

# Human-Animal Bonds II: The Role of Pets in Family Systems and Family Therapy

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*The vast majority of pet owners regard their companion animals as family members, yet the role of pets in family systems and family therapy has received little attention in research, training, and practice. This article first notes the benefits of family pets and their importance for resilience. It then examines their role in couple and family processes and their involvement in relational dynamics and tensions. Next, it addresses bereavement in the loss of a cherished pet, influences complicating grief, and facilitation of mourning and adaptation. Finally, it explores the ways that clients' pets and the use of therapists' companion animals in animal-assisted therapy can inform and enrich couple and family therapy as valuable resources in healing.*

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Companion animals have become increasingly important in family life. More than 85% of pet owners regard their pets as family members (Cohen, 2002). Many treat them as “full members” of the family, as important as other members. Some feel closest to their pet. Indeed, in a national survey 57% of respondents, if stranded on a desert island with only one companion, would choose their family pet.

## BENEFITS OF FAMILY PETS

Families choose a wide variety of pets, depending on personal preferences, past experience, allergy concerns, residential or environmental influences, and cultural norms. Dogs and cats are the most common, yet other animals are often considered family members, such as birds, which some call their “fids”—feathered kids (Anderson, 2003).

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Consistent with research on the benefits of companion animals (see Barker et al., 2003; Walsh, 2009), families give many reasons for having pets (Cain, 1983). Above all, they value their companionship, pleasure, and affection. Pets respond eagerly to care and attention, offering unconditional love and nonthreatening physical contact in holding and petting—crucial human needs. Attachments with pets provide psychological and social support (Beck & Madresh, 2008). After a stressful workday, their enthusiastic greeting, affection, and nonjudgmental support lead many, on arriving home, to prefer the company of their pets to that of their spouses!

Over 3/4 of children in the United States live with pets—more than those living with both parents. Children in single-parent families have significantly higher levels of bonding with pets than those in two-parent families (Bodsworth & Coleman, 2001). Children without siblings are most strongly bonded to their pets. With the vast majority of parents in the workforce, pets provide vital companionship and a sense of security. In my case, growing up as an only child with two working parents, my dog Rusty welcomed me home from school, shared my milk and cookies, and curled up close to help me with my homework.

Many families credit educational and socialization benefits of pets for their children. For instance, as studies with pets, children find are more empathic than those without pets (Melson, 2003). One mother noted, “Our pets bring out the best in the kids in responsibility, kindness, affection, first-aid, and concern for other living things.” She added that all members of her family developed a much deeper respect for life in general. Pets also help prepare children for later life experiences, from pregnancy, birth, and rearing of offspring to the illness and death of a loved one.

Young adults, both singles and couples, often choose to raise pets before or instead of parenthood, gaining abilities to provide nurturance, affection, limit-setting, and concern for another living being. At midlife, many parents who are launching young adult children turn to the family pet, or acquire a new pet, to fill a void. One mother, after her two sons moved away, got two dogs. When they developed a close bond with each other, just as the brothers had, friends credited her for raising the dogs as well as her sons.

Companion animals are especially valued for well-being in later life (Walsh, 2009). Elder family members with dementia can become anxious and confused at family gatherings. Sitting with and stroking a pet is calming and soothing, facilitating their inclusion without the demands of keeping up with the rapid pace of interactions (Baun & McCabe 2003). One grandfather, sitting quietly at dinnertime, delighted in “secretly” giving sausages and treats to the attentive family dog at his side.

### THE VALUE OF PETS IN RESILIENCE

While most families report that their pet is of great importance to them at all times, they value them most at times of crisis and loss, through disruptive transitions, and in weathering prolonged adversity (Cain, 1985). Companion animals provide socioemotional support that facilitates coping, recovery, and resilience. When members are feeling vulnerable, lonely, or depressed, others may be preoccupied, distant, or uncomfortable in relating. Bonds with pets offer comfort, affection, and a sense of security.

Pets can facilitate adaptation with tumultuous life changes (Allen, 1995). Cain (1985) found that 82% of families acquired a pet at times when they were experiencing a move, separation, divorce, or death. Military families reported that at times of disruptive relocation their pet provided support and stability. Children with pets are less anxious and withdrawn when moving to a new neighborhood and school (Melson,

2003). In one divorcing family, parents eased their daughter's adjustments by letting her keep the family dog Sparky with her: during the week at her mother's home and accompanying her for weekends at her father's apartment.

In a study of adoptive families, Linville and Lyness (2007) noted that all 20 families had pets. More than half had purposely adopted animals that needed homes as a parallel experience for their adopted children. One parent described the valuable role of pets: "We have four dogs and two cats. They are all rescue animals. I laugh and tell everyone that everyone in our house is rescued. Our daughter is really into rescuing animals. She wants all of the animals to have a home like she does" (p. 84). In another family, the parents allowed the children to watch the birth of a litter of kittens and then to look for good homes for them. They interviewed potential families and visited their homes first, much like a home study in their own adoption.

Bonds with pets are especially vital in times of illness or death. Doty (2007) traces his close relationship with his two dogs from the comfort and joy they provided as his partner became ill and eventually died of AIDS. Their loyal bond sustained him through the aftermath, alleviating his loneliness. In one family, a daughter reported, "Mom has always been devoted to our pets, but since my dad's death, they have become her family and her deepest attachments. She calls them her 'tribe' and her 'fur folks.'" In another case, an elderly woman who had lost her spouse, siblings, and only child said of her birds, "They are more precious than you can imagine—They are all I have left in this world."

