

**EXPLORING RITUALS AND MEMORIAL PRACTICES SURROUNDING THE
DEATH OF A COMPANION ANIMAL**

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Bachelor of Arts and Science, University of Lethbridge, 2023

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Faculty of Education

University of Lethbridge

LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

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DEDICATION

To the creatures with whom I share my heart, soul, and home. Those with fur and those without.

ABSTRACT

Research has increasingly recognized the significance of human-companion animal bonds; however, less is understood about how bereaved companion animal (CA) owners experience their grief and the role of memorialization and ritual. Using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), this research explored how four adult women who had experienced the death of their dog or cat made sense of their lived experience. The analysis highlighted three superordinate themes central to the participants' experiences: (1) Holding the Past in the Present, (2) Grief in Social Contexts, and (3) The Ebb and Flow of Grief. Findings illustrate how participants sustain ongoing bonds with their deceased CAs expressed through rituals and acts of memorialization. The study highlights the complex nature of grief after losing a CA, emphasizing the meaningful bonds and unique experiences involved. Participant experiences highlight that social norms surrounding CA grief shape disclosure of grief outside immediate family systems. The current study contributes to, and advocates for, a nuanced understanding of CA grief respecting enduring connections woven into and informed by personal and social meaning.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Work described in this thesis received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, “EXPLORING RITUALS AND MEMORIAL PRACTICES SURROUNDING THE DEATH OF A COMPANION ANIMAL”, No. Pro0015213, November 21, 2025.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Toupey Luft, for her constructive critiques and calm, confident guidance. I am truly grateful. I would also like to thank my thesis committee for their contributions, which greatly enhanced the final outcome of the project. Dr. Louise Barrett, for being a formative influence in my academic studies and for always fiercely encouraging my intellectual curiosity. Dr. Dawn McBride, for her encouragement, keen eye, and thoughtful feedback.

I would like to thank Dr. Darlene Chalmers for taking the time to serve as the external examiner for my defence. Thank you as well to Dr. Robert LeBlanc for chairing my thesis defence.

A heartfelt thank you to the participants in this study and their beloved companion animals. I am grateful for their willingness to share their grief and for allowing me the honour of witnessing it. Without their vulnerability and openness to share such tender parts of life, this project would not have happened.



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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

If we love, we grieve. Grief and love are forever intertwined.

—Nick Cave, *The Red Hand Files*

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of individuals whose companion animal (CA) has died, an area that is not fully understood, using the methodological approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The study focuses on the individual descriptions provided by participants' use of ritual and memorialization following the death of their companion animal, through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. As IPA allows researchers a chance for a deep and detailed understanding of what a lived experience has been for an individual and, in addition, how they have come to make sense of this experience, topics such as grief, bereavement, and ritual/memorialization are well-suited to the use of IPA (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

My interest in this subject emerged from the fact that animals have been a constant in my life. For only a few brief moments, I have not cohabited with an animal. I have experienced grief over the loss of my companion animals throughout my life and have witnessed friends and family who have grieved the loss of theirs. I have created memorials for my deceased companion animals and have had friends and family share theirs with me. I have noticed, for myself, that creating memorials and performing rituals have affected my grief process by providing a space to openly express emotions, connect with others about the experience, celebrate my animals' lives while acknowledging the significance of their deaths, and serve as a memory anchor I can visit to feel connected to

them. This made me curious about whether and how it affects others. Thus, my curiosity about this topic arises from my relationships with my companion animals, prompting questions about ritual and memorialization practices such as cremation, burial, headstones, urns, creating keepsakes from their belongings or remains, ceremonies like memorial services or funerals, or annual remembrance, and how these are used in the process of meaning-making after the death of companion animals.

Terminology

For this study, the terms *animal companions* and *companion animals* are used interchangeably and abbreviated as "CA" in some instances. The definition, taken from Hewson (2014), outlined that these are “animals kept as companions to humans and generally of domesticated species” (p. 103). This included dogs, cats, horses, reptiles, smaller mammals, rabbits, and birds, and excluded fish. This term is used rather than *pet* in the study; however, within the literature review and when referring to literature that uses the term *pet*, *pet* and *companion animal/animal companion* will be used interchangeably to reflect the terminology used in the research. The decision to use this terminology reflects the current understanding of animals' sentience, cognitive complexity, and individuality, as well as the complexity and modern reality of the relationship between animals and their owners. In this study, *grief* refers to the behavioural, social, psychological, and emotional responses that individuals experience when a significant relationship comes to an end or is disrupted (Hewson, 2014). More nuanced understandings of grief also include the loss of something important, such as a friendship, a job, or a stage of life. Although much research remains to be done on the loss of companion animals due to divorce, relinquishment, and rehoming, this study will focus on the grief associated with the death of a companion animal.

