Counsellors.⁵

Companion Animal Economics

- their positive effects on Health and Productivity

Both pet owners and businesses benefit from the human-animal bond as pet ownership positively impacts human health and productivity. For example, research demonstrates that pet owners enjoy:

- **Improved physical health.** Lower incidence of heart disease, heart attacks and strokes. Large scale retrospective studies now confirm that dog and cat owners also have fewer minor illnesses and take more exercise. Serpell⁶, McNicholas *et al*⁷, Kramer *et al*⁸, Mubanga *et al*⁹, American Heart Association¹⁰.
- **Improved mental health.** Pets mitigate against loneliness and depression and facilitate social communication. Brooks *et al*¹¹, Mental Health Foundation¹²
- **Employer benefits.** Pet friendly businesses were found to have enhanced staff recruitment, productivity and retention; improved workplace relations. Improved employee health and fewer sick days.¹³

Animals positively impact the lives of their owners in many ways. They can be regarded as a best friend, a confidante, a 'baby' or family to those without children, a travelling companion, a final link to a deceased loved one, a way of life - providing structure, routine and companionship. It's no wonder their loss can be felt so deeply, and this can affect anyone from an office junior to the Managing Director.

A little compassion towards a staff member experiencing pet bereavement, will help to improve staff loyalty and increase productivity.

Endnotes:

1. **Mackenzie-Smith, G.** (2017). Who's a good boy, my sweet, sweet Oreo? *Purple Clover*
2. **Brooks *et al.*** Ontological security and connectivity provided by pets: a study in the self-management of the everyday lives of people diagnosed with a long-term mental health condition. *BMC Psychiatry* 16, 409 (2016) doi:10.1186/s12888-016-1111-3
3. **SCAS** <http://www.scas.org.uk/human-animal-bond/coping-with-pet-loss/>
4. **Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service.** Helpline number: 0800 096 6606 (open 8.30am - 8.30pm, 365 days a year) or email: pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk
5. **The Ralph Site** <https://www.theralphsite.com/index.php?idPage=22>
6. **Serpell J.** Beneficial effects of pet ownership on some aspects of human health and behaviour. In *Journal Royal Society Medicine* 1991 Dec; 84(12): 717-720. PMID: 17747453
7. **McNicholas *et al.*** 2005 Pet ownership and human health: a brief review of evidence and issues *British Medical Journal*; 331 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.331.7527.1252>
8. **Kramer *et al.*** Dog Ownership and Survival. In *Circulation: Cardiovasc Qual Outcomes*. 2019;12:e005554. DOI: 10.1161/CIRCOUTCOMES.119.005554 October 2019 2 Accessed <http://ahajournals.org> October 2019
9. **Mubanga *et al.*** Dog Ownership and Mortality After a MACE. In *Circulation: Circ Cardiovasc Qual Outcomes*. 2019;12:e005342. DOI: 10.1161/CIRCOUTCOMES.118.005342 October 2019 2 Downloaded from <http://ahajournals.org> October 2019
10. **American Heart Association** Pet ownership and cardiovascular risk: a scientific statement <https://www.ahajournals.org/doi/full/10.1161/CIR.0b013e31829201e1>
11. **Mental Health Foundation** Pets and Mental Health Accessed Oct 2019 <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/pets-and-mental-health>
12. **Brooks H, Rushton K, Lovell K, *et al.*** In *Medical Humanities*(2019); 45: 326-334.
13. **Nationwide/HABRI** 2018 Study indicates pet-friendly workplaces more likely to attract, engage and retain employees. Accessed Oct 2019 <https://blog.nationwide.com/news/pet-friendly-workplaces/>.

About Fostering Compassion

Fostering Compassion's 'Creating Compassionate Children' programme is a groundbreaking humane education project for care experienced children who may be showing worrying behaviour towards animals or be struggling with compassion and empathy in general. Through animal assisted activities and its unique approach of sharing the stories of rescued domestic and wild animals, children are encouraged to see animals as sentient beings who can share similar emotions to them. This distinctive approach often provides a platform for the children to open up about their own neglect and turns worrying behaviour towards animals into caring, compassionate and nurturing behaviour.

Fostering Compassion's 'Connect with Compassion' programme highlights the strength and importance of the human-animal bond, recognising attachment to pets, especially in relation to the vulnerable. It works to protect this valuable bond and raise awareness of the pain and trauma that can result when it is broken, through bereavement, loss or enforced separation and the impact that can have on health and well-being.

About the Society for Companion Animal Studies

The Society for Companion Animal Studies (SCAS) was established in 1979 to promote the study of human-companion animal interactions and raise awareness of the importance of pets in society.

Over the past forty years SCAS has established itself as the leading human-companion animal bond organisation in the UK through providing education, raising awareness, encouraging best practice and influencing the development of policies and practices that support the human-companion animal bond.

SCAS consistently strives to enhance the well-being of people and animals by providing information about human-animal interactions to our members, education, health and social care professionals and to others interested in how companion animals enhance human health and quality of life.

Our work has included:

- Pet bereavement support and training
- Encouraging the adoption of positive pets in housing policies
- The role of companion animals in child health and development
- Advice on animal assisted interventions in health, education and social care settings
- Research on pet ownership, e.g. for older people, and for people living in residential care

SCAS is a membership organisation with members drawn from all of the caring professions. Membership information is available on the website.

Please check the SCAS and Fostering Compassion websites for updated information:

www.scas.org.uk | www.fosteringcompassion.org