### THE ROLE OF PETS IN FAMILY FUNCTIONING

The family system is a functional unit comprised of interconnected members, their roles, and their relationships. Pets are often the "glue" in the family—bringing members together and increasing family cohesion (Cain, 1983). They enhance daily family life and promote greater interaction and communication. As one father commented, "Sometimes I think our household revolves around the animals." Nearly half of families reported that the pet gets the most "strokes" in the family—physical touch, looks, words, smiles, and gestures. It can be easier to focus attention and affection on a pet than on a spouse or other family members. In one family, whenever there's an argument between siblings, the mother says, "Stop fighting, you're upsetting Barkley!" She commented, "This is always more effective than saying 'Stop hitting your brother.'"

In a study of social interaction patterns in the everyday life of couples, Allen (1995) found that couples with dogs had greater well-being, and those with the highest attachment to their dogs—and who confide in them—fared the best. Interestingly, talking to dogs—in addition to one's spouse—was related to greater life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and physical and emotional health. Confiding in pets to "discuss" difficult life situations greatly relieved stress.

Pets are commonly included in family rituals and ceremonies. Most families buy holiday presents for them, as well as gifts "from" their pets to other family members. They often plan celebrations for their pets, especially birthday parties—and even "bow-wow vows" and "bark mitzvahs." Such practices express love and commitment, as well as a sense of *communitas* and shared humor (Dresser, 2000).

Having pets, like childrearing, presents family challenges and learning opportunities around family organization, such as rules, roles, authority, and boundaries, as

well as communication clarity and problem solving. Family members often disagree over pet care and discipline. Conflicts commonly arise about rules (e.g., allowing pets on the bed); treats, punishments, and consistency; and responsibilities such as walking, feeding, and cleaning up after pets. Often spousal conflicts erupt over being too lenient and spoiling a pet or being too strict and harsh, mirroring issues in raising children.

Pet trainers, coaches, and therapists, called in to resolve serious pet behavior problems, commonly find it is not the animal but the family that has the problem. On the popular televised series *The Dog Whisperer*, trainer Cesar Milan (2006) goes to the family home and works much like a structural family therapist (Minuchin, 1974). First he observes family-pet interactions and enactment of the problem behavior. With hyperactive and out-of-control pets, he notes that the family has let the dog control them and works with them to build family structure, boundaries, and hierarchy, with the parents authoritatively in charge as the “family pack leaders.”

Animal advocates, such as Temple Grandin (Grandin & Johnson, 2009), cite recent findings that wolves in the wild do not live in packs or dominance hierarchies; instead they live in families, “with a mom, a dad, and their pups” (p. 26). She contends that family dogs, likewise, need good parenting, rewards, and limits, as do children.

### **Family Climate and Relational Dynamics**

Pets are drawn into the web of relationships that comprise a family system (Melson & Fine, 2006; Sussman, 1985; Triebenbacher, 2000). The role of a pet varies with family structure, the strengths and weaknesses of members, and the socioemotional milieu (Levinson, 1962, 1997). Companion animals are highly attuned to the family emotional climate and are very sensitive to highly charged affective states of members, as veterinarians have long observed in behavior and physiological measures. Heiman (1965) observed that pets display behavioral reactions that are extensions of those of family members. Anxious owners tend to have anxious pets.

Murray Bowen (1978) noted that the family emotional system, which reverberates like shockwaves through the network of relationships, may include even nonrelatives and pets. Network therapists Speck and Attneave (1973) noticed that pets often seemed to reflect the feelings of family members and their behavior seemed directly related to the behavioral trends in the family. In one family, the parents and their daughter all had a fear of leaving the house, and their dog and cat became agitated if urged to go out. Similarly, in a family Cain (1983) observed, the parents’ strict control was a source of family conflict. Exceedingly anxious about their children’s activities and whereabouts, they treated their dog in the same overprotective way. They kept him tied to a porch railing and never let him off leash in the park, fearing he might “get lost.”

In a groundbreaking study, Cain, a Bowen-oriented family therapy educator, first presented her survey on the significant role of pets in family systems at the 1978 Georgetown Family Symposium (Cain, 1983). Having observed this in her clinical and supervision cases, as well as her own family life, she designed an exploratory questionnaire study with a convenience sample of 60 families with a variety of pets.

Cain found that most family respondents believed that their pets understood when they talked or confided in them, and that their pets were sensitive to their moods, as conveyed in their tone of voice, body language, or tears. Family members reported that

their pets were “tuned in” to their feelings, whether happiness, excitement, tension, sadness, or anger. When family members were sick or injured, their pets were very responsive, often licking a wounded area or curling up close to offer comfort. Some described their companion animals as “live-in” therapists.

Just as children’s emotional or behavioral symptoms can indicate anxiety or stress in the family system, Cain found that pets often reflected and expressed family distress. Some pets stopped eating or had physical symptoms, such as vomiting, diarrhea, or even seizures, at times of high tension or conflict in the family (Cain, 1983). Some family members also described their pets as “acting out” their feelings. When there was a family crisis or high anxiety, 81% said their pets showed strong reactions in hyperactivity, restlessness, and anxiety, including barking, running, inability to eat or sleep, soiling, and becoming ill and requiring medication. At times of intense spousal or parent-child conflict, half of the pets reacted by moving close, seeking attention, or trying to protect a vulnerable family member; the others withdrew or even hid.