Rationale for Study

The population of individuals with companion animals in Canada has increased, with 80% of households having some form of companion animal (Blair, 2023). The bond shared between humans and companion animals is complex and, at times, bewildering (Julius et al., 2012; Prato-Previde et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2006; Takashima & Day, 2014). Growing research has shown that emotional and attachment bonds may extend beyond species boundaries, with humans forming strong affective bonds with their animal companions (Prato-Previde et al., 2022). Due to the relatively shorter lifespans of animals, individuals who own companion animals may encounter multiple experiences of grieving the loss of their various animal companions throughout their lifespan (Hewson, 2014), and the death of an animal companion may cause grief similar to that of the loss of a human (Carmack, 1985). In fact, Archer (1997) described a sample from a questionnaire which suggested the loss of a dog would be as significant as the loss of a friend or family member. In this study, humans felt an unconditional bond with their animals and perceived that their animals were often less judgmental than they were in their relationships with other humans. Archer (1997) astutely connected this bond to the counselling term coined by Carl Rogers of “unconditional positive regard”, whereby the counsellor (companion animal) is non-judgmental, supportive, and caring despite the actions of the client (human) (Rogers, 1957, p. 96). Given the isolation of our modern society (Taylor et al., 2023), having non-judgmental relationships with companion animals may provide a buffer against some of the isolation.

If we consider that humans and animals can form strong bonds (Udell & Brubaker, 2016; Vitale et al., 2019), and that when a companion animal dies, there can be significant grief experienced over their loss, pet owners may use continuing bonds

expressions to maintain attachment and cope with grief (Habarth et al., 2017; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b). However, little research has focused on how individuals find meaning in their grief through expressions of continuing bonds with CAs, such as ritual and memorialization practices. Therefore, this study explores individual experiences of ritual and memorialization following the death of a companion animal and how these practices may support meaning-making in the context of loss

Changing Perceptions of Grief

Changes in research and the clinical practice of grief have shifted the understanding of grief's function, moving away from understanding it as a way of severing the attachment with the deceased (Klass & Goss, 1999). Klass et al.'s (1996) book, *Continuing Bonds: A New Understanding of Grief*, challenged the idea that relinquishing a bond with a deceased person is necessary for bereavement to occur. Little research has explored the unique, individual choices made to memorialize their animals and to understand these as legitimate ways of expressing grief (Kogan et al., 2022). Building on this, this study is particularly interested in how individuals use memorialization, ritual, and memories as continuing bonds to support their grief process.

Hughes and Lewis Harkin (2022) completed a meta-analysis of research on continuing bond (CB) expressions after the death of a companion animal. Most publications on this topic were primarily quantitative methods from 1994 to 2020. This publication identified two gaps: (1) the absence of qualitative research on companion animals and grief, and (2) the scarcity of studies focused on ritual and memorialization concerning grief. Thus, understanding how individuals' CB expressions and the reception from society more broadly contribute to this emerging area of literature.

Significant research on CB expressions suggested that an effort to preserve the emotional attachment or connection with the deceased individual serves as a means to sustain attachment and cope with grief (Habarth et al., 2017; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b). However, societal values often do not support the grieving process for individuals when the loss involves animals rather than humans, which may influence experiences of animal companion bereavement (Doka, 2025). For some, the experience of grief due to the loss of a companion animal and their grief process is stigmatized in society and judged by others, which may lead to feelings of disenfranchisement (Crossley & Rolland, 2022; Hess-Holden et al., 2017). Further, Walsh (2009) suggested that the mental health field has undervalued and pathologized humans' attachments to their companion animals. The literature review in the next chapter will provide an overview of multiple models of grief and their application to attachment theory and continuing bonds.

Relevance for Mental Health Counselling

Given the large number of companion animal owners, the study of companion animal loss and grief will likely remain a significant area of research in psychology. Factors that predicted the outcome of grief for individuals who have lost a companion animal included the level of attachment to the companion animal, a sense of understanding from others around their experiences of loss, and a combination of other stressful life events (Gosse & Barnes, 1994). In the field of counselling psychology, there has been a call for greater understanding of the human-animal bond and grief (Brown, 2024; Cordaro, 2012; Javors, 2001; Toray, 2004).

Research on the role of counselling in pet-loss grief has been limited (Cleary et al., 2022; Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022), yet pet owners often use continuing bonds and memorialization to cope with their loss (Park et al., 2023). This highlights a gap in

understanding how counselling sees rituals and memorialization as part of pet grief support. Gaining a deeper understanding of the individual lived experiences of grief and how memorialization and rituals serve as meaningful expressions of CBs can significantly enhance this area of research. Exploring how individuals derive meaning from these experiences may also contribute valuable insights to the field.

