



Welcome to this Courageous Conversation, the newest installment of the 'Let's Talk About Grief' awareness campaign. In this discussion, we delve into the grief of losing a pet, with a special emphasis on palliative care and end-of-life options.

Griefline's Louisa Smith is joined by Dr. Jackie Campbell, founder of Sunset Vets, who shares her insights on supporting families to deliver peaceful pet euthanasia and pet palliative care at home.

Louisa

So welcome to today's courageous conversation. I am honoured to be joined by Dr. Jackie Campbell, founder of Sunset Vets, which is Australia's largest dedicated palliative care service for pets. Welcome, Jackie. Thank you. So I'm a pet owner. I have a 13-year-old toy spoodle and she is divine coco so as a pet owner, I also know that experiencing grief and loss is inevitable.

So what are the unique aspects of grief experienced by pet owners, humans. And how does it compare to grieving? Say, another human.

Jackie

Yeah, look, I mean, I think, as pet owners, we all kind of know and experience that they just don't live as long as we want them to, and you know it's never long enough. And I talk a lot when I'm counseling the families that I work with about this this kind of.

You know, shifting age that we see, and they experience that aging process more rapidly.

So it is. It's part of that inevitable process that, as pet owners. We will all go through, and I think sometimes the grief that is associated with that end-of-life period can sometimes take people by surprise. So there's some similarities in how we would grieve around the loss of a pet. And then there's some unique elements to it as well.

So you know, as a as a kind of broad statement, I think in many ways it's no different, particularly for the families that we would work with in that end-of-life period that their pets are just as important to them as any other family member, sometimes more so, and so that grief can really be a significant life event for them.

What we find that is a little bit unique sometimes to the experience of pet loss is that oftentimes we are working through these quality of life decisions with families. And so, as our pets approach that end of life period, either just through aging, or maybe they have been diagnosed with the terminal illness.

There's often a lot of decision making that we have to make for them about. You know their quality of life, and ultimately for many pets. It's a decision around euthanasia and that choice to let them go in a more gentle way. And so the very unique element, I guess, of pet loss. Grief is often that that guilt. So we've got the loss and the sadness. But we've also sometimes got this layering of guilt around the decision making in the sense that we're sometimes actively making this choice to end this pet's life, and that can be really complex for some people. So we see, you know, a lot of anticipatory grief. We see a lot of complex grief.

And we also, you know, see a lot of very natural and normal grieving and that can be a really unique, beautiful element of it. Sometimes we're working with these families. And it's the young children's 1st experience with loss and grief. So that can sometimes be a really positive thing to work through as well.

Louisa

For sure. Yeah. So I mean, look, we. I think the unique love that we have for our pets is really centered around their unconditional love for us, and you know I guess you know we always have their wellbeing front of mind, I guess, because of that love that they have for us. So when they do face a serious illness and are, or are approaching that end of life.

I know that palliative care can play a crucial role in maintaining their quality of the time that they have left with us, and providing them comfort, and I guess, ensuring their dignity? As our as our very beloved friends. So what does palliative care for a pet entail? And how does it provide that comfort and dignity to them?

Jackie

Yeah, great question. So palliative care essentially is, is this approach that we would take to medical decision making. And most commonly we're applying it at end of life, where we start to shift the goals of care a little bit. So we may be making decisions that are more focused on comfort, and not necessarily kind of chasing that curative outcome the pet.

So it's a very holistic kind of approach to how we look after both the kind of medical needs of the pet, and at sunset. We kind of are often supporting decision making around pain management plans. And that's a really key element of what we do. Is there more we can do to make this pet more comfortable, either through a change in the medications that they're on, or we're thinking about things like their environment.

What does their day-to-day living look like? And can we make recommendations around things like physio and exercise and appropriate flooring that they're kind of navigating in the home. Those key things can

really impact quality of life in a really positive way. If we're looking at those final weeks where it's so important, right?

