



TITLE: 2.5 - Unrecognized Social Mourning

Pet loss is a particularly difficult bereavement to endure as it is often minimized, even denied by society. Unlike the loss of a human loved one, the disappearance of a pet does not benefit from established social recognition. However, in some cultures and places, official rituals and ceremonies to say goodbye to animals do exist. Those mourning are often left alone with their grief, without the support and understanding of those around them.

This lack of social validation is linked to the legal status of the animal, still considered in many countries as mere movable property, but it's important to note the existence of significant legal variation, with some places now recognizing the animal as a "sentient being". This purely material view does not account for the emotional richness of the human-animal bond and the intensity of the grief experienced when it is broken. It leads to a form of collective denial of the grief experienced by the mourners.

This denial is often expressed through clumsy, even hurtful phrases, meant to minimize the loss: "It was just a dog", "You can get another one", "You have to turn the page". These injunctions to quickly move on, to replace the loved one lost, deny the uniqueness and depth of the bond that united the mourner with their companion. They give the impression that this grief is illegitimate, that it does not deserve to be fully lived.

Yet emotional and physical reactions experienced at the loss of an animal are in every way comparable to those experienced in human bereavement. Intense sadness, feelings of abandonment, loss of appetite, sleep disorders, difficulty concentrating are all normal manifestations of the grieving process. But due to a lack of social recognition and validation, these reactions are often lived in shame and guilt. The mourners feel that they do not have

the right to be so affected, that they have to hide their grief to avoid confusion or mockery.

Although relatively inconspicuous, some forms of institutional support do exist for those grieving for animals. There is no specific leave for the death of an animal, often forcing mourners to return to work immediately, without having time to live their grief. Health professionals (doctors, psychologists) are rarely trained in the specifics of pet bereavement and may lack empathy for this suffering. As for veterinarians, although they are in the frontline during euthanasia, many of them are trained to provide support in case of bereavement, and some clinics even have dedicated staff to help with the grieving process.

Faced with this lack of social recognition, many mourners turn to social media and specialized forums for support. These virtual spaces, as well as in-person support groups, helplines and pet loss professionals, allow sharing experiences with others who have suffered a similar loss, to feel understood and validated in their grief. They also offer ideas for personalized rituals to honor the memory of the lost animal, in the absence of official ceremonies. But while these initiatives are valuable, they cannot replace a true collective recognition of pet bereavement.

To change mentalities, awareness and education work is necessary. It's about making people aware of the importance of the human-animal bond, of the reality of the suffering experienced when it's broken. The media have a role to play in giving voice to the mourners, in breaking the taboo surrounding this type of bereavement. Professionals in contact with animals (veterinarians, breeders, shelters) also need to be trained in bereavement support, to offer a compassionate listening and, if needed, to guide towards specialists.

But it's mainly a societal change of perspective that is needed, to fully recognize the animal's status as a sentient being and the legitimacy of the grief experienced at its loss. As long as pet bereavement is considered a second-rate bereavement, mourners will continue to suffer in silence, deprived of the support they would need to get through this ordeal. Offering them this support is recognizing that their pain is real, deep, and deserving to be received with compassion. It allows them to live their grief in the open, without shame or guilt. It also means finally honoring the beauty and uniqueness of the bond that united them to their departed companion.

Points to Remember:

- Pet bereavement is often minimized and not socially recognized, although there are cultural variations and rituals in some places.
- The lack of social validation is linked to the legal status of the animal, still considered as movable property in many countries, despite a shift towards recognizing the animal as a "sentient being" in some cases.

- Emotional and physical reactions at the loss of an animal are comparable to those of human grief, but a lack of social recognition often leads to shame and guilt.
- Some forms of support exist, such as social media, support groups, helplines, and specialized professionals, but they don't replace real collective recognition.
- Veterinarians are often trained to provide support in case of bereavement, and some clinics have dedicated staff for this accompaniment.
- Awareness and education efforts are necessary to change mentalities and fully recognize the animal's status as a sentient being and the legitimacy of the grief experienced at its loss.