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Maintaining the Bond Through Living Memorialization

Continuing bonds and confronting loss

When a someone we love dies, including a beloved animal companion, we may think that the bond has been broken—that our relationship with this incredible being is over. But memory is a way of maintaining the bond. It isn't just the memory of a loved one that is kept alive, but the relationship itself.

Over breakfast a few weeks ago, I had a very interesting conversation with Emily Mroz, a psychology graduate student at the University of Florida, and her faculty mentor, psychology professor Susan Bluck. Both are working in the area of memory. Mroz's dissertation research, in collaboration with Bluck, focuses on human memorializing the death of a loved one. But as they telling me about their work, I thought it was perhaps applicable to companion animals as well.

Mroz and Bluck begin with what psychologists call continuing bonds—the idea that healthy grieving can best be achieved by seeking to create 'continuing bonds' with the dead rather than by trying hard to 'let go.' Instead of trying to forget, we seek to remember.

One of the ways in which remembrance, or continuing bonds, can be maintained is through memorializing, particularly through concrete physical reminders of the dead. But not all memorializing is the same, Mroz and Bluck's research suggests. Some forms of memorializing may enhance continuing bonds better than others.

Consider two different approaches to memorializing.

Continuing Intimacy (Remembering the loved one's life): some objects or behaviors trigger memories of the loved one as alive and well, as part of our daily life. These objects or behaviors foster "recall of shared memories" and help "maintain a sense of the relationship even after death." (p. 4) Some examples, from the human realm, might include wearing a necklace or hat that used to belong to the deceased or telling stories about them. "This type of memorial," says Mroz, "is likely to provide rich memory cues to aid in sustaining recall over time, thereby helping individuals with the emotionally meaningful goal of remembering their loved one and promoting continuing bonds." (p. 5)

Confronting Loss (Remembering a loved one's death): some forms of memorialization focus attention on the person's death rather than on their life. Mroz suggests, for example, that an urn full of cremated ashes on the mantle or a tattoo with the date of death serve to remind the mourner that their loved one has died. They focus attention on the loss, and thus don't serve to "forge connections to the life of the loved one" and thus don't sustain a continuing bond. These types of memorial practices may indicate that the mourner is "grappling with the sometimes overwhelming reality that the loss is final," "may perpetuate mal-adaptive post-loss attachment" (p, 16) and may be a symptom of complicated grief.

Research indicates that memorializing practices that focus on remembering the living are more liking to maintain a continuing feeling of intimacy, are more likely to promote continuing bonds, and are possibly also likely to assist in the grieving process than practices that focus on remembering the dead.

Mroz and Bluck have also looked at some of the possible influences that predict individual "memorializing preferences." A greater acceptance of death as natural and inevitable and a belief in an afterlife appear to be linked with a preference for remembering the living, while those who have had a disturbing experience with death in the past show a preference for remembering the dead.

Since my conversation with them, I've been thinking about the implications of Mroz and Bluck's work within my own area of specialization: end of life care for animals and their human companions. Would her findings about continuing bonds, and the benefits of choosing forms of memorialization that emphasize the living, extend into the realm of

pet memorialization? If so, this might provide useful guidance for veterinarians and mental health professionals who deal with pet bereavement. Some of the most common forms of pet memorialization—the clay pawprint taken just after a euthanasia, the urn of cremated remains returned a week or two after death—seem like reminders of the death, not of the life of an animal. In looking around my own house at the memorials I have of my dog Ody (who died in 2009), the pawprint and urn are (incidentally) pushed way back on the top of a bookshelf. Before talking with Mroz and Bluck, I hadn't thought about the fact that these remind me of the day we had Ody euthanized—one of the worst days of my life—and maybe this is why I have, without quite realizing it, pushed these back from view. On prominent display, hanging from the lamp on my desk, is Ody's collar, which reminds me of our daily runs, and which are (I now see) an attempt to remember him doing what he loved best.

Illustration Source: Wikimedia Commons

References

Mroz, E., & Bluck, S. (2017). In Memory: Predicting Preferences for Memorializing Lost Loved Ones. Paper submitted to: Death Studies.