



Pet Bereavement Care in Practice Mini Series

Session 1: Pet-People Relationships: Attachment

Dr Sue Dawson MBPsS



Session one **Pet Bereavement Care in Practice: Pet-people Relationships: attachment**

Within veterinary practice it is vital to have a basic understanding of human-companion animal relationships, as this is the foundation for building **partnerships in care** with clients. Nowhere is this understanding more important than at times of delivering a terminal prognosis and in providing **bereavement care for grieving clients**. Companion animal caregivers have an expectation that veterinary professionals will have an understanding of the importance of their relationship with their pet and because pet bereavement is a societally **disenfranchised loss** (i.e. not recognised as significant in white western societies) it is essential veterinary professionals develop some kind of understanding of a basic psychology of the human-companion relationship (i.e. pet-person relationship). To gain understanding of human attachments to pets, it is helpful to look at attachment theories and the purpose of attachment.

Unlike the BSAVA and BVNA here in the UK, The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) provides a statement defining the HCAR (which in the USA is referred to as the human-animal bond: HAB), locating its relevance at the heart of veterinary practice:

The human-animal bond is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviours that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes but is not limited to emotional, psychological and physical interactions of people, animals and the environment. The veterinarian's role in the human-animal bond is to maximize potentials of this relationship between people and animals. (AVMA 2006).

The AVMA further recognises: the existence of the pet-person relationship and its importance to client and community health; that the human-companion animal relationship has existed for thousands of years and has major significance for veterinary medicine because as veterinary medicine serves society, it fulfils both human and animal needs. In its recognition of the centrality of the human-companion animal relationship (i.e. the pet-person relationship) within veterinary practice the **AVMA recognises this relationship as an attachment and validates its importance to the individual and to wider society.**

At present the most dominant theoretical model for understanding human-companion animal relationships is Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). **Attachment theory** can be used to understand companion-animals within family systems and also shed light onto how individuals within systems have the potential to impact on each other both positively and negatively. The term **attachment** refers to a **mutual and intense relationship** between two individuals. Although reciprocity need not be present, e.g. someone can be attached to someone else who does not feel attached towards them. Within veterinary practice it is not unusual to encounter emotionally intense human-companion relationships; caregivers can become deeply involved with their companion animal. Similarly companion animals can become anxiously attached to their caregivers resulting in welfare concerns such as anxiety separation distress and other behavioural difficulties. **Attachment** as a term is most often used to describe relationships between parent-child usually mother-child.

There are **four characteristics** associated with attachment:

- Proximity seeking particularly in times of distress
- Distress at separation (separation anxiety)
- Pleasure at reunion
- General orientation towards the primary caregiver

When reflecting on professional practice it is easy to make real-life connections with attachment theory from observing behaviour of both person and non-human animal and listening carefully to language used to talk about pets.

The function of attachment is safety, security and survival. Certainly companion animals rely on their human partners/caregivers to provide for them and protect their welfare. Some caregivers describe their pets as being like “children,” likely echoing this dependence. Some companion animals have been selectively bred to culture neotenous characteristics: large eyes, domed foreheads e.g. Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. This physical appearance of vulnerability generates a “cute response” to elicit nurturing and caring behaviour. For some caregivers this relational parent-child metaphor is embodied anthropomorphically e.g. dressing their pets, particularly dogs, in infant like clothing treating them as surrogate human babies. This kind of behaviour is meeting some inner psychological attachment need of the caregiver and taken to extremes, severely compromise animal welfare.

From a psychological perspective attachment objects satisfy comfort and security needs, for some companion-animal caregivers this may be the function of their relationship with their pet. Observing how clients relate to their pets in consults, the waiting room and paying careful attention clients use to talk about their pets in particular metaphors, e.g. “he’s my baby;” “she is my world” can provide valuable insight into how the pet is perceived and its psychological representation in the life world of the client. Understanding attachment is key in understanding human reactions to loss.