So definitely palliative care is about that medical kind of process for the pet. But the other element is really all around the client care piece. So that family how are we supporting? You know the things that are impacting their daily quality of life. And we talk a lot about this this concept around caregiver Burden, which I know we see in human health as well. The caregivers often, you know, may be having challenges with what we as a medical team are actually asking of them when it comes to the daily care.

So what we try to do is, I guess, bring that all together with a really clear conversation with owners about what their end of life goals are for their pet, what's important to them? Where's their line in the sand? What does quality of life look like for their individual pet and for their family unit?

And so it's this beautiful mesh of looking after the patient and looking after the family and the people as well, and how we kind of get all of those kind of competing needs to align into a holistic treatment plan. So yeah, that's what I guess we aim to focus on. And it, and it's all really around. Can we make everybody more comfortable and taking a breath sometimes in a moment, to appreciate that we may be in those end weeks. And what does that look like, as far as the things we want to do for that parent and that family unit?

Louisa

So for our listeners, who may not own a pet or haven't had a pet age and have come to that end of life experience. Yet. Can you share a story where the palliative care process has been a positive experience for both the pet and the owner.

Jackie

Yeah, look, I mean, I think we see positive impacts sometimes across the whole spectrum of people associated with the lives of our pets. So you

know. Certainly we've got many scenarios where as I say, we've been supporting a family to care for their pet. But then there's been neighbors involved in that caregiving and community members that have kind of become involved in that end of life process so that can be can be a really positive thing as well. And, as you say sometimes for people who have not experienced pet loss before, or they're not particularly pet people.

Having kind of exposure to any of this death and grief. Literacy stuff is actually really positive. So we will see all sorts of medical presentations for the families that we work with. You know, many times we might be called to help or assess a family where they've been given a certain diagnosis, and we can look at ways in which we can better manage particularly pain, and where we think that we maybe have 6 months of life left, you know we're still there supporting them 12 or 18 months later.

So many, many stories like that will happen in the context of palliative care where we get those key clinical decisions right? Equally. Sometimes the reverse happens. And we have less time that we think. And so our role there really is around.

How do we help guide those owners through what? What can be really confronting, where the timeframes are different, to what we were hoping or expecting. And we have a crisis type situation. So yeah, look, lots and lots of wonderful stories about how we help both the pets. But also the secondary and tertiary people that might come into contact with those animals.

You know, I've had beautiful euthanasia appointments where we've been, you know, in the garden of a street, and neighbours have, you know, attended those visitations, and we've had a community involvement in a in a goodbye for a pet. So wide and diverse, I guess, is, is the take home for how we would support people. But the key concept being around that that comfort outcome at end of life.

Louisa

Oh, that's so lovely! And I know that it would be probably one of the most challenging decisions a pet owner would ever a human being would ever have to make in their life. To euthanize their loved pet, beloved pet. So I know that, you know, grief line exists to support people through all kinds of loss, including the death of a pet. But I know that there's not a huge amount of other supports available to emotionally guide people through this process.

But I know that sunset vets offer this unique additional service to pet owners. So can you just explain to me what the importance is of providing that emotional care and support to pet owners through the process, and then, after the death of their pet.

Jackie

Yeah, look, I think what we know is that pet owners who are supported through their grief, as you say, both before and after that actual loss. We know that their outcomes are better. So they process grief in a more kind of normal way. We see less complex grief. And typically, we see measurable things like that return to pet ownership again sooner in certain circumstances. And so when we get into the intricacies of the value and the benefits that our pets bring kind of on a on a human level of wellness. Those things are really, really key.

And so I think that again, if we look at that key unique component of pet loss grief around the guilt it really does require. Someone who at least has given thought to the fact that as they're supporting this person through grief. These people may have made this active decision to end a life, and whilst we do that in in an attempt to kind of mitigate or manage any suffering that we can't medically alleviate anymore. There is a lot of complex emotion around that, and we know that these pets are linked sometimes to, you know. Complex backstories, you know, will be sometimes supporting.