Importantly, like the grief experienced from the loss of a human, the grief experienced from the loss of a companion animal is unique to each person experiencing the loss. Because this study is interested in exploring the research participants' individual and unique lived experiences, I have chosen IPA as an appropriate method that allows the participants to "express themselves and their 'lived experience' stories the way they see fit without any distortion and/or prosecution" (Alase, 2017, p. 9). Given the significant advancements in our understanding of CBs and disenfranchised grief over the loss of humans, the study explored how this may be experienced for individuals grieving the loss of their companion animals

Grief and Companion Animals

Significant research has considered the health benefits of companion animals (Herzog, 2011; McNicholas et al., 2005; Scoresby et al., 2021; Serpell, 1991; Siegel, 1990), and more research demonstrated the significant bond between owners and their companion animals as a factor in the grief process (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Carmack, 1985; Cleary et al., 2022; Field et al., 2009; Habarth et al., 2017; Hewson, 2014; Hunt & Padilla, 2006; Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022; Lykins et al., 2024; Morley & Fook, 2005; Packman et al. 2011a, 2011b; Spain et al., 2019). Although there has been considerable research on grief concerning the loss of a human, less research has focused on supporting individuals who grieve the loss of their companion animals (CAs)

(Cordaro, 2012). Although scarce, research on grief over the death of CAs has been increasing in the last decades (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Behler et al., 2020; Bussolari et al., 2021; Carmack, 1985; Cleary et al., 2022; Field et al., 2009; Gosse & Barnes, 2014; Hewson, 2014; Morley & Fook, 2005; Park et al., 2023; Podrazik et al., 2000). More research is needed in counselling psychology on pet bereavement and its application in counselling. There has been a call for more specialized counselling for individuals grieving the loss of their companion animals, including pet bereavement counselling, to legitimize the experience, as the grieving process of pet owners has gone under the radar and has yet to receive the attention it requires (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022). In addition, much companion animal bereavement literature has tended to minimize or pathologize the experience (Morley & Fook, 2005). At this point, although there has been some move towards specialized counselling for bereaved pet owners (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022), most of the support available for grieving pet owners has trended in the form of hotlines, grief support groups online, and through their veterinarian (Cordaro, 2012; Hewson, 2014). While there may be similarities to the grieving process in humans, companion animal bereavement is unique, as the bereaved may not be supported in the same way and, due to societal attitudes, their distress may be invalidated (Cordaro, 2012; Hess-Holden et al., 2017).

Further to the gaps above, there has been limited research on how the counselling field has assisted clients grieving the loss of their pets (Cleary et al., 2022; Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2024). Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble's (2022) article explicitly discussed pet bereavement counselling based in the UK, without mentioning the use of memorialization or rituals with bereaved pet owners. However, Kogan et al.'s (2022) and Park et al.'s (2023) articles found that common coping mechanisms among pet owners included

continuing bonds and memorialization. This demonstrates a gap in the literature on how the field of counselling understands the use of rituals and memorialization as a potentially important part of the grief process when supporting clients through the grief of their pets.

Summary and Statement of Purpose

In summary, the key points discussed above highlight that we are only beginning to understand the experience of grief due to the loss of a companion animal (CA), compared to understanding grief due to the loss of a human. Therefore, this study explores the use of ritual and memorialization following the death of a companion animal and how their owners have come to make meaning of their lived experience. Considering the projected growth in populations and the subsequent rise in pet ownership in the coming years, changes in societal perceptions of the role of pets, as well as the potential influence of grief on the mental health of those who have lost a CA, this study of companion animal loss and grief is timely and relevant.

Overall, my goal for this research is to expand on the scant exploration of individual lived experiences of the use of ritual and memorialization following the death of a CA. This may highlight areas that require attention in specialized training for counselling practices. More broadly, it may help to normalize rather than pathologize experiences of grief and the active mourning processes that support individuals in meaning-making after the death of their companion animals.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

There has been considerable debate in the literature about when humans started keeping animals as companion animals (pets) and the multifaceted and mysterious relationship humans have with animals (Julius et al., 2012; Prato-Previde et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2006; Takashima & Day, 2014). Research by Spencer et al. (2006) noted that some of the earliest records of pets date to the Egyptian pharaohs. However, it was proposed that the relationship between humans and cats was more sacred or held spiritual significance than as animal companions (CAs). Takashima and Day (2014) proposed that keeping animal companions may have begun with the domestication of dogs over 35,000 years ago. However, Spencer et al. (2006) indicated that it is unclear whether human domestication of dogs aimed to create animal companions or to provide a source of fur and meat. Although animals such as dogs and horses belonging to rulers and nobles have been referenced, there is scant evidence that they were treated as pets in a manner similar to our practices today.