Locating and understanding the facets of the HCAR:

Recent UK research investigating human attachment to pets (Dawson 2007) identified what has become known as the **facets of the HCAR**, essentially revealing the “ingredients” that can make up a close human-companion animal relationship: **exclusivity**, an owner’s sense of having a “special” bond with, being chosen/preferred by their pet; **having caring, nurturing role** for a pet which includes rescuing animals and the nurturing of young animals; **a pet’s personality/perceived individuality** i.e. the owner experiencing and relating to their pet as an individual, seeing them as irreplaceable and unique and possessing a “personality;” **perceived reciprocity** involving talking to a CA, mutual trust, and non-sexual love; **the pet’s family member status** this extends to the use of human familial metaphors to describe human/companion animal relationships e.g. like a brother/sister, like a child or surrogate parent, (further revealing the relational qualities experienced by owners); **duration of time spent together**, i.e. length of ownership, amount of time spent together during the day and night; **proximity** (emotional and physical) – a sense of closeness, sustained need for actual physical proximity of the pet; **compatibility** with owner’s own personality (either complimentary or similar), appearance and behaviour (Dawson 2007). **The facets of the human-companion animal relationship** can be applied as a helpful tool to gaining understanding of how clients may perceive and relate to their pets, essentially revealing the nature of their attachment.

Self-Psychology (Brown, 2004; Dawson, 2007) is also applied for understanding HCARs. Developed by Heinz Kohut (1913-1981) Self Psychology grew from psychoanalytic theory but broke away from traditional Freudian thinking by focussing on development of early personality structures arising from mother-child relationships in infancy. **Empathy - the capacity to recognise feelings expressed by another - is construed as a central process within Self Psychology.** In particular attention is given to failures of parental empathy in infancy and its impact on the developing child in terms of learning to self-regulate emotions.

The “**self**” and the “self-object” are the two main concepts within Self Psychology (Brown, 2004).

The self is seen as the psychological structure at the centre of the personality and this provides the person with his or her overall sense of self and cohesion (Wolf, 1988, 1994; Brown, 2004).

The self is composed of values, beliefs, ambitions, skills and innate talents and abilities where there is miss-match of ambition and skill or ability, frustration and tension is likely to result, e.g. someone has ideals of becoming a supermodel but does not grow tall enough. Essentially where the ideal self does not meet the actual self, disequilibrium can result. To maintain a sense of balance and construct a continuous sense of self people look for certain responses from others or their environment. These psychologically sustaining responses' include empathy, calming and soothing responses (Brown, 2004; Dawson, 2007).

These responses help to promote a sense of self and are provided by "objects" i.e. people, non-human animals, careers, activities, things or ideas. **Scientific studies support that companion animals can have a soothing and calming effect on people who are experiencing stress (Allen, Blasovich, Tomaka & Kelsey, 1991);** the calming effect that companion animals can have on people can be conceptualised as a self object function. This helps maintain the sense of the owner's self and is vital in constructing self-cohesion. It is therefore not the pet itself but the function the pet has in the caregivers/owner's life that provides the self object function maintaining the owner's self-cohesiveness. **This can help in understanding how and why some caregivers are completely broken emotionally and fragmented when their pet dies or is lost.**

Caregivers may be more reliant on their relationship with their pet than they are with other human beings. For this reason it is appropriate to offer referral information advice to bereaved owners or those experiencing anticipatory grief in advance of the death of their pet. It is essentially the person's internal experience of the their relationship with the pet that determines whether that relationship provides a self object function in their life-world and whether this relationship is central within self-cohesion. Sue Ellen Brown (2004) delineated three types of self-object functions that caregiver relationships with companion animals may provide, that could be central within self-cohesion:

- **Mirroring self objects** – provide affirmation and confirmation of worth and goodness; e.g. the experience of caring for a pet, looking after a sick or injured companion animal, feeling "loved" by the animal.
- **Idealizable self object** – sustain a sense of self by enabling someone to feel part of an admired, protective, calm self-object e.g. an owner who shows their pet may feel a sense of being part of the admired cat or dog at the show when it wins a trophy; similarly there can be a sense of merger in experiencing the gentleness, calm, and soothing non-anxious acceptance of a pet.
- **Alter-ego self objects** (often referred to as twinship self-objects) provide a sense of essential likeness to self e.g. a status dog owned by a young man who wishes to project an image of toughness, strength and masculinity.

