

## **Educational Challenges and Prospects for Counseling Support in Pet Loss: Toward Training and Public Awareness**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the educational and social challenges surrounding counseling support for individuals experiencing grief following the death of a companion animal. While pets are increasingly regarded as family members, pet loss remains socially undervalued, often leaving bereaved owners isolated and uncertain about appropriate mourning practices and available support resources. To explore these issues, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five bereaved pet owners and four certified pet-loss counselors in Japan. Qualitative analysis revealed three key themes: (1) bereaved owners frequently experience loneliness, social misunderstanding, and a lack of safe spaces to express grief; (2) counselors face difficulties in establishing trust, responding to diverse emotional reactions, and managing their own psychological burden; and (3) both groups highlighted the absence of systematic training frameworks and clearly defined professional roles in pet loss counseling. These findings indicate the fragility of current support systems and underscore the urgent need for structured education, supervision, and professional development for counselors. Furthermore, enhancing public awareness through community education and open dialogue is essential for reducing stigma and fostering social inclusion. From an international and educational perspective, integrating pet loss counseling into professional training curricula—such as social work, psychology, and human–animal interaction studies—can contribute to the development of inclusive, sustainable, and compassionate counseling support systems.

*Keywords:* pet loss, grief counseling, education, professional training, public awareness

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## Introduction

In recent decades, changes in family structures and lifestyles have led to a growing tendency to regard companion animals as family members who provide emotional support and daily companionship. As a result, the death of a pet can trigger profound grief reactions comparable to those experienced after the loss of a human family member. Despite this emotional significance, pet loss grief is often socially undervalued and insufficiently recognized within formal support systems, particularly in Japan. Bereaved owners may encounter misunderstanding, minimization of their grief, or a lack of accessible professional resources, which can intensify feelings of isolation.

Previous studies have pointed out that socially unrecognized or disenfranchised grief tends to be associated with prolonged distress and difficulties in help-seeking behavior. In the context of pet loss, limited public awareness and the absence of standardized counseling frameworks further complicate access to appropriate support. Although some certified pet-loss counselors and informal support practices exist, their roles are not widely understood, and opportunities for systematic training and supervision remain scarce.

From an educational perspective, these challenges raise important questions regarding how counseling support for pet loss should be positioned within professional training and community education. This study aims to clarify the educational and social challenges faced by both bereaved pet owners and counselors and to explore prospects for developing structured training systems and public awareness initiatives that can strengthen support for pet loss grief.

## Literature Review

In recent years, companion animals have increasingly been regarded as family members, and their emotional role in everyday life has become more significant. As a result, the death of a pet can represent a profound loss experience for owners and may evoke intense grief reactions. Psychological and sociological studies have indicated that pet-loss grief can involve strong emotional responses, role disruption, and identity-related distress (Kimura, 2009, 2022). However, unlike human bereavement, pet loss often lacks institutionalized rituals and socially recognized mourning practices (Naito, 2013), which may contribute to ambiguity in coping and the suppression of grief expression. In addition, reactions following the death of a companion animal have been found to resemble bereavement responses after the loss of a significant other (Keddie, 1977), suggesting that pet-loss grief may have psychological impacts comparable to those of human loss.

Despite the potential severity of pet-loss grief, it is often difficult to speak about openly, and bereaved owners may struggle to access appropriate support. Such socially constrained grief can be understood through the concept of disenfranchised grief, which refers to losses that are not fully recognized or validated by society (Doka, 1989, 2002). Therefore, the need for grief care and counseling for pet loss has been increasing. Grief counseling has been conceptualized as a process that supports adjustment to loss through emotional regulation and meaning-making (Neimeyer, 2019; Worden, 2018), and this framework may also be applicable to pet-loss support.

Given this background, grief care counseling aimed at supporting adaptation to loss requires supporters who understand the specific characteristics of pet bereavement. In particular,

because pet-loss grief is often difficult to legitimize socially, the development and availability of pet-loss-specialized counselors are needed to provide appropriate and culturally responsive support.

