

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2019 Edition

Feature

Support Employees Grieving the Loss of a Pet

Q: What can employers do to assist employees grieving the loss of a pet?

A: Supporting employees through times of grief can be very difficult. When the grief comes as the result of losing a pet, managers can play an important role in supporting the employee through a time of tremendous loss. Employees who feel supported generally have more positive feelings about their manager, team, workplace and work than those who do not.

Grief is a normal human reaction to loss. The loss can come in many forms. While we experience similar stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance), the expression of each grief experience is unique to the individual.

Pets have a significant place in their owners' lives. Pet owners have abundant love for and genuine relationships with their pets. In some cases, the pet is the only family the employee has. Their passing leaves a tremendous gap and a need for coping strategies as one comes to terms with the loss.

So, what's the best way to support the grieving employee?

Know the company policy for bereavement. If there's time before you meet with the grieving employee, learn the company policy for bereavement for pets including time off, access to Employee and Family Assistance Programs (EFAP) and other supports. If you hear about the loss before understanding what support can be provided, tell the employee you will find out what's available right away and get back to them quickly.

Acknowledge the loss. Simply acknowledging the loss in a way that conveys genuine caring and compassion is a good place to start. "I am so sorry this has happened," or "I know how much she or he meant to you. I am sorry," will go a long way. It does not have to be complicated or profound. People just want to know that you can appreciate how difficult the loss is for them.

Refrain from language than minimizes the loss. It might be hard to understand the depth of grief for a lost pet. Sometimes in an effort to help, people offer well intended statements that fall horribly short of the mark. Stay away from phrases such as "Well you can always get another one," or anything at begins with "At least." Also avoid comparisons with personal situations of grief — the story of when it happened to you. It is important to refrain from talk about how they will "get over it." Loss is something one learns to live with. Acceptance is about the final realization that their loved one is gone and learning to establish the way forward without their presence.

Work with employees to help them understand how to best support their teammate. Not everyone likes or owns animals. For some, it's difficult to understand the magnitude of grief they see from a colleague who has suffered the loss of a pet. Host a conversation either one on one or with the team minus the grieving pet owner to talk about the grieving process and strategies to best support their colleague. Set the example of caring, compassion and care for their well-being.



Gail Boone
MPA, CEC

*Next Stage Equine
Facilitated Coaching*

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2019 Edition

Feature continued

Ask what they need from you and the team right now. Understand they might not know the answer to this question especially if the loss is recent. Presenting the question shows consideration and provides the employee with the opportunity to ask you or team mates for help. A prior conversation with team mates about how to share the load until the employee feels ready to fully step into their workload helps ensure work gets done. A grieving employee might need the work as a distraction, however having a plan in case they need support is important. It also helps other employees feel like they are making a meaningful contribution.

Make space for the grieving process. Know the grieving process will take time. It is not linear. There will be good days, bad days, highs and lows. Just because an employee has a good day does not mean they have moved through the stages of grieving and into acceptance. The intensity of the grief will vary with time as well. Many things such as anniversaries, special events and stories can trigger grief. Expect it anytime.

Offer time off. While not all workplaces can offer time paid time off, finding a way to enable an employee to take some time can be very helpful especially right after the loss. Don't ask the employee to take 'vacation time' to deal with losing of a pet. Doing so is a sure way to generate feelings of resentment and instill a sense of lack of caring.

Check in. While there's no need to be explicit about why you are checking in, do so from time to time. Ask the employee about selfcare and strategies to make sure they are eating, getting enough rest and exercise. If they have a friend at work, encourage the friend to be available if the employee needs a listening ear. Help the employee understand you have a concern for their overall well-being.

Proving the much-needed support after the loss of a pet helps the employee to find their new normal. It will take time. Managers and colleagues who can come alongside to provide quiet and meaningful support send a message of the value of people over productivity. That message won't be forgotten.

Gail Boone is an Executive Coach and Owner of Next Stage Equine Facilitated Coaching and can be reached via email at gailboone@ns.sympatico.ca.