

CHANGING THE PARADIGM

- 60% of private-sector workers get paid time off.¹
- Grief-related losses cost U.S. companies as much as \$75 billion annually.¹

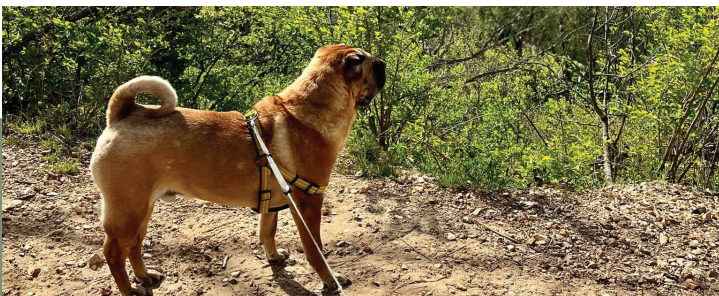
Yet the vast majority of employers provide only two to four days of bereavement leave, depending on whether the deceased is a child, spouse, parent or extended family member. On average, four days are allotted for the death of a spouse or child, according to the Society for Human Resource Management 2016 Paid Leave in the Workplace Survey.

Three days are typically given for the loss of a parent, grandparent, domestic partner, sibling, grandchild or foster child. Only one or two days are usually offered for the death of a spouse's relative or an extended family member (aunt, uncle, cousin). And, for the death of a close friend or colleague, most companies don't extend any leave at all.¹

- Grief experts recommend 20 days of bereavement leave for close family members.¹
- 4 days is the average bereavement leave allotted for the death of a spouse or child.¹
- 3 days is the average time off given for the loss of a parent, grandparent, domestic partner, sibling, grandchild or foster child.¹

There is much to be done in how organizations are able to handle grief

This document is not to ask for additional time within your organizations bereavement policy, but instead to **educate and inspire you to advocate for inclusion of Pets as part of your bereavement policy.**



WHY LOSING A PET IS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT²

It's common to think that people don't get that sad after loss of a pet. But **research tells us** that often, the grief that people feel following loss of an animal companion feels the same as grief following loss of a human companion. In some cases, people report even more intense feelings. This may be because of the special type of relationship we feel with our pets. Often, **it feels** like a parent-child relationship, and is associated with unconditional love and acceptance, which we don't always get in our human relationships. Feeling these especially strong feelings after pet loss may take some people by surprise and lead to feeling shame or guilt.

There are **many reasons** why grieving a pet can be just as or even more difficult than grieving a human:

- While everyone can understand and empathize with loss of a person, not everyone can grasp how devastating pet loss can be. Some people may make insensitive comments, such as "you can just get another pet," which adds to the sense that other people don't understand what we're going through.
- We don't tend to have the same rituals surrounding pet loss as we do with the loss of our fellow humans. This may include not getting as much social support from others. This may lead to feeling like our emotions aren't valid, and feeling even more isolated.
- Because some people don't understand pet loss, we often don't have as much space to process emotions. For example, pet loss is often not considered a valid reason for taking time off of work. People who have just lost a companion may find it extremely difficult to keep up with normal responsibilities, even though they are expected to keep performing as normal.
- Because of stigma surrounding grieving during pet loss, some people may find it hard to talk openly about what they are struggling with. Often, people who have lost a pet feel embarrassed or ashamed at the depth of their emotion.

Being hesitant to acknowledge or talk about these strong emotions is common. Not having solid support systems surrounding pet loss can sometimes make processing it more difficult. This may mean that the pet grieving process is more complex and it can take longer for us to move on.

Another difficulty surrounding pet loss that is often unacknowledged is that it leads to changes in a person's routine. Perhaps a person got used to being woken up in the morning by their hungry cat, or getting exercise through walking their dog. When that pet is gone, a person's whole daily routine may be thrown off, leaving a person feeling even more lost. Small hassles and disruptions to a person's routine can easily add up to be **just as stressful and harmful to health** than bigger events.

PET LOSS AND PHYSICAL HEALTH²

Grief from pet loss **may also lead to physical symptoms**, such as fatigue, insomnia, a hollow feeling in the stomach, tightness in the chest, dry mouth, and aches and pains.

Sometimes, our reactions to grief can be severe.

One woman **reportedly** experienced "broken heart syndrome" after losing her dog. This condition occurs when one chamber of the heart suddenly weakens in response to an emotional or physical stress. Its symptoms are similar to heart attack symptoms. While this condition is rare, it highlights the large effect that grief can have on the body.²

*"It was the most tragic, traumatic, and emotionally devastating experience I had ever been through. I didn't know what to do. I cried day and night."
(Dorothy R., Alabama)³*

*"I felt like someone had ripped out my insides."
(Karen A., Illinois)³*

Do these reactions to the loss of a pet touch a familiar chord in your heart? Grief, confusion, anger, guilt and depression are all typical responses to the death of a loved one.