However, in order for pet-loss-specialized counselors to function effectively within society, it is essential to establish systematic training and sustainable support structures rather than relying solely on individual goodwill or personal experience. Insufficient training and unclear professional boundaries may increase supporters' psychological burden and undermine the quality and continuity of care. Furthermore, counseling outcomes depend not only on techniques but also on relational factors and professional competence, highlighting the importance of ongoing education and professional development (Wampold & Imel, 2015). In addition, group-based support frameworks can promote shared recognition and mutual validation of grief experiences, thereby reducing isolation (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that pet-loss counseling represents not only an individual psychological issue but also an educational challenge involving training systems, professional development, and broader social understanding.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore educational and practical challenges in counseling support for individuals experiencing grief after the death of a companion animal. Qualitative methods were considered appropriate for capturing the complexity of lived experiences, relational processes, and meaning-making related to pet-loss grief, as well as the perspectives of counselors who provide support in real-world contexts.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of two groups: (1) five bereaved pet owners who had experienced the death of a companion animal, and (2) four certified pet-loss counselors with practical experience in providing grief care and counseling. This dual-perspective sampling enabled the study to examine both the needs of bereaved owners and the challenges faced by counselors, particularly regarding training, professional boundaries, and sustainable support practices.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Interview questions for bereaved owners focused on their grief experiences, perceived social support, help-seeking processes, and difficulties in mourning, including uncertainty about appropriate practices and available resources. Interviews with counselors examined perceived client needs, challenges in building trustful relationships, limits and boundaries of support, emotional burden, and perspectives on education, supervision, and the development of training frameworks. All interviews were conducted individually and followed an interview guide while allowing flexibility to explore emerging topics.

## **Data Analysis**

Interview data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. First, interview transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Next, meaningful segments were coded to identify recurring concepts related to grief experiences, counseling processes, and educational issues in support provision. Codes were then grouped into broader themes, and themes were refined through iterative comparison across participants and between the two participant groups. This process enabled the study to identify key issues that shape the fragility of the current support environment and to clarify educational implications for strengthening counseling systems for pet-loss grief.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The study addressed ethical considerations relevant to sensitive interviews involving grief experiences. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Interview data were treated confidentially and anonymized to protect participants' privacy.

## **Results**

The thematic analysis identified four major themes that illustrate both the lived experiences of bereaved pet owners and the practical challenges reported by certified pet-loss counselors. Overall, the findings indicate that pet-loss grief is frequently experienced as socially constrained and difficult to express, while the current support environment remains fragile due to limited access to specialized resources and insufficient educational frameworks for counselors.

### **Theme 1: Social Isolation and Limited Recognition of Pet-Loss Grief**

Bereaved owners commonly described feelings of isolation and a lack of understanding from others. Many participants reported that their grief was minimized by family members, friends, or colleagues, and that they hesitated to disclose their emotions openly. This social constraint contributed to the experience of grieving "alone," even when owners were surrounded by others in daily life. Several owners expressed that pet loss was treated as a "private matter" rather than a legitimate form of mourning, which reduced opportunities for emotional validation and supportive dialogue.

Counselors also emphasized that limited social recognition of pet-loss grief creates barriers to help-seeking. They observed that many clients delayed reaching out for support because they felt hesitant, embarrassed, or uncertain about whether their grief would be accepted as "appropriate." This tendency was viewed as a key factor that makes pet-loss grief difficult to address at an early stage.

### **Theme 2: Uncertainty About Mourning Practices and Available Resources**

Another recurring theme was uncertainty regarding how to mourn and where to seek support. Owners described confusion about what constitutes "proper" mourning for a pet, including decisions related to memorial practices, rituals, and personal coping strategies. Several owners noted that while human loss is often accompanied by socially shared customs and guidance, pet loss was experienced as lacking clear social scripts or institutional support. As

a result, owners often relied on trial-and-error approaches, personal beliefs, or informal advice, which sometimes intensified distress.

