

Good Grief: Getting Over Rover

Why Our Grief Over a Dog Is So Intense



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What is it About Dogs, Exactly, That Make Them So Precious to Us?

My wife and I recently went through one of the more excruciatingly sorrowful experiences of our long married life: the euthanasia of our beloved dog, Murphy.

Losing a dog is hard enough; setting the time and date in advance and then counting down the hours that we had left with her was almost more than we could bear. I still get choked up when I remember making eye contact with Murphy moments before she took her last breath: she flashed me a look that was an endearing blend of confusion mixed with the reassurance that all was well because we were both by her side.

When people who have never had a dog see their dog-owning friends mourn the loss of a pet, they probably think it is a bit of an overreaction. After all, it is "just a dog." Fortunately, most are too polite to say this out loud. But those of us who have loved a dog know the truth: Your own pet is never "just a dog."

Rudyard Kipling captured this sentiment in a stanza of his poem "The Power of the Dog":

*When the fourteen years which
Nature permits*

*Are closing in asthma, or tumour,
or fits,*

*And the vet's unspoken
prescription runs*

*To lethal chambers or loaded guns,
Then you will find – it's your own
affair –*

*But ... you've given your heart to a
dog to tear.*

Many times friends have guiltily confided to me that they grieved more desperately over the loss of a dog than over the loss of friends or relatives.

Research has confirmed that for most people, the loss of a dog is in almost every way comparable to the loss of a human loved one. Unfortunately, we do not have the corresponding cultural grief rituals to help us get through the loss of a pet, which can make us feel more than a bit embarrassed to show too much public grief over our dead dogs.

Why Dogs Are Special?

What is it about dogs, exactly, that make them so precious to us?

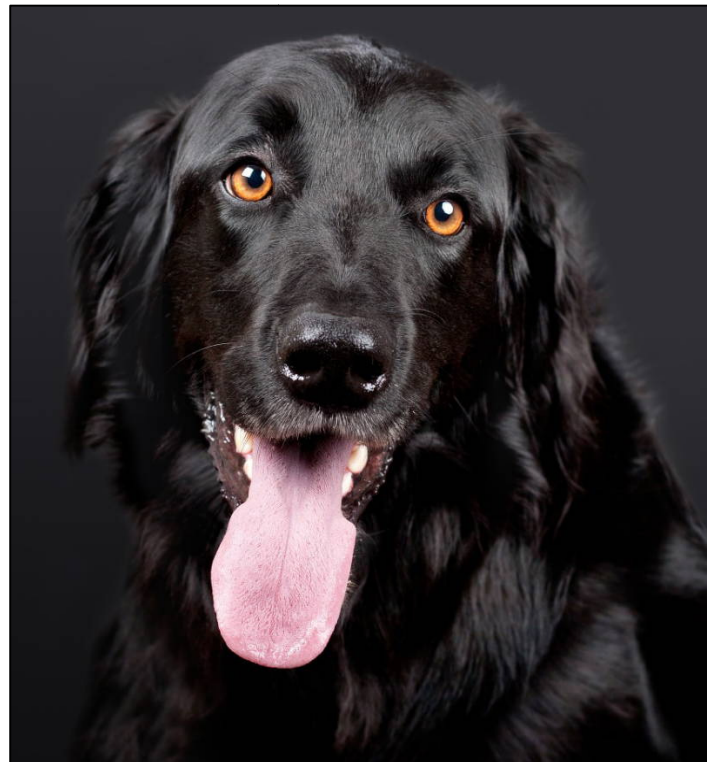
For starters, dogs have had to adapt to living with humans and they have done it very well - they are the only animal to have evolved specifically to be our companions and

friends. Anthropologist Brian Hare has developed the "Domestication Hypothesis" to explain how dogs morphed from their grey wolf ancestors into the socially-skilled animals with whom we now interact in very much the same way that we relate to other people.

In fact, our relationships with dogs can be even more satisfying than our human relationships, if for no other reason than dogs provide us with such unconditional, uncritical positive feedback.

As the old saying goes, "May I become the kind of person that my dog thinks I already am."

Interacting with dogs makes us feel good, and just looking at them can make us smile. Dog owners score higher on measures of well-being and, on average, they are happier than people who own cats



and those who own no pets at all.

Dogs seem to feel the same way about us. They have been selectively bred through generations to pay attention to us, and MRI scans show that dog brains respond to praise from their owners just as strongly as they do to food - for some dogs, praise is an even more effective incentive than food. Dogs recognise people from their faces and can learn to infer human emotional states from facial expression alone. Studies also indicate that dogs can understand human intentions, that they try to be helpful to us, and that they will even avoid people who do not cooperate with us or treat us well.

Dogs communicate with us as no other animal does. They are skilled at comprehending spoken words and using their own vocalisations to communicate with us in return.

Our strong attachment to dogs was subtly revealed in a recent study of "misnaming." This is what happens when you call someone by the wrong name, such as when parents mistakenly call one of their kids by a sibling's name. It turns out that the name of

the family dog frequently gets confused in the same mix as other human family members, indicating that the dog's name is being pulled out of the same cognitive pool in which the names of other family members are swimming around. Curiously, this rarely happens with cat names.

It is no wonder that we miss our dogs so much when they are gone.

Why Grief Over the Death of a Dog Is So Intense

Psychologist Julie Axelrod pointed out that the loss of a dog is so painful because we are not losing just one thing; we experience multiple losses at the same time.

We may be losing our primary companion, a source of unconditional love, a 'life witness' who provides security and comfort to us, and maybe even a protégé whom we mentor like a child. The loss of a dog seriously disrupts our daily routine, even more profoundly than the loss of most friends and relatives, and changes in lifestyle and routine are one of the primary building blocks of stress.

A recent survey of bereaved pet owners documented the common experience of misperceiving ambiguous sights and sounds as the deceased pet. This occurs most frequently shortly after the death of the pet, especially among individuals who had very high levels of attachment to their pets.

I miss my dog more than I can say, and yet, I

am sure that I will put myself through this ordeal again in the years to come.

I'd like to finish this essay with another stanza from the Kipling poem:

When the body that lived at your single will,

With its whimper of welcome, is stilled (how still!)

When the spirit that answered your every mood

Is gone - wherever it goes - for good,

You will discover how much you care,

And will give your heart to a dog to tear.

Biography:

Frank is an award-winning teacher who was born on a US military base in Germany and masqueraded as a college wrestling coach for almost 30 years. He and his wife Maryjo have two children (Tim & Maura) and one grandchild (Colleen).

He is the Cornelia H. Dudley Professor of Psychology at Knox College and a Fellow of several professional organisations, including the Association for Psychological Science (APS). He is an evolutionary social psychologist whose research is guided by the simple desire to make sense of everyday life, and he is currently studying gossip, aggression, and creepiness.

McAndrew's research has appeared in dozens of different professional journals and is regularly featured in popular media outlets such as NPR, the BBC, The New York Times, and NBC's Today Show. He has written for many popular print and online magazines, including Time, CNN, The Washington Post, Salon, Newsweek, The Daily Beast, PBS Newshour, the Huffington Post, The New Republic, and Scientific American.

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