Only recently, however, have researchers come to realize that a pet may also be considered a loved one and a family member, and that its death may evoke similar and often equally intense emotions.³

There is an abundance of research on the physical and mental benefits of having a pet and/or utilizing an animal in therapy. However, the loss of that companion can be devastating and traumatic. Humans develop a lasting attachment with their pets, which breaks at the loss of the pet. Regardless of the manner of death, a pet owner may perceive the death as traumatic and experience distress or exhibit posttraumatic stress symptoms. Seeking psychotherapy for pet loss can help to alleviate the distress and process the complicated grief. Growth following a trauma allows individuals to find new understanding about themselves and the world. The loss of a beloved pet cannot be replaced, but rather humans can develop undiscovered meaning in light of a tragedy.⁴

Though discussion of the benefits of pet companionship is widely discussed, there is less information regarding pet loss, specifically traumatic pet loss. Traumatic grief is distinct in that the presentation of a person who experiences loss is met with significant separation distress as a result of the death of a loved one (Jacobs, Mazure, & Prigerson, 2000). The definition of trauma is not concrete and does not describe one type of event; trauma is subjective and is variably based on each individual's experience to an event. A traumatic event, such as physical abuse or natural disaster, does not always result in someone developing posttraumatic stress disorder, instead, a person's emotional experience of the trauma determines the long-term effects (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014).⁴

Therefore, the loss of a pet can be interpreted by an individual as traumatic

Similar to the loss of a family member, and breaking the human-animal bond.⁴

Here are some examples of how other companies are managing:

Mastercard's updated policy is a direct result of CEO Ajay Banga speaking with Sandberg about her book, Fraccaro says. "Although bereavement leave is not one of the things you automatically think about when you are deciding whether to join a company, it is one aspect of the employee value proposition," he says.¹

Facebook and Mastercard have set a high standard, and many smaller companies may not be in a position to dole out a month's worth of paid leave—for any reason. Fortunately, there are creative ways HR professionals can support employees when they need it most. For instance, if a worker needs more time off following the death of a loved one, consider asking other staff members to donate vacation time.¹

That's the approach used by Joyce Van Curen, HR director at Turning Point Community Programs, a nonprofit mental health agency in Sacramento, Calif., with 620 employees. Typically, donations pour in and the grieving individual winds up with more leave than he or she needs, Van Curen says. If the grief is profound, Van Curen will encourage the employee to get a note from his or her doctor saying additional time off is needed, so that she can put the employee on family medical leave.¹

"Grievers have told me that what was most disruptive to them is they felt they needed to go back to work soon and they got judged on that."¹
—David Kessler, *Grief.com*

It's essential that co-workers, HR and managers acknowledge that a huge loss has occurred in the employee's life, Kessler says. He offers these guidelines for dealing with an employee who has lost a loved one:¹

- Ask the employee, or a co-worker who is close to the worker, how he or she would like you to communicate with staff that he or she will be out of the office. If the bereaved individual doesn't want to share much, simply state, "**Jane had a loss in her immediate family and will be out for the next week.**"

- Be aware of when the funeral is taking place and whether the employee is traveling to get there. Refrain from contacting the employee during those times, and ask the person's manager to do the same.
- Avoid telling the employee you know what he or she is going through. Nobody knows what it's like to have a spouse, child or parent die suddenly unless they have been through it themselves—and even then the experience is highly personal and individual. That said, if you haven't yet experienced the death of a close family member and want to get a better understanding of what it feels like, ask trusted colleagues who have been through it if they're willing to share their story so you can better relate to other employees.
- Send flowers and, if the funeral is local, request that one or two representatives from the office attend. If possible, make a donation in the loved one's memory to a recommended charity. At the very least, have everyone sign a card.

If the employee learns about the death while at work, he or she will often come to HR with the news—so remember to expect the unexpected. Van Curen suggests keeping a binder of resources on hand. "You can't give advice," she says, "but you can provide resources for grief counselors, funeral homes, tax attorneys and florists."¹

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Most people feel isolated after a family member dies, even if they are from a large family, Mason says. Often, others want to help but don't know what to do, so they do nothing—which makes the bereaved person feel even more alone, she says. Offer to mow the lawn, pick up food at the grocery store, walk the dog or plan an outing for their children.¹

"I couldn't understand when friends didn't ask me how I was," writes Sandberg in Option B. "I felt invisible, as if I was standing in front of them but they couldn't see me."¹

Keep in mind that the first year is typically the toughest, as individuals navigate all the milestones, anniversaries and birthdays without their loved one for the first time, Mason says.¹

The more flexible an employer can be during this most difficult time, the more loyalty it will get in return over the long run. “If the employee has been with you a year or longer, and they’re a good employee,” Van Curen says, “why would you throw that away and not do everything in your power to support that person?”¹

Pets can actually make us healthier people. Those who have pets tend to have lower rates of heart disease and lower blood pressure. Some studies have found that they are also less likely to experience loneliness or depression, and more likely to say they are satisfied with their life. So it may be no surprise that when we lose this relationship, our health is affected in a negative way.⁵

“Again, the goal of receiving this document is not to expand additional days to your bereavement policy, but instead to educate and inspire you to advocate for inclusion of Pets as part of your bereavement policy”
(Erika Sinner)

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