### **Pets, Displacement, and Triangles**

In 1974, my former colleague, Starkey Duncan, a pioneer researcher on nonverbal communication, set up a video camera to record the dinner hour of a “typical” university couple every night for a week. In reviewing the tape, we were startled to notice that each dinnertime, when the couple’s conversation became tense and on the verge of conflict, the kitchen door swung open and their cat jumped up onto the wife’s lap. As she stroked the cat, the tension between spouses subsided and they resumed light conversation.

In such ways, pets, like children, can serve as emotional barometers and homeostatic regulators moderating stress in relationships (Allen & Blascovich, 1996). Further, Heiman (1965) observed that in some cases, a pet serves to maintain psychological and relational equilibrium through mechanisms of displacement, projection, and identification. For instance, a wife’s anger at her husband’s neglect in caring for her pet ferret while she was on a business trip reflected their relational issues: she felt he neglected her needs and resented her travel.

Triangles, as Bowen (1978) observed, are patterned ways of dealing with conflicts in human systems when tensions rise above a tolerable level between two parties and a third is drawn in. As Cain (1983, 1985) found, a pet, like a child, is frequently triangled into relational tensions, most often in spousal conflicts. Families described numerous situations where their pets were drawn in when there was tension between family members. One father displaced anger at his wife by yelling at their dog. A mother said something critical to the cat, intended for her daughter to overhear. A pet, sensing high tension, diverted members from a crisis by demanding attention, misbehaving to draw the anger, or acting “cute” or silly to elicit smiles and laughter. Two pets started fighting (as children often do) when tensions escalated between parents. Some pets acted like peacemakers, jumping up and wedging in between members to break up conflict. Of note, several families reported instances of deliberately *not* drawing in the pet; they put the pet in the yard during a conflict because the pet always got upset and tried to interfere.

In some cases, pets became the subject of observation and conversation between spouses, with warmth, concern, and affection expressed for the pet rather than for

each other. In a pursuer-distancer relationship, this could provide affection for a partner wanting more intimacy than the other. However, in some cases, this could evoke jealousy and hurt. One couple came to me for therapy because the wife felt starved of affection by her husband, who sat petting his purring cat on his lap every evening but could not express affection toward her. Exploration of family-of-origin issues revealed that, having felt threatened by his mother's intrusiveness, he was more comfortable being affectionate with his cat than with women.

When pets are treated as family members, feelings of jealousy, anger, control, guilt, and fear can all play out through them. Pets, too, often show jealousy when partners or family members are hugging or kissing. In one case, when the dog interrupted the husband's affection toward his wife, he would kick the dog away. The wife would then scoop up the dog to comfort him, angry at the husband for hurting "her" dog. Some couples complain that their dog barks, growls, and chews things up during their lovemaking, even when they close the door (Cain, 1983).

With divorce, some couples fight over custody and visitation of pets, with varied triangles reflecting interaction patterns in the family. Because pets are legally considered property, their guardianship and welfare may not be considered as it would for children. Contentious divorces can also draw pet reactions. In one postdivorce case, Rudy, the talkative family bird, refused to speak to the mother, even though she was the residential parent and fed and cared for him. It riled her that he chattered happily with the father each time he came to pick up the son for a visit.

Pets also can become embroiled in the complex realignment of relationships with stepfamily formation. In one case, the children repeatedly complained that their new stepmother did not take care of their gerbils as well as their mother did. When one gerbil died, they blamed the stepmother, who was not at fault, triggering a marital crisis that brought the family to therapy.

### **Family Violence and Pet Abuse**

Severe physical violence is a significant predictor of pet abuse; in turn, pet abuse is often an indicator of domestic violence toward human family members. A large body of research indicates that batterers often threaten, hurt, or kill beloved family pets as a means of coercing, intimidating, controlling, and upsetting their partners and their children (Faver & Strand, 2003). Companion animal abuse occurs disproportionately in a variety of family violence contexts, including heterosexual and same-sex partner abuse; child physical and sexual abuse; and sibling abuse (Beirne, 2002). One study (Ascione et al., 2007) found that women living in domestic shelters were nearly 11 times more likely to report that their partner had hurt or killed pets than a comparison group of women that had not suffered intimate violence.

Pet-abusing batterers tend to show less affection toward pets, more often use commands and threats, punish them, view them as property, and blame them as the cause of stressful events (Carlisle-Frank, Frank, & Neilsen, 2004). At times, men displaced their anger by injuring or even killing the pets. Frequently, abuse was perpetrated out of jealousy where the pet posed a perceived threat to the attention and devotion the abuser expected from his partner.

The vast majority of women in shelters are emotionally close to their pets and distraught by the animal abuse, as are their children (Flynn, 2000). In many cases, concern for their pet's welfare keeps women from seeking shelter sooner. Some who

have been betrayed, abused, or wounded in childhood or couple relationships are all the more attached to a pet that gives them uncritical support, security, and love. Such findings underscore the need for pet-sheltering services and arrangements for pet guardianship. Also, police and others, who commonly minimize pet abuse or threatened harm, need to support upset family members and assist their efforts to rescue pets in harm's way.

### **PET LOSS AND BEREAVEMENT**

The loss of a companion animal can be profound when the bond has been important. As with other significant losses, grief can be intense and the mourning process may take time. This is a normal response and does not indicate a pathological attachment. More than 85% of persons report grief symptoms at the death of a pet and over one-third have continuing grief at six months (Wrobel & Dye, 2003). Some experience grief as poignantly as with the loss of a human family member (Toray, 2004). The death of a pet is often the first loss that children experience, offering parents the opportunity to help them learn about loss and express their grief. Two daughters recalled how their father, rather than laughing at their tears when their hamster died, comforted them and said a benediction as they buried Toby in a shoebox in their yard.