By the 18th century, paintings of household animals, such as upper-class dogs, emerged. Spencer et al. (2006) suggested that the popularity of animals as pets began to increase following the Industrial Revolution. Kidd and Kidd (1997) reported that increased urbanization in the United States has led to significant changes in relationships between animals and family members over the last century. This increased urbanization has reduced exposure to farm animals and increased exposure to domesticated animals, influencing beliefs and personal feelings regarding pet ownership. They also suggested a generational effect of pet ownership, whereby individuals from families with pets are often more likely to acquire their own as adults.

Current North American Companion Animal Populations

Between 2016 and 2020, the dog population in the United States increased from 76.8 million to 83.7 million, while the cat population rose from 58.4 million to 60 million (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2021). In Canada, from 2018 to 2020, the dog population increased from 7.6 million to 7.7 million, while the cat population remained stable. However, the population of dogs increased from 7.7 million to 7.9 million from 2020 to 2022, and the population of cats increased from 8.1 million to 8.5 million from 2020 to 2022 (Canadian Animal Health Institute, 2020; 2022). In 2021, there were over 28 million pets in Canada, with the majority of households (over 80%) having some variety of pet. Within Canada, over half of the households had a cat, a dog, or both. Approximately 20% of cats and dogs have been with their owners for ten years or more, and approximately 35% of cats and 33% of dogs are over eight years old (Blair, 2023). Interestingly, the American Veterinary Medical Association (2021) observed that although the population of dogs and cats has risen, households were more likely to have fewer pets than before. This could indicate that there are more new pet owners with resources directed towards fewer animals. These statistics clearly show a rise in the number of pets in North American households. Although this is outside the scope of this study, it is essential to consider how the COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in pet ownership and the recent increase in pet surrenders reported by shelters.

Benefits of Companion Animal Ownership

The role that animals have served as companions to humans has changed dramatically in the last few decades (Toray, 2004). Significant research has attempted to empirically demonstrate the benefits of pet ownership for human mental and physical health, with inconclusive results (Herzog, 2011; McNicholas et al., 2005; Scoresby et al.,

2021; Serpell, 1991; Siegel, 1990). McNicholas et al.'s (2005) review of evidence and issues of human health and pet ownership suggested that a surge in research on the topic during the 1980s perhaps proved the importance people attach to their pets rather than demonstrating the health benefits of pet ownership. The review indicated that a different understanding of “health” may be needed when considering the benefits of pet ownership, including the dimensions of well-being (both mental and physical) and how pets contribute to a sense of social integration. More recent studies exploring the therapeutic effects of animals have found significant positive effects of animal presence on blood pressure during stressful events (Allen et al., 2022) and a reduction in loneliness among older adults in long-term care facilities (Banks & Banks, 2005).

According to research by Albert and Bulcroft (1988), the keeping of animal companions, particularly in the city, makes little to no economic sense as they do not do “useful work” and require extensive time commitments, substantial costs, and “often exact humiliating or onerous tasks from their owners” (p. 543). As Archer (1997) queried, “From a Darwinian perspective, it is a puzzling form of behaviour, as it entails provisioning a member of another species, in return for which there are no apparent benefits connected to fitness” (p. 237). The literature has identified the most common reasons for keeping animal companions as fulfilling a need for companionship, providing affection, or expressing personal identity (Spencer et al., 2006). Despite some historical questions about the rationale for animal ownership, it is evident that the concept of the human-animal companion bond is integral to understanding the importance of companion animals to humans (Scoresby et al., 2021).

The Human-Companion Animal Bond

Attachment theory, particularly the term *affectional bond*, offered an appropriate lens to consider the bond between humans and animals. Introduced by Bowlby's (1977) work on attachment theory and further expanded by Ainsworth (1989), an *affectional bond* is a behavioural connection in which one individual forms a strong attachment to another. Although affectional bonds are often considered to be between a child and caregiver or surrogate caregiver, Ainsworth (1989) proposed that "affectional bonds are not synonymous with relationships" (p. 711). These differences, she suggested, are threefold: First, unlike affectional bonds, relationships may or may not be as long-lasting. Second, while relationships are dyadic, affectional bonds are a "representation in the internal organization of the individual person". Third, relationships evolve from a "total history of their interaction," which may integrate numerous components irrelevant to what constitutes an attachment or affectional bond (Ainsworth, 1989, p. 711). Ainsworth defined an affectional bond as "a relatively long-enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual and is interchangeable with none other. In an affectional bond, there is a desire to maintain closeness to the partner" (Ainsworth, 1989, p. 711).