Counselors similarly reported that clients often asked practical and normative questions, such as what they “should” do after the death of a pet and whether their grief reactions were normal. In this sense, pet-loss counseling was described not only as emotional support but also as psychoeducational guidance, helping clients understand grief processes and navigate culturally and personally meaningful ways of mourning.

### **Theme 3: Counselor Burden and Boundary Challenges in Support Provision**

Counselors highlighted multiple difficulties in providing support, particularly the challenge of building trustful relationships while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Because pet-loss grief is often socially undervalued, counselors reported that clients sometimes entered counseling with heightened sensitivity, fear of judgment, or a strong need for validation. Establishing a safe and respectful relationship required careful communication and emotional attunement.

At the same time, counselors described emotional burden associated with repeatedly engaging with intense grief narratives. Several participants emphasized that unclear role expectations and the absence of widely shared practice standards made it difficult to determine the limits of counseling support, especially when clients presented complex emotional needs. These conditions were viewed as potential risks for counselor strain and inconsistency in service quality.

### **Theme 4: Need for Educational Frameworks, Training, and Community-Based Learning Opportunities**

Across both participant groups, the findings indicated an urgent need for structured training, supervision, and educational frameworks to strengthen pet-loss counseling support. Counselors emphasized that professional development opportunities remain limited and that systematic training pathways are necessary to ensure ethical and culturally sensitive practice. Participants also noted the importance of supervision as a mechanism for sustaining counselor well-being, clarifying professional boundaries, and improving the quality and continuity of care.

In addition, the findings suggested that broader public education and community-based learning opportunities may play a complementary role in reducing stigma and enhancing social inclusion. Both owners and counselors pointed to the value of creating accessible spaces for dialogue, where pet-loss grief can be recognized as a legitimate form of mourning. Such community-level approaches were viewed as important for supporting individuals who may not seek formal counseling but still benefit from empathy, shared understanding, and guidance.

## **Discussion**

This study examined educational aspects of counseling support for individuals experiencing grief after the death of a companion animal by analyzing interviews with bereaved pet owners and certified pet-loss counselors. The findings highlight that pet-loss grief can be psychologically profound while remaining socially constrained, and that current counseling

support is fragile due to limited recognition, insufficient access to specialized services, and underdeveloped educational frameworks for training and supervision.

### **Pet-Loss Grief as Socially Constrained and Underrecognized**

A key finding was that bereaved owners frequently experienced isolation and hesitation to disclose grief openly. This aligns with the concept of disenfranchised grief, which refers to losses that are not fully recognized or validated by society (Doka, 1989, 2002). In such contexts, grief may be experienced as “invisible,” making it difficult for individuals to seek help or receive emotional validation. Participants’ accounts suggest that social minimization of pet-loss grief reinforces withdrawal and delays help-seeking, potentially intensifying distress over time. These findings indicate that strengthening support requires not only individual-level interventions but also social conditions that legitimize pet-loss mourning as a meaningful form of loss experience.

### **Counseling Support as Both Emotional Care and Psychoeducation**

The results also showed that pet-loss counseling frequently involves uncertainty about mourning practices and the lack of accessible information regarding coping and support options. This implies that counseling for pet loss functions not only as emotional care but also as psychoeducational guidance, helping owners interpret grief responses and navigate culturally and personally meaningful ways of mourning. Such a perspective is consistent with grief counseling frameworks that emphasize adjustment through emotional regulation, meaning-making, and continued adaptation to loss (Neimeyer, 2019; Worden, 2018). In practice, counselors may need to support both the emotional dimensions of grief and the cognitive and behavioral aspects of coping, including decision-making related to rituals, memorialization, and daily life reorganization after loss.