The literature on companion animal loss and bereavement has been predominantly individually focused. A systems perspective is needed to appreciate the reverberations of pet loss in the family system and relational dynamics, as well as the crucial importance of family and social support in recovery from loss (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004).

### **Complicated Losses**

The impact of pet loss and the intensity of grief can vary depending on such factors as the degree of attachment, role function, timing, and circumstances of the loss (Jarolmen, 1998; McCutcheon & Fleming, 2001; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). With a sudden, unanticipated loss, family members lack time to prepare emotionally and to say their goodbyes. A pet loss is more profound with such factors as social isolation, the crucial role of an animal in coping with an illness or disability, and concurrence of other losses or stressful life events (Toray, 2004). A pet death caused by deliberate harm, as in domestic violence, is especially wrenching.

#### *Disenfranchised loss*

All too commonly, grief with the loss of a pet is unacknowledged, trivialized, or pathologized, which complicates mourning (Meyers, 2002; Werner-Lin & Moro, 2004). Because society has tended to underestimate the significance of pet bonds and the impact of pet loss, many suffer silently and alone, feeling that others do not understand or even belittle their grief. Insensitive comments, such as "it's just an animal," imply that strong grief is inappropriate or that the attachment was abnormal. Lacking family or social support, survivors may minimize or distort their loss experience. As one man admitted, "When my bird died, people thought I was weird when I even mentioned my sadness, so I hid my grief, wondering if maybe I *was* weird to have cared so much." As social awareness is growing, validation and comfort increasingly can be found, from pet loss condolence cards to participation in on-line pet memorials and support networks (see Bestfriends.org; deltasociety.org for resources).

*Accidental death*

A pet death resulting from an accident, as when hit by a car, is traumatic and commonly provokes blame and guilt (Planchon, Templer, Stokes, & Keller, 2002). Death involving the negligence of a family member, compounded by minimization, can seriously strain relationships. In therapy, one wife was angry and withdrawn from her husband for several months since, he had absent-mindedly left their beloved terrier Fluffy in the car after a morning errand. When she arrived home from work at the end of the day, she was distressed that Fluffy was missing. Finding him dead in the car, she became distraught. To relieve her upset and to assuage his guilt, he minimized the loss, assuring her that they could go out the next day and get another dog just like Fluffy. Outraged by his response, she retreated into her grief, carrying anger at his carelessness and insensitivity to all that Fluffy meant to her and how he could not simply be replaced like a stuffed toy.

*Ambiguous loss*

When the fate of a missing pet is unknown, conflict between family members is common: some hold out hope of return while others come to accept the loss as final and want to grieve and move on (Boss, 1999). Mourning can also be complicated when the cause of a death remains unclear and members ruminate about what they could have or should have done that might have made a difference. Clinicians can help families to gain whatever clarity possible and to live with remaining uncertainty.

*Forced separation*

One of the most agonizing situations is the forced relinquishment of a valued pet. Many older adults move into a residence or nursing home that does not allow pets and must give up a cherished companion. In an economic crisis forcing people from their homes, many must part with beloved pets that cannot be taken with them. One of the tragedies of Hurricane Katrina involved the agonizing decision many residents had to make: whether to leave their pets behind in order to escape floodwaters. Some refused to abandon cherished pets. Many, with great difficulty, took pets with them, only to be forced to separate later when authorities would not allow animals in buses or shelters. Animal rescue organizations saved and sheltered many animals, found foster and adoptive families, and searched for displaced pet owners, enabling many to reunite with their pets (see <http://www.Bestfriends.org>). Some foster families became so attached to an animal over many months that when the owners finally found and reclaimed their pet, visitation rights were arranged.

Concerns about abandonment or guardianship of pets come to the fore when owners are no longer able to care for their animals, are facing their own serious illness, or are planning their wills. One elderly couple were preoccupied with worries about the future wellbeing of their beloved parrot, Toby, expected to live many years after them. Old intergenerational alliances and conflicts were revived as they argued over which of their adult children could be trusted to provide the care they expected for Toby.

*Grief compounded by other losses*

A pet loss in the midst of other losses or disruptive transitions, as in divorce, migration, or displacement from homes, can have a cumulative effect. One man learned that his dog, Buddy, had inoperable cancer shortly after his wife divorced him and his

son left for college. When a pet has been a life companion over many years, the bond and grief can be especially strong, particularly when other losses have been experienced.

When a pet has helped to ease difficult times, such as an illness, a divorce, or a move, the later loss of that pet can reactivate the past losses, as in the following case:

Roger grew up on a farm always wanting a horse, but his father had refused. When he was 12, his mother developed cancer and urged the father to grant his wish. The devotion and affection he gave to—and received from—his horse, Sugar, helped him to cope with his mother's illness and then her death. Shortly after he left home for college, his father casually mentioned in an email that he had sold the horse because caring for it was too much trouble. The abrupt news of the loss of Sugar was devastating and also re-evoked the painful loss of his mother. His father's callous disregard for his feelings sparked an angry and long-lasting cutoff from him. In brief father-son therapy sessions, the father gained appreciation of Roger's meaningful bond with Sugar. He then tearfully acknowledged how much he missed his wife and his son and that the horse had been a constant painful reminder of both losses. He had thought that selling it would relieve his sadness, but it only left him feeling more bereft. The mutual understanding and caring they gained through this conversation brought Ralph and his father to a closer relationship than they had ever had in the past.