Emotional and attachment bonds may extend beyond species boundaries, with humans forming strong affective bonds with their animal companions (Prato-Previde et al., 2022). The human-animal bond is considered the "dynamic relationship between people and animals such that each influences the psychological and physiological state of the other" (College of Veterinary Medicine, 2023, p. 1). The term *human-animal bond* has increasingly been used to describe the relationship people have with their animal companions. Often, people view their animal companions as their best friends, companions, and, for some, surrogate children (Toray, 2004).

Lagoni et al. (1994) provided three primary reasons for humans to be attached to animals: anthropomorphism (the attribution of human-like traits to an animal), neoteny (infantile characteristics), and allelomimetic behaviours (human behaviours that appear to be mimicked by animals). Attachment may occur due to humans' proximity to animals and the need to nurture and care for pets. This makes owners feel needed and strengthens the enduring affectionate bond between owners and their animal companions.

Attachment Theory and Companion Animal Bereavement

Of primary importance to Bowlby (1980) was the adaptive attachment behavioural system, which evolved in response to the threat of separation (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Holmes, 2012). Through his groundbreaking work, Bowlby fundamentally transformed our understanding of the bond between a child and their mother and the profound impact that separation, deprivation, and loss can have on this connection (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby's work on attachment theory recognized how separated and bereaved children, just like adults, feel significant feelings of anguish, pain, yearning, despair, angry protest, and apathy. Bowlby indicated that the long-lasting effects of this separation could manifest themselves as neurosis in children and adolescents and mental illness in adults. In essence, attachment theory is summarized by its spatial nature: I feel good when close to my loved one, I feel anxious or sad when I am far from them (Holmes, 2012). Inter-species attachment bonding is anticipated to progress similarly to human bonds, providing security and protection (Field et al., 2009; Noonan, 1998).

An attachment lens was initially applied to the emotional ties between the child and caregiver. However, over time, the understanding of attachment has expanded to encompass emotional connections within interpersonal and romantic relationships (Julius et al., 2012). Field et al. (2009) suggested that pets assume recognized human roles

because they elicit familiar emotions and behaviour patterns typically observed in human relationships. Furthermore, humans have appeared to have similar attachments or emotional bonds to their companion animals as to their attachment and emotional bonds to friends and family (Planchon et al., 2002). For Bowlby, separation anxiety surfaces whenever the bond between the parent-child, adult spouse, or adult companion is threatened (Holmes, 2012). If we consider the human-animal bond as an attachment bond, a similar response to separation would likely occur upon losing a pet, just as when a human attachment bond is lost (Crossley & Rolland, 2022; Field et al., 2009; Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022; Lykins et al., 2024).

A study by Dowsett et al. (2020) investigated predictors of separation anxiety from companion animals and found that individuals with lower social support and attachment problems were more likely to experience it. They also found a positive correlation between animal-related and human-related separation anxiety. Although there is significant research on separation anxiety in companion animals, less is known about humans experiencing separation anxiety from their companion animals.

The bond between humans and animals, and its terminology, is nuanced. Some literature has referred to it as an “attachment bond” (Field et al., 2005; Packman et al., 2011a), others have termed it as an “affectional bond” (Salter Ainsworth, 1993; Walsh, 2009), and at times, as discussed by Sevilli and Klass (2025), the terms ‘bond’ and ‘attachment’ have been used interchangeably. The diversity of terminology and perspectives highlights the nuanced, multifaceted, and complex nature of these bonds, as well as the evolution of research in its conceptualization of them.

Developmental Stages of Owning Pets and the Grief Associated with the Loss

Pet ownership and the experiences of grief following their death can vary significantly depending on an individual's developmental stage. From childhood to aging populations, the connection with companion animals and the emotional and psychological reactions to losing a pet differ.

Pet Ownership Across the Lifespan

Rates of pet ownership and the role and meaning given to varied across different developmental phases in life. For children and adolescents (ages 0-18), evidence suggests that pet ownership (particularly dog ownership) may benefit emotional, behavioural, cognitive, educational, and social development (Purewal et al., 2017). However, a recent longitudinal study in the UK found little evidence to support peer ownership regarding children's emotional health or cognitive outcomes (Purewal et al., 2024). For young adults, a study which examined millennials' experiences of dog ownership suggested that dog ownership may help shape family identity and strengthen the skills needed to move towards adulthood. However, the study reported that parents were often called upon for support with caregiving responsibilities, and although financial responsibilities were a concern, they did not stop these participants from owning pets (Graham et al., 2019).

While there were few statistics on pet ownership by age, middle-aged adults aged 45-54 years old and slightly younger (early to mid-forties) were the most common age range to own pets in Canada and the United States (Statista, 2013; Urban Wire, 2023). A recent study of adults aged 20-74 found that pet ownership supported cognitive and brain health, with dog owners having the strongest effects (McDonough et al., 2022). For older adults (65 and older), pet ownership has been shown to be beneficial, as it fosters a sense of purpose, increases socialization, reduces loneliness, and provides companionship.