### **The Need for Specialized Counselors, Training, and Supervision**

Another major implication concerns the professional challenges faced by counselors. Interviewees emphasized the difficulty of maintaining trustful relationships while managing emotional burden and unclear boundaries. These challenges suggest that the effectiveness and sustainability of pet-loss counseling depend on more than individual goodwill or experience. Evidence-based perspectives in psychotherapy highlight that outcomes are influenced not only by specific techniques but also by relational factors and professional competence, underscoring the value of systematic training and ongoing development (Wampold & Imel, 2015). Therefore, establishing structured educational pathways—such as training curricula, ethical guidelines, and supervision practices—may be essential for strengthening the quality, continuity, and safety of counseling support for pet-loss grief.

Importantly, the present findings support the argument that pet-loss counseling should be treated as a specialized domain. Because pet-loss grief is often socially undervalued, clients may enter counseling with heightened sensitivity to judgment and an urgent need for validation. Counselors who understand the specific characteristics of pet bereavement can provide culturally responsive and ethically appropriate support while clarifying realistic expectations and boundaries. This indicates that the development and placement of pet-loss-specialized counselors is a critical step toward improving support access and reducing disparities in grief care.

## **Community-Based Learning Opportunities and Social Inclusion**

In addition to professional counseling, both owners and counselors pointed to the value of accessible spaces for dialogue and shared learning. Group-based approaches may reduce isolation by fostering mutual recognition and normalization of grief experiences (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Community-oriented programs—such as public lectures, peer-support groups, and educational workshops—may offer low-threshold opportunities for individuals who hesitate to seek formal counseling. These approaches may also contribute to broader social awareness and stigma reduction, thereby promoting social inclusion for those affected by pet-loss grief.

## **Educational Implications and Future Directions**

Taken together, the findings suggest that improving pet-loss grief support requires integrated efforts at multiple levels. At the professional level, training and supervision systems are needed to develop competent counselors and sustain ethical practice. At the community level, public education and dialogue opportunities may help create environments in which pet-loss grief can be spoken about safely and respectfully. Future research should further examine how educational frameworks can be institutionalized across disciplines (e.g., social work, psychology, and human–animal interaction studies) and how collaboration between counselors, community organizations, and related services can strengthen pathways to support. Expanding empirical evidence with larger and more diverse samples would also be valuable for clarifying variations in grief experiences and support needs.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of pet-loss counseling as an educational and socio-cultural challenge, demonstrating that systematic training, supervision, and community-based learning opportunities are crucial for developing sustainable and compassionate support systems for individuals affected by pet loss.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the educational aspects of counseling support for individuals experiencing grief after the death of a companion animal by examining interviews with bereaved pet owners and certified pet-loss counselors in Japan. The findings indicate that pet-loss grief can be profound yet socially constrained, often leading to isolation, limited validation, and barriers to help-seeking. In addition, bereaved owners frequently face uncertainty regarding appropriate mourning practices and available resources, suggesting that pet-loss support involves both emotional care and psychoeducational guidance.

Importantly, the study highlights that strengthening pet-loss counseling requires more than individual goodwill and experience. Because counselors may encounter high emotional demands and unclear professional boundaries, systematic training, supervision, and sustainable support structures are essential to ensure the quality and continuity of care. The findings also suggest that community-based learning opportunities and accessible spaces for dialogue can complement formal counseling by reducing isolation and promoting social recognition of pet-loss grief. Overall, this research contributes to the development of inclusive and compassionate support systems by positioning pet-loss counseling as both a psychological and educational challenge.

## **Limitations**

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study sample was relatively small and may not represent the diversity of pet-loss experiences or counseling practices across regions, cultural contexts, or different forms of companion-animal relationships. Second, the findings were based on self-reported interview data, which may be influenced by recall bias, social desirability, and individual differences in narrative expression. Third, while the study captured perspectives from both bereaved owners and counselors, it did not include additional stakeholders such as veterinarians, animal funeral service providers, community organizations, or mental health professionals outside the pet-loss counseling field. Including these perspectives could provide a broader understanding of support pathways and systemic challenges. Future research should expand participant diversity and investigate how training frameworks, supervision models, and community-based programs can be implemented and evaluated in practice.

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