

Senior Citizen Pet Owners

by Dr. Wallace Sife

Single senior citizens who have pets tend to be extremely affectionate with them. For many reasons there is always a lot more emotional dependency involved in this kind human-pet of relationship. Although the older person's health and mobility is deteriorating, the love for and from the pet is steadfast. Companion animals share the unique loneliness and the changes in one's living status and ability to do things. Intelligent pets are able to comprehend these and help their owners in many ways.

As hearing, sight, and general physical condition diminish, the senior's motivation to savor life sometimes weakens. Visitors, if any, usually become scarce, and life becomes a more closed-in experience – alone with the pet. Who can fully comprehend the countless days and years that these older people spend talking their lonely hearts out to their pets and sharing precious memories and dreams? The companion animal silently accepts it all, and becomes a very dear and necessary part of the senior's secluded life. Incidentally, that inter-relationship is not unique to this class of pet owners. Because of the faithful and loving nature of pets, it is not surprising that even younger single people can easily fall into this overly- dependent and isolated way of life. But they have options to help themselves, whereas most of our older folk don't.

Eventually, when the pet itself shows signs of aging or deteriorating health, the senior is forced to rise to the occasion, and become more of a caretaker. These additional responsibilities can become a major problem to someone who is not functioning well, himself. But taking special care of a pet does actually make the older person feel even more vital, loved, and needed. However, when outside assistance for the pet becomes necessary, it may feel like a great personal tragedy or defeat for the senior. If someone has to relieve him of those duties, even the wise old pet owner may feel that he has failed in a final responsibility to a beloved companion—and himself as well. Most of us have no idea how very sad and useless this makes so many of our older people at such a time. And that always turns into a deep sense of guilt – in addition to all the other problems one has at an advanced age.

Usually, senior citizens have some wisdom that comes with many years of life experience. Over time, they have seen friends and family die, and they have learned to become more philosophical and tolerant of pain, loss, and loneliness. But deep bereavement and grief can be even more intense when they lose a pet.

And it may be especially painful and even scary to them. Their own death seems so much closer and more meaningful to them now. But sadly, because of their isolation and pride, we too often don't really see or know of their anguish as well as fears, at such a time. And in most cases, their sense of guilt and self-disappointment may not allow them to reveal that to anyone. How sad this is. And who really cares?

And there is another haunting sadness that most older pet owners carry inside them. Their own death can be extremely traumatic for their beloved pets. If the senior dies first who could then possibly care for and love them the way they did? And who would be there to properly honor them, when they do eventually die?

Our companion animals can't philosophize as we do. If an owner dies first, the pet also suffers a unique grief and loss that people can barely comprehend. Every older loving pet owner fears this, and has a powerful responsibility to make special plans – just in case. This must not be procrastinated because it is so painful.

In considering a pet's impending death, all of us – especially seniors – need to realize that they have their own strong sense of animal dignity, too. Maybe somehow their shorter lives is the best way. Nobody who is aging or suffering wants to live forever. We all grieve our loss, proportionate to the degree of love we have for our pet. But again, this is an especially difficult trauma for our lonely elders who lose a cherished companion.

In our frantic, high-speed society it is often too convenient for family and acquaintances to ignore our seniors at such a time. Perhaps it is our own uneasiness with death that results in our fear or inability to offer real compassion and consolation to people who are nearing the ends of their own lives. With so many contemporary new distractions it is just too easy to generalize about things and lovingly lead them out into pasture—and walk away, pretending (or hoping) to ourselves that we have helped. It is so sad, but in a sense, most often they are lovingly abandoned. We tend to overlook or forget that we have a special responsibility to the elderly pet owners in our lives, and even those we don't know, personally. In addition to this being a social and moral duty, if we love or have some kind of special relationship with a senior with a pet, we have a somewhat more complicated kind of obligation to deal with – and too often don't.

Caring for elders should go beyond those who are family and friends. We need to consider more fully that they form unique bonds with their pets. And they grieve more profoundly than most of us realize.

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