These benefits are suggested to increase resilience to negative mental health disorders

(Hui Gan et al., 2020). However, in aging populations, pet ownership rates appear to decline (American Pet Products Association, 2016).

Grief From the Loss of Pets at Different Life Stages

The grief resulting from the loss of a pet has been found to have different effects on individuals depending on their developmental stage in life. There has been little research on how the death of a pet affects children and adolescents. Schmidt et al. (2020) found negative correlations between the child's age and both the grief associated with losing a pet and the child's attachment to the pet. This overall suggests that children may have less attachment to their pets as they grow older. However, McCutcheon and Fleming (2001) reviewed previous studies using age as a variable in the grief response following the death of a pet. Research on age as a variable has revealed significant inconsistencies across the limited number of studies. To add to the literature, their study examined the severity of grief in three age groups (18-35 years, 36-59 years, and 60-plus years) and found that younger owners might experience greater levels of anger and hostility after losing a pet than seniors experiencing grief. Some possible reasons for these findings, suggested by the researchers, included differences in the development of younger populations' understanding of death or dying, whereas older populations may have a more evolved perspective after potentially facing more losses in their lives and possibly having a greater capacity to cope with loss.

Disenfranchised Grief

Coined by Kenneth Doka (1989), disenfranchised grief refers to an individual's grief that is not acknowledged by others or by society. According to Morley and Fook (2005), veterinarians often do not acknowledge the validity of grief reactions and need to make referrals to bereavement counselling services for their clients. A thematic analysis

of counsellors who provided pet bereavement counselling found that society does not take the loss of animal companions as seriously as it should. The providers suggested there was a lack of acceptance of companion animal bereavement as a normative process of grief and that the experience of the bereaved may go unacknowledged or appreciated (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022).

Themes in the literature indicated that, for some bereaved companion animal owners, there is a tension between how they feel and how they believe they should feel in their experience of grief. Decisions made by pet owners and circumstances around pet death may differ from those concerning human death. If social values do not support the process of grief for bereaved individuals in ways similar to those of humans, it may impact experiences of pet bereavement (Cleary et al., 2022). For example, Spain et al. (2019) found that high levels of grief severity and disenfranchisement inhibit post-traumatic growth in areas relating to interpersonal relationships. Despite the findings of the emotional responses to grief from the loss of a companion animal, there is still a societal tendency to trivialize these experiences (Cordaro, 2012; Hess-Holden et al., 2017; Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022; Morley & Fook, 2005). In addition, Park et al.'s (2023) large-scale literature review described coping mechanisms for companion animal bereavement that support the grief process. A common maladaptive coping mechanism is isolation, which may be a result of experiences of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2025). Alternatively, bereaved pet owners had more positive outcomes when supported socially, including counselling, support groups, and hotlines (Park et al., 2023).

An Evolving Understanding of the Grief Process

In the last decades, research and clinical practices in grief have moved away from the understanding of grief as a way of severing the attachment between the living and the

dead (Klass & Goss, 1999). Instead, more recent research considers how individuals use CB expressions to sustain this attachment (Crossley & Rolland, 2022). As explored in the introductory chapter, CB expressions involve an effort to preserve the emotional attachment or connection with the deceased individual, serving as a means to sustain attachment and cope with grief (Habarth et al., 2017; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b).

Evolution In Attachment Theory

From an attachment theory perspective, as Bowlby (1980) argued, in the immediate aftermath of the death of a loved one, the bereaved individual may not fully comprehend the permanent nature of the separation. Field et al. (2005) interpreted this as Bowlby's (1980) "protest phase," where the bereaved displays both marked protest and distress to re-establish physical proximity with the attachment figure (p. 280). They suggested some CB expressions may be understood as the search attempts to reclaim the attachment figure. For example, mistaking the footsteps of a deceased or seeing the deceased's face in a crowd reflects an attempt to re-establish proximity. While some CB expressions provide temporary relief, others may serve as a means of stabilizing felt security, such as by using the deceased's belongings. Acknowledging the permanence of separation, a CB can serve as an internalized secure base to help alleviate the pain of loss (Field et al., 2005, 2009).

The intensity and length of grief symptoms have been demonstrated to correlate with the strength of the attachment bond between humans and companion animals (Field et al., 2009; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Furthermore, Lykins et al. (2024) found that attachment anxiety positively predicted more severe grief in participants, whereas attachment avoidance predicted less severe grief. Attachment theory provides a valuable lens for studying the grief associated with companion animal loss, as death is understood

in attachment theory as a break in an attachment bond. Lykins et al. (2024) found that attachment anxiety following companion animal death was linked to more intense grief symptoms, consistent with findings from multiple other studies (Brown & Symons, 2016; King & Werner, 2011).