It is important to keep in mind not all pet owners' experiencing of their relationship with their pet will provide a self-object function. To provide a self-object function this experience must be central in constructing self-cohesion and a sense of self. However Self Psychology seems to provide the most useful model for understanding different ways people relate to and experience their pets. The key to understanding the relationship lies in the presence **empathy** and the owner's ability for empathy and recognition of the pet as a separate being to self. Where owners are enmeshed with their pet, there might well be empathy but the fundamental (subconscious) function of the relationship is to meet the owner's own needs rather than the individual species specific needs of the pet. Merger and enmeshment between owner and pet can result in animal welfare being compromised and/or second to the owner's needs, e.g. training a status dog to fight as a means of projecting a tough image of self regardless of the consequences to the animal.

Archaic and mature self-object relating

There are considered to be two ways of self-object relating: archaic and mature. The main difference lies in the ability to empathize and see self-objects as separate to self. Brown (2004) describes this as self-centredness verses other-centeredness. If a caregiver relates maturely to their companion animal they see it as a sentient, separate being to self and are more clearly able to see its emergent welfare needs regardless of the impact of these on themselves. **End of life care, euthanasia decision making are examples of where enmeshment can interfere with more objective evaluation of quality of life for the animal and making a decision for the pet to protect them from suffering, even though euthanasia may cause great distress and suffering to the pet's caregiver.**

If a pet owner relates to their companion animal as an archaic self-object they perceive and understand their pet anthropomorphically and as an extension of themselves. This can result in treating them as human beings, e.g. feeding them human food and too many treats resulting in obesity and obesity related disease and disability but the owner will be under the impression their behaviour is an expression of "love" for their animal. Similarly archaic self-object relating can result in treating dogs as humans in the home, disregarding the dog's need for a pack hierarchy causing behavioural problems sometimes even resulting in attacks on humans. In trying to understand the psychology behind status dogs both handbag dogs and fighting dogs, it is necessary to look at the type of self-object relating identify this is likely to be a form of archaic self-object relating meeting the needs of the owner; the dog is merely an extension of self. Within veterinary practice constantly reinforcing separateness is key in communicating with owners and advocating for animal welfare. Validating the role the pet has whilst simultaneously locating, emphasising and reinforcing separateness may build a working partnership for animal welfare.

Pets as transitional objects

There is also the likelihood that some pets function as transitional objects (in-between beings) which helps in understanding the ease at which some owners may relinquish dogs and other pets so apparently easily, they have served their function in the life-world of their owners who do not experience the relationship as providing a self-object function so are easily able to detach themselves. Exploring owner expectations of a new pet after bereavement, understanding possible psychological representations in context of their family circumstances may help some people to realise pet ownership is not for them at this moment in time and will not meet what may be very unrealistic and idealistic expectations. There may be other animal-related outlets available for some people, e.g. becoming a cat socialiser at a local animal shelter or a dog walker without taking on the responsibility of a pet in the family. **Understanding human attachments to their pets, past and perceived future pets can not only benefit the owner in enabling more individual personalised client care, but can also importantly really make a positive impact in protecting animal welfare.**

Creating a bond-centred practice

In the USA the benefits to human and animal welfare of adopting what has become known as a bond centred approach to veterinary practice is recognised. Putting the pet-person relationship at the heart of practice better enables veterinary professionals respond to and support pet owner's emotional needs created by the human-companion animal bond, (Lagoni et al 2001). Owners' emotional needs can be identified as:-

- **Trust in the veterinary team** – gained through honesty, familiarity, a sense of equality generated by involvement in decisions regarding treatment and care, this extends to palliative and bereavement care.

- **Personalised focused attention** – a bespoke service, e.g. enabled through uninterrupted consults, allowing enough time for each consult, active verbal recognition of the individual pet person bond; support through long term health conditions and bereavement.
- **Information – from multiple sources** e.g. practice website, given verbally in consults; written information in leaflet/hand-out form; verbal and written in nurse facilitated clinics e.g. continuing care clinics (a fusion of palliative and bereavement care)
- **Acknowledgement of and response to the human-companion animal relationship** – verbal recognition of the individuality of the pet (companion animal); **validation of the relationship between pet and person**; actively support to maintain the bond e.g. through provision of community nursing for housebound owners or those with other additional needs, access to practice enabled temporary pet fostering at times of crisis; through sensitive and caring bereavement support.
- **Confidence in the veterinary team's ability to identify and respond to sensitive issues**
- **Validation of intuition, observations and perceptions regarding their pet's health** – involving listening to and valuing owners' subjective perspectives which be enabled through applied use of illness trajectory mapping.