You know, a family member in the pit was owned by another family member who has now passed. So there's these complex layerings of the loss of that pet is sometimes kind of reopening some of those grief wounds.

So it is a bit of a unique area where we just want people to kind of understand that these pets really are important to families, and that there sometimes is more beneath the kind of surface around the decisions that have been made that that can be a challenge for people if they're not well supported. And it's amazing that that groups like growth liner are there specifically with this kind of knowledge of what people's grief looks like. It does seem to me that it's not just the loss and the trauma, but the grief that makes it very, very unique in the context of a euthanasia decision.

Louisa

Hmm! So I want to know in your experience what it's been like to see children as part of this process as well, because I'm sure that there are people watching and listening to this conversation that might not consider involving their children in that process and being present as their pet dies. What's your thoughts and experience around that? And having witnessed some families, you know, with their children present through the process.

Jackie

Yeah, look, I think it's definitely something where we would encourage families to have that conversation ahead of the decision making. And obviously every family is going to be, you know, unique in its own right. But often there's a lot of fear around how children will react. And thinking that we need to shield them from that experience and shield them from that grief.

In many circumstances it can be a very positive thing for children to be present at the decision making points and present at the euthanasia depending on the context and depending on the child. So there's certainly a kind of recommendation that we would, we would have families working with

their veterinarian and planning for these appointments and seeking guidance on what is it going to look like?

What are the processes involved as we were approaching that euthanasia appointment, and I think, from my experience, often you know, giving children that space and that capacity to experience and then express their grief is often very, very healthy, and sometimes it can be, you know, really helpful as well for the parents. You know, we work with a lot of families, I guess, where the dog or the cat was the 1st child. And so, you know, it's important as children come into that family unit that we're kind of managing the emotions of everybody during those appointments. In the context of what sunset vets does. We're working often in the home environment for these euthanasia. So stepping out of the hospital setting, and that can be maybe slightly more manageable if we have a number of children kind of in their own home, where they can step in or out of that appointment as they please.

But equally, you know, a lot of veterinary hospitals have really focused on managing and helping grief for clients. So things like grieving rooms and comfort rooms are now becoming more commonplace within those hospital settings, and I think we're getting we're getting better and better at recognising how important our pets are and doing this stuff better.

Louisa

Yeah, most definitely, and having conversations like this, so that we can share with others in the in our communities. Around the importance of having conversations about death and grief, and being realistic about managing the end of life options, I guess, available to our pets. And I guess on that final note. I just wanted you to share with our listeners a little bit about sunset vets. Where are you located? If if people want to know more about the work that you do, how they can. How can they find you?

Jackie

Yeah. So look, we are a mobile palliative care team, and we have vets in numerous locations around the country. So our goal, I guess, is to endeavour to support families through this this kind of transition period at end of life. And wherever possible. You know we would endeavour to work with that primary care veterinary team to provide this additional palliative support. And, as I said, we work in the home.

So we come into the home environment. We'll be assessing the patient in that location and working through both the medical plan for the pet and also that emotional support piece for the client as we as we prepare sometimes for that initial decision where that's the appropriate pathway. So, yeah, look, we're certainly accessible across a number of locations in Australia. We also, as you mentioned, do have some additional supports around the grief side of things, and that is available to people nationally. So we can facilitate some support, you know, by telehealth solutions as well. And there's also some resources.

I guess if people are facing some of these decisions, you know, in the near future for their own family unit with their own pet. Some of our digital resources, like our quality of life assessment forms, may be useful and helpful to people as well.

Louisa

Oh, thank you so much for sharing that information, and we'll be sure to also include links in our show notes and wherever you're viewing this video, you'll be able to see in the comments, the link to the Sunset Vets website. So I just want to thank you again, Jackie, for joining us for this courageous conversation. And please stay in touch, and we'll continue to support each other in this important space.

Jackie

Yeah, thank you so much, Louise. A pleasure to be yeah. Having this conversation with you. It's an important one.

Louisa

Thank you.