However, newer understandings of grief have considered how CBs help maintain that bond rather than sever it. Rather than relying solely on an attachment lens, a CB perspective of grief may be more helpful for this study as it moves towards understanding the continued presence of the deceased with the living (Selvili & Klass, 2025). Significantly, Selvili and Klass (2025) recently differentiated between attachment theory and the continuing bonds model of grief. While overlapping in some respects, they discussed the following nuances:

First, attachment theory often frames continuing bonds as compensatory illusions, second-best adaptations to the impossibility of reunion with the deceased. In contrast, the continuing bonds model assumes that these bonds are extensions of preexisting relationships, shaped by the mourners' unique history with the deceased that evolves into an integral part of both their inner lives and social worlds. (Selvili & Klass, 2025, p. 1)

Their discussion highlights how there is an element of “pursuit of autonomy” in attachment theory and a “journey towards independence,” while continuing bonds support the “relational continuity” and “the enduring presence of the deceased within the shared space of living” (Selvili & Klass, 2025, p. 12). This is a crucial distinction in examining how societal views and changes in bereavement experiences either support or hinder this process. Understanding that rituals, memorials, and keeping parts of their deceased pet

close act as CB expressions may also illuminate the meaning-making process in these acts.

Critiques of Applying Attachment Theory to Animals

While studies have shown humans can form strong attachment bonds with their companion animals (Prato-Previde et al., 2022), some research has acknowledged that attachment to pets differs from attachment to humans. For example, Lass-Hennemann et al. (2022) found that strong emotional attachment to pets was shared among individuals with insecure attachment styles. This suggested that emotional bonding with pets reflects a compensatory process for individuals with insecure attachments to humans, and that these attachment styles may lead to stronger bonds with their pets.

Prato-Previde et al. (2022) described the complexity of the human-animal bond and considered the roles of empathy, attachment, and anthropomorphism within it. Their research suggested that these mechanisms, when functional, are relevant to healthy relationships with animals, but when dysfunctional or pathological, can become problematic, leading to issues such as animal hoarding and other highly negative effects on both human and animal welfare. An attachment bond with an animal does not necessarily mean a positive outcome for the animal's welfare. An example of this, described by Mota-Rojas et al. (2021), would be behaviours considered caring and loving, such as allowing pets to sleep in beds, applying cosmetics, using clothing for their pets, and overfeeding. When in reality, the animals may be better served in caring for their “natural needs rather than on supposed similarities and an affective involvement” (Prato-Previde et al. 2022, p. 4).

A study by Wells and Treacy (2024) examined the relationship between attachment strength to pet owners and their pets, using the Big Five personality

assessment. They found that personality traits such as neuroticism and conscientiousness were associated with higher attachment scores. Since personality traits may influence attachment strength, they could play a significant role, in contrast to attachment theory's view of the dyadic development of the bond.

Furthermore, Rockett and Carr's (2014) meta-analysis of the use of attachment theory as a conceptual framework for understanding human-animal relationships noted that certain animal characteristics become important for their likelihood of meeting attachment needs or of being viewed as secure attachment figures. Additionally, attachment to animals may arise during certain circumstances for certain people, such as life changes and stages. Research has also shown that gender differences can influence the strength of emotional attachment to animals. Therefore, applying attachment theory to human-animal bonds may overlook how personality traits, compensatory behaviours, and human psychological needs relate to human-animal bonds rather than attachment mechanisms alone.

Stages/Models/Theories of Grief

Kübler-Ross Model

A frequently instructed and well-known model for understanding the human psychological reactions to death is from Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. It was written to support patients with terminal illnesses and those involved in their care. This groundbreaking work paved the way for discussions of death and dying in a culture where death was often not acknowledged or discussed openly. In this book, she introduced the five stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (DABDA). This model has also been applied in other contexts, such as experiences of loss, including grief and significant life changes (Tyrrell et al., 2023). While these stages

are often considered static and linear, this misconception may stem from a misunderstanding of Kübler-Ross's model, as they may be skipped or manifest differently for individuals (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Tyrrell et al., 2023).

As was first understood in Kübler-Ross's model, denial was described as a defence mechanism to distance and protect oneself from considering the harsh reality of death. This can be seen as rejected diagnoses, attributed fault to the physician or the test, or altogether avoidance of the conversation (Tyrrell et al., 2023). However, in more recent iterations, such as *On Grief and Grieving* by Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005), rather than focused on the dying individual, the denial may be seen by the person grieving the loved one. A more contemporary understanding of denial is its ability to "help us pace our feelings of grief" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 10).