### *Role function in relational dynamics*

When a pet has served a crucial function in couple or family dynamics, the loss of the animal can destabilize the relational system. Where couple or family tensions have been buffered by attention to a pet, the loss of the pet can generate relational distress and escalating conflicts. In one case, a woman's affectionate bond with her cat, Mitzi, compensated for a cool, distant relationship in her marriage. When Mitzi died, her husband's lack of affection became intolerable and she left him, just as some marital breakups occur when children have left home or a child has died.

### *Secrecy or distorted communication*

Although teenagers may overtly minimize the importance of a pet, and a small child or a cognitively impaired family member may not fully comprehend a death, they may well have deep emotional reactions to its loss. Family constraint from talking about pet loss and sharing grief can stifle communication and block mourning. Often, well-intentioned parents, wishing to protect vulnerable family members, secretly remove a pet from the home without preparing them for the loss. As sad as it may be to anticipate, it is more traumatic to find their pet suddenly gone, without a chance to hold it one last time and say goodbyes. If told a deceased pet has simply run away, they may anxiously search or wait for its return. Children, with active imaginations, may fantasize worst-case scenarios. Phrases such as "putting to sleep" may imply that death is not final or frighten them about what happens when they go to sleep. It is crucial to explain a pet's anticipated or actual death sensitively and truthfully, using simple, clear information.

### **End-of-life Decisions**

As in human relationships, the death of an older animal is expectable, yet the loss of a longtime companion can be profound. In the past, ailing pets were typically euthanized. Increasingly, those who are strongly attached to their pet are electing costly,

extensive medical treatments now available, unless the animal's suffering or the caregiving burden becomes too great. These wrenching decisions need to be handled sensitively, exploring any guilt at forgoing treatments, with a veterinarian's clear information about medical options and prognosis. Studies find that for most, euthanasia is more beneficial for both the animal and human companions than waiting for a suffering pet to die "naturally." Those who wish to be with their pet at the end of life usually find it a very healing experience. Clinicians can facilitate discussion among members in decision making to best fit their needs and circumstances (Meyers, 2002).

### **Facilitating Family Adaptation with Pet Loss**

Clinicians can be helpful in facilitating four key family adaptational tasks with the loss of a pet, as with human losses in the family (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004):

- (1) Help families to clarify and share information, acknowledge the loss, and gain understanding of its meaning and significance for all members and relationships.
- (2) Facilitate open communication and shared experience of loss by encouraging healing rituals, expression of feelings, and mutual support.
- (3) Facilitate discussion and efforts to reorganize role functions and realign relationships disrupted by the loss.
- (4) Support reinvestment with other relationships and continuing bonds with the lost pet (e.g., memories, stories, photos, and deeds to honor the valued pet).

Clinicians can encourage families to create healing rituals to mourn their loss and honor their companion animal (Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 2003). They might hold a simple memorial rite, each member sharing a favorite story of their pet. Shared activities are especially beneficial, such as making a photo album of their life with their pet. Many bury the remains or scatter the ashes in a special place. In our family, we brought the ashes of our beloved yellow lab Targa to our summer cottage, scattering them at the edge of the ocean on the beach where our new dog Shasta runs and swims.

Meaning-making is crucial to the grieving process. When a pet bond and loss are unacknowledged or trivialized, clinicians can help family members to validate the significance and to support those who are deeply bereaved (Clements, Benasutti, & Carmone, 2003; Donahue, 2005; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Therapists should attend to both the family's experience and the broader cultural influences in unhelpful responses of others. With pet illness, end-of-life decisions, and bereavement, family therapists can play a valuable collaborative role in veterinary medicine through clinical services, education, and research (Hafen, Rush, Reisbig, McDaniel, & White, 2007).

### **THE ROLE OF PETS IN FAMILY THERAPY**

The health and mental health benefits of companion animals are finding application in a broad range of programs in institutional and community settings (see Walsh, 2009). The inclusion of pets in individual psychotherapy is becoming increasingly common, especially with children, since the pioneering work of Boris Levinson (1962, 1997). Yet there has been scant attention to human-animal bonds in family therapy

training and practice. As Melson and Fine (2006) note, family systems approaches have remained focused on human-human bonds. Clinicians seeking to understand family functioning and to identify resources for healing and resilience usually ask about important persons in kin and social networks but rarely consider animal companions.

In a consultation with a recently formed stepfamily experiencing relational upheaval, the 9-year-old-daughter, an only child, was invited to sketch a simple genogram showing her important relationships. As seen in Figure 1, in addition to her Dad, Mom, and Stepdad, she spontaneously included her dog Ginger, and her strong bond with her pet. This opened conversation about the importance of this bond, supporting her through the family transitions of divorce, remarriage, and move to a new neighborhood.

### Exploring the Role of Client Pets

To introduce inquiry, clinicians can note that pets often play important roles for individuals, couples, and families and can be valued members of clients' healing team. They can be potential resources in understanding and resolving problems, in fostering well-being, and in strengthening resilience in dealing with life challenges. It should be noted that service animals, trained to work with individuals challenged by disabilities, are not regarded as pets, yet they are all the more important for human partners and their caregivers (Walsh, 2009).

