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Reactivated Grief and Stress in Owners When Their Pet Dies

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The Dean Abroad

Dean Robert R. Marshak was presented to HRH The Duke of Edinburgh on the occasion of the unveiling of Adrian Jones' statuary group, "Duncan's Horses," at the Royal Veterinary College, North Mymms, Herts., England.

A maquette of the statuary group was presented to the School during the Centennial Celebration last year.

While in England, Dr. and Mrs. Marshak visited Dr. J. Alfred Wight, better known as James Herriot, and toured the Yorkshire countryside and the clinic made famous by Herriot's books. Dean Marshak also presented Dr. Wight with the Centennial Medal of the School for his contributions to veterinary medicine.

The Dean and Mrs. Marshak then travelled to Israel to visit the new veterinary school at Hebrew University. Here, Dr. Marshak presented the Centennial Award to Dr. Jonathan Adler (V'54) and Dr. Uri Bargai (V'59), who could not attend the awards presentation last year.



Paul Mellon, KBE, Dean Marshak, Mrs. Marshak and Dr. A. O. Betts in front of "Duncan's Horses."



Paul Mellon, KBE, Dean Marshak and others are presented to HRH The Duke of Edinburgh (turned away from camera) by Dr. A. O. Betts, Principal and Dean of the Royal Veterinary College.



"Tristram," "James Herriot," and "Siegfried."



Penn exchange students at Hebrew University, I. to r., Alexander Werner, Amy Attas, Ann Whereat, Richard Baron, V.M.D. (V'82), a staff member at Daniel Cohen's hospital in Israel, Marcia Margolis.

Jonathan Adler (V'54), professor of physiology, Hebrew University Medical School and Uri Bargai (V'59), radiologist and Clinical Head, School of Veterinary Medicine, Hebrew University.

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Recent research concerning the relationships between people and their pets has established that many owners perceive their animals to be like members of the family. Consequently, the lives of these owners tend to be structured around and intertwined with the needs and welfare of their pets. Pets influence what their owners do and how they feel.

The Social Work Service at the VHUP, which helps owners cope with their difficulties during the critical illness, death or euthanasia of a special pet, recently studied how the loss of a pet affects the lives of owners. The cases of 196 owners were reviewed to examine how often and how much other life stresses influenced owner's feelings and behaviors during illness or death of their pet. Ninety-nine of these owners indicated that their pet's medical problem or death had caused them to recall and struggle with other recent illnesses and deaths of family members and friends.

Seventeen owners talked about a parent's death, ten about the death of a spouse, six about friends and siblings, and eight about the death of another pet. One-half of these owners mentioned that their pet's death added additional stress to other difficulties presently occurring in their lives. Some of the specific stresses were: eleven owners being ill themselves and reflecting on their own future through the illness or death of their pet; twenty-two owners were dealing concurrently with critically ill parents, children, spouses or friends. A number of other owners mentioned marital and monetary difficulties.

Perhaps the clearest way to explain how a pet's death becomes a part of other family stresses is by relating the following experience of Mr. and Mrs. E. Their 15-year-old dog had been referred for surgery. However, cancer had reached the point where treatment was not feasible and the pet was beginning to suffer. As the E's struggled with the decision about euthanasia, Mrs. E. mentioned how she had cared for her mother who had died from cancer. Mrs. E. said she had "known" when her mother was suffering too much and had prayed for death to

come; it came shortly thereafter. Many of the same sad and upsetting feelings were surfacing during her dog's illness, yet she said she didn't yet have that "feeling" the time was right. Mrs. E. associated her pet's illness and pending death with her mother's illness and death. In effect, she relived her mother's death while anticipating the death of a special pet. Clearly these similar experiences, while not the same in meaning, elicited the same responses, and the earlier death influenced and exacerbated the grieving for her pet.

This brief, descriptive study suggested several things. First, a pet's illness and death appears to generate the same type of emotional thoughts and feelings that human death produces. Secondly, when owners have had experiences with human illness and death, they appear likely to associate these events with illness and death of their pets. The result may be that not only do these owners grieve for their pets, but they also grieve once more for deaths in the past. The resulting "double grief" phenomenon can make a pet's death a troublesome and difficult emotional experience.

Helaine Greenberg, M.S.W.