Pets (and service animals) should be included on the family genogram (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008), noting name, breed, age, health, and important dates (e.g., animal loss), with associated stressors and/or symptoms noted on the timeline. It is important to explore the following issues:

- meaning and significance of bonds with companion animals;
- involvement, concerns, or conflict about an animal in recent crisis/presenting problem;
- animal illness; recent or anticipated death or loss;
- animal's role in couple/family relationships (alliances, conflicts, triangles, losses);
- animal-related issues that may contribute to or express suffering or relational conflict;

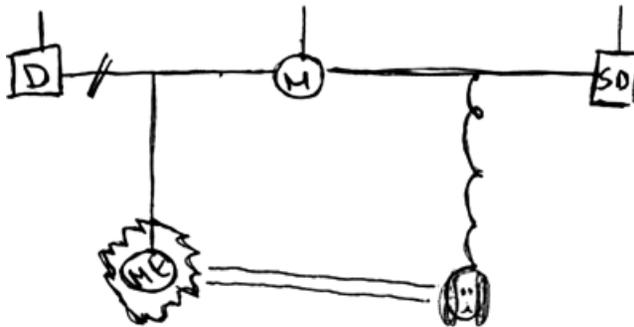


FIGURE 1. Young girl's genogram drawing of her most significant family members, revealing importance of bond with her dog in recent stepfamily transition.

- past importance of animals, for example, childhood pet bond or negative experience;
- role of animal(s) in coping with adversity; potential resource for resilience.

In family assessment, much can be learned about relational patterns by asking members about their companion animals. Although clients may initially be surprised by a therapist's interest, those with pets usually respond with rich descriptions of their bonds. Their stories can reveal important information about how the family system is organized, couple relationships, communication and problem-solving processes, and coping strategies with stressful situations. Learning about deliberate harm to pets, or seeing their neglect in home visits, may suggest risk or undisclosed abuse or neglect of human family members, because they so often coexist. Child cruelty to animals may be an indicator of other abuse in the family, and is an early risk factor for later violence toward humans.

It is also important to inquire about past experiences with animals. Clients often relate stories about unconditional love they have shared with a pet. Trauma survivors, particularly those who suffered sexual abuse, often say that only a pet made them feel safe and loved. Memories of a past bond with a pet at a time of distress can suggest the potential benefit of bringing a companion animal into their lives again as a relational resource. The loss of a cherished pet may be a major source of current distress.

In assessing the role of pets, clinicians should be cautious not to assume that problems involving pets necessarily indicate couple or family dysfunction or that their symptoms serve a function for the family. As research, above, has shown, emotional or behavioral distress in pets, as in human family members, may be reverberations in the family system from a crisis event or prolonged stress, such as financial strain or a loved one's illness or death. In some cases, an animal's own temperamental disposition, or the ramifications of its past neglect or abuse, can be challenging for even the healthiest families. A biopsychosocial systemic perspective is essential. Finally, it is important for clinicians to examine their own attitudes and experience regarding the importance of a pet in order to be sensitive to the meaning of this unique bond for clients.

### **Symbolic Use of Animals to Represent Relational Dynamics**

Therapists often draw on human connections with animals in the use of symbolism, metaphors, and stories, as well as puppet animals, especially with children (Melson & Fine, 2006). In family therapy practice, Peggy Papp, one of the most creative therapists, often brought animals metaphorically into the therapy process. In working with distressed couples, she would ask each partner to imagine the other and themselves in symbolic form, such as animals, as in a fantasy or dream. She then would choreograph their interaction in role play: the husband might act as a roaring lion and the wife as a timid mouse. Choosing and acting out animal roles injected playful humor, easing relational tensions, and yielded valuable insights on how they experienced each other and their needs for relationship change (Papp, 1982). Sometimes it revealed gender, power, and cultural issues, as well. In Japan, a number of women presented themselves as trapped animals: a bird in a golden cage with the husband holding the key and refusing to let her out, or a tigress in a cage pacing back and forth while the animal trainer cracked his whip (P. Papp, personal communication).

In the family play genogram technique developed by Monica McGoldrick (McGoldrick et al., 2008), clients choose animal and other miniature figures to represent key family members and relationships on a large genogram. Discussion about the choices reveals important feelings and perspectives on relationships and changes to repair and strengthen them. Imaginary conversations can be conducted among the miniatures. For example, the therapist might ask family members what the hummingbird (representing a beloved grandmother who had recently died) might say to comfort the sad turtle (representing a child). In one family struggling to cope after a parental separation, members were asked to choose figures representing resources they might draw upon. The father and older daughters chose figures representing aunts and close friends. The youngest child chose a dog, prompting laughter and agreement that their dog was their most loving resource (p. 266).

In other applications, Arad (2004) has developed an animal attribution storytelling technique: “If your mother were an animal, what animal would she be?” Rio (2001) describes a technique—“My family as animals”—to facilitate the inclusion of children in family therapy. In all cases, clinicians should be mindful that the significance and meaning of animals vary greatly, shaped by personal history and culture.

### **Animals in Therapy Sessions**

Although it seems unconventional to many in the mental health field to have a pet in the psychotherapy room, Sigmund Freud was the first to do so. As psychiatrist Roy Grinker (1979) recalled, Freud’s dogs were quite prominent in his year of psychoanalysis:

As a child I had been deathly afraid of dogs. Now Freud’s dogs naturally got the full force of my fears and hatreds. When I rang the bell [into] the waiting room . . . there would be a horrendous barking from the other side . . . and a great big wolfhound would attack me with its snout at the same level as my genitalia. So I entered Freud’s office with a high level of castration anxiety. (p. 9)

In the therapy sessions, Freud’s Chinese chow, Jofi, would sit alongside the couch. Whenever Jofi became restless, Freud would end the session early, so Grinker learned to bring treats for the dog in order to get his full time. Freud frequently offered comments and interpretations through his dog. When Jofi would get up and scratch at the door to be let out, Freud would say, “Jofi doesn’t approve of what you’re saying.” When the dog scratched at the door to be let back in, Freud would playfully say, “Jofi wants to give you another chance.” Grinker added, “Once when I was emoting with a great deal of vigor, the dog jumped on top of me, and Freud said, ‘You see, Jofi is so excited that you’ve been able to discover the source of your anxiety!’”

The first recorded pet in a family therapy session concerned a family whose son was so afraid of dogs that he could not leave home alone. The case was seen at Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic in the 1970s. The narrated videotape of sessions was widely used in family therapy training and the transcript was published in Haley’s (1976) influential book *Problem-solving Therapy*. The title of the case report, “A Modern Little Hans,” was inspired by Freud’s (1909) case of Little Hans, describing his psychotherapy with a boy who was afraid of horses. Freud interpreted the source of the phobia as castration anxiety, due to repressed sexual longing for his mother and fear of

his father's punishment. The family systems approach, applying a structural model, connected symptoms to the mother's over-involvement and the father's peripheral position. Family therapy sessions with mother, father, and son aimed at realigning their relationships around solving the presenting problem. Using techniques of directives and paradoxical intention, the therapist instructed the family to adopt a dog—not just any dog, but a dog that was afraid—and to bring the dog to a therapy session to help the boy cure the dog of its fear. They arrived with a small puppy in a box and soon enacted the problem. (And the puppy peed on the floor.) The therapist, noting that the father was a mail carrier, suggested that he was clearly an expert because he dealt with all kinds of dogs every day. He encouraged him to share his expertise in handling dogs with his son and the puppy in the session. As the boy's confidence and the father-son bond grew, the boy's symptoms rapidly subsided, and therapy shifted to strengthen the parents' relationship.

### **Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT)**

Companion animals were commonly used as therapeutic resources in psychiatric institutions in the late 19th century (Fine, 2006a). Their therapeutic role diminished with the advent of scientific medicine, strict conventions in psychoanalysis, and negative views about animals by early behavioral psychologists. In the 1960s, child psychologist Boris Levinson was influential in opening the mental health field to the impact that pets can have in therapy. Levinson (1962, 1997) described the benefits that his dog brought to his counseling sessions with children and adolescents in reducing anxiety and opening withdrawn patients to positive engagement with others. His case studies encouraged further research and practice. To date, research has not kept pace with the growing use of this promising complementary approach, known as AAT (sometimes called pet-facilitated therapy or pet cotherapy) (Fine, 2006b; Hooker, Freeman, & Stewart, 2002).

AAT involves the use of the therapist's companion animal, most often a dog, as an integral part of the treatment process. The inclusion of an animal enhances the therapeutic milieu and facilitates change through interactions with clients. A number of small studies (Fine, 2006b) show benefits for healing and positive development in individual and group therapy formats in a variety of inpatient and outpatient settings, such as a group treatment model for sexually abused girls (Reichert, 1994). Some therapists do walking therapy with their dog and client. Others use horse-riding therapeutically (Burgon, 2003). Canine crisis intervention is also used to mitigate traumatic stress. For example, grief counselors have brought trained crisis-response "comfort dogs" to college campuses after a mass shooting has occurred to assist returning students.

The inclusion of a therapist's pet in psychotherapy can provide a number of benefits (Fine, 2006b). Because therapy sessions can arouse intense anxiety, the simple presence of friendly animals can have a calming effect and foster a sense of security, especially in initial contacts. Stroking or playing with pets at the start of sessions decreases tensions and builds rapport and trust in the therapeutic relationship. Even a tropical fish tank has been shown to enhance the therapeutic milieu, conveying that the therapy setting is a safe place. Most clients, especially children, relate and interact easily with pets in sessions—talking to them and through them. Laughter and joy at animal antics brightens mood. Having pets in sessions also facilitates exploration and awareness of

feelings. Holding and stroking them is soothing and comforting when threatening issues or highly charged feelings arise. This reduces anxiety and increases comfort with the therapeutic process, facilitating positive change. It can also moderate escalating conflict between spouses or overactive, impulsive behavior of a child. Animal misbehavior also provides teachable moments and learning opportunities for parents in handling child behavior problems as therapists model discipline or problem-solving strategies with positive reinforcement and clarify what the animal is seeking.

Pets often are a catalyst for release and discussion of deep emotions and suffering. Sensitive issues can often be broached through pet contact. Fine (2006b) recounts a session with an 8-year-old girl referred for depression. Intrigued by the birds in his therapy room, she reached out to touch one. He explained that she needed to ask permission. He then let her scratch the bird's head, but added that there were places where the bird did not like to be touched. She replied, "I know what you mean" (p. 176). Soon after, she revealed her experience of sexual abuse by a grandparent. The interactions served as a catalyst in opening the discussion.

Family therapist David Wohlsifer (2008) has related his experience working with his canine cotherapist, Jake, as in the following case:

When Sean began to tell his story of childhood sexual abuse he started to sob. My therapy dog, Jake, came over and nuzzled his snout into his face. Sean hugged Jake tightly and continued to tell his story while I sat watching my cotherapist Jake do his work. After Sean finished his story, I praised him for his strength and courage in going to such a personal and painful place in sharing his story with me. Sean looked up and said, "I didn't tell my story to you; I told it to Jake."

Sean began a new relationship with Peter, who joined him for several sessions to work on Sean's trust and safety issues with intimacy and sex. At the start of sessions Sean would light up when he saw Jake. Together, he and Peter would hug Jake and playfully roughhouse with him, laughing as he would roll on his back so they could rub his belly. Sean later remarked that the interest, warmth, and caring Peter showed to Jake helped him to trust Peter to love him without hurting him.

In my own clinical work I have experienced the beneficial influence of having my pet in sessions. Recently I received a letter from a former client thanking me for our work several years ago concerning her inability to love again since the death of her boyfriend, soon after the death of her beloved grandmother. She told me how powerful it had been that my dog, Targa, lay at her feet during our sessions. She had never had a dog and was initially apprehensive, but somehow the dog's touch and calm presence gave her courage to open up and heal deep pain that she had never reached in previous psychotherapy. She also felt more deeply connected to me in the sessions through my dog. She wanted me to know that our conversations—and especially Targa—had changed her life. She had returned to her hometown, moved out of her parents' home, and adopted a dog. She soon fell in love, married, and now has a beautiful child whose delight with animals brought back memories of Targa.

The therapist's careful selection and certification of a therapy animal, rigorous healthcare and monitoring, and informed consent by clients are all essential (Fine, 2006b; see Delta Society, Standards of Practice, <http://www.Deltasociety.org>; Therapy Dogs International, <http://www.tdi.org>). Clinicians should be aware of any client concerns, such as fears or allergies, before introducing animals in therapy. Some may

not respond to animals, have had negative experiences, or are simply afraid of them. Thus, the advisability and effect of pet-assisted interventions will vary and they may not be appropriate in many cases.

### **Including Client Pets in Therapy Sessions**

It can be helpful in some cases to include client pets in therapy sessions, especially where the bond is crucial for physical or emotional wellbeing. Observation and discussion of client interactions with pets in the therapy room or a home visit can yield important information about relational dynamics. In some cases, a pet may bring its human companion to therapy:

Sondra consulted with me about a troubling dilemma: she felt controlled and imprisoned in her apartment by her small dog, Rex. She was becoming increasingly isolated and depressed. She couldn't leave Rex alone; she thought he looked depressed much of the time and would be too upset. I asked her more about this bond. She replied, "I'm confused; he's very cute and I'm sort of attached to him but not sure I love him. Yet I feel that he needs me and I can't abandon him. He whimpers if I don't want him in my bed. So I let him sleep with me, but I toss and turn all night. It's terrible; I don't know what to do." Asked how she acquired the pup, she said that she had been in a serious relationship with Sylvio, very much wanting to marry and have a child together. However, his possessive, controlling behavior led her to break up with him, despite his pleas not to leave him. At their last meeting to say goodbye, he surprised her with the gift of this puppy. She had not wanted a dog, but felt obliged to accept it, as she felt guilty leaving Sylvio when he loved her so much. "Hah!"—she interjected—"I left the man but I can't leave the dog he gave me!"

Sondra brought Rex to our next session for me to meet him. She immediately held up the puppy, saying "look at him, doesn't he look depressed? I think he knows I'm confused about him." Sondra sat down, cradled Rex in her arms, and smiled lovingly at him through tears. I suggested that maybe her tangled emotions about Rex could help us understand some unresolved issues in her relationship with Sylvio. In our discussion, she acknowledged that she had trouble standing up for herself not only with Rex, but with men, and feared being controlled like her mother was by her father. As she gained ability in setting limits with Rex and resumed going out with friends, her depression lifted and she felt more loving toward the pup—and toward Sylvio. With new confidence in asserting her needs, she requested couples therapy with Sylvio to see if the relationship could succeed on new terms, and if not, to say goodbye for good. But, she added, either way, she now was sure about keeping Rex in her life and her heart.

### **CONCLUSION**

The rich and complex role pets play in couple and family life has been documented in exploratory studies and clinical anecdotes, but family systems research has scarcely considered their influence. Many family therapists are keenly interested in the subject, sharing stories about their own pets and remarking on ways that pets are drawn into couple and family dynamics. Yet family systems training and clinical assessment rarely include these bonds. Likewise, there is growing interest in AAT in individually oriented clinical practice with children and adults, yet its application in systemic approaches is only beginning to be explored. This paper is intended to stimulate greater attention in systems-oriented research, theory, training, and practice.

Melson and Fine (2006) contend that the blinders to the role of pets in families stem from a “humanocentric” (or anthropocentric) perspective, viewing only human interpersonal bonds as significant. They argue for a paradigm shift to a “biocentric” orientation, encompassing our connections with other species and the natural world. This holistic perspective, in essence, is resonant with the systemic orientation espoused by Gregory Bateson (1979) and at the very foundation of family therapy theory and practice. Including companion animals as valuable resources in systemic assessments and interventions can inform and enrich therapeutic work with couples and families.

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#### INTERNET RESOURCES

*Best Friends Animal Society*. <http://www.bestfriends.org/aboutus/>  
*Delta Society*. <http://www.deltasociety.org>  
*Therapy Dogs International*. <http://www.tdi.org>

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