In the original conception of Kübler-Ross's model, anger may be expressed to family members for lack of support or perceived risk factors, to doctors, or to higher beings for the injustice of the diagnosis (Tyrrell et al., 2023). The new conception placed a greater emphasis on understanding the griever's anger at God. It also acknowledged the importance of anger as a means of processing the experience and seeking meaning in it (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005).

Bargaining was considered a tool to find some control over their illness, which could be either internal or verbalized. The bargaining process could be rational in the sense of commitment to treatment and acceptance of healthcare. Alternatively, it could be seen as more irrational thinking, such as attempts to dispel misattributed guilt about their diagnosis and to believe they are to blame (Tyrrell et al., 2023). Before the loss, bargaining was seen as a way to do anything possible to spare the life of a loved one,

while after the loss, bargaining took the form of “if only” (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005, p. 17).

Both Kübler-Ross’s (1969) initial discussion of the stage of depression and Kübler-Ross and Kessler’s (2005) description of the stage of depression as a normal reaction to grief, in which it is experienced at a deeper level. The fifth and last stage in Kübler-Ross’s model of grief was acceptance. This is when people begin to consider happier memories, make funeral arrangements, and plan finances (Tyrrell et al., 2023). However, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) suggested that when this is applied to the grief of the loss of a loved one, acceptance has been misconstrued as being all right. They argue that for most people, after the death of a loved one, no one ever really feels all right.

Criticisms of the Kübler-Ross model of grief focus on the lack of empirical validation of the stages and on the too rigid application of these concepts (Tyrrell et al., 2023). Therefore, some scholars would see this model as an essential historical framework, but it should perhaps no longer be regarded as a sound theoretical guide (Corr, 2020). However, in more recent writings, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) acknowledged that the stages have evolved since their conception. They suggest there is no typical response to loss and that “our grief is as individual as our lives” (p. 7).

Bowlby and Parkes' Four Phases of Grief

According to Bretherton (1992), *Grief and Mourning in Infancy and Early Childhood* by Bowlby (1960) was a controversial paper pushing back on Anna Freud’s consideration that children cannot experience grief due to their unformed ego. Bowlby’s insight into childhood mourning as relevant to understanding grief in adulthood attracted Parkes, who was interested in adult grief (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby and Parkes introduced a revised grief theory during the 1980s, building on Kübler-Ross’s model.

Their work outlines four stages of grief and highlights that the grieving process does not follow a linear pattern (Tyrrell et al., 2023). However, most of the literature on this grief model refers only to Bowlby and excludes Parke. Bowlby's theory of bereavement was an extension of his theory of separation anxiety in that anxiety was a response to separation between a care-seeker and caregiver in a reciprocal relationship when the relationship is threatened. He considered the grief reaction as a form of separation anxiety, as death is regarded as an irreversible form of separation (Holmes, 2012).

Bowlby's four stages of mourning Bowlby (1961), as described by Holmes (2012), were as follows: Stage one was numbing, which was seen in the recently bereaved as a calmness stemming from emotional shutdown where the effect is suppressed, reality denied until the bereaved was felt to be in a situation safe and secure enough to let go slightly. Stage two was yearning, searching, and/or anger. The search for the lost object was placed at the center of Bowlby's mourning response. This could be seen both physically and psychologically. Physically, this looked like restlessness, scanning, moving from room to room, desperate for the lost loved one to reappear. Psychologically, this presented as repetitive thoughts, replaying the events leading up to the incident to see if there was a mistake or if the situation would turn out differently. This was likened to the child anxiously searching for their mother. The bereaved were considered to be anxiously searching and searching to be reunited with their missing attachment.

Stages three and four of Bowlby's stages of mourning were of disorganization and despair, followed by reorganization. The loss of the bereaved was considered not only to remove the loved one physically, but also the secure base that one would return to in their time of need. This loss was considered to throw the sufferer's inner world into turmoil.

The third stage required internal work, including identification with the lost object, before

the person can reinstate themselves in their internal representation of reality. The Bowlbian view considered that grieving involves rebuilding a secure inner base. New attachments could only form after old ones are let go, and a secure holding environment was necessary for secure attachments (Bowlby, 1961; Holmes, 2012, p. 94).

Neimeyer and Meaning-Making

Within a constructivist and social constructionist theoretical framework for grief, Neimeyer considered the grieving process a meaning-making process (Tyrrell et al., 2023). Neimeyer et al. (2002) suggested that humans seek meaning in mourning and that tension arises from the need to preserve continuity while integrating the changed reality of the world into their conception of who they are now.

Socially, our response to bereavement is connected to changes in personal, social, and collective identity. For Neimeyer et al. (2002), the meaning-making triggered by loss is not only in the bereaved's private thoughts and feelings but in the reorganization of their sense of self and their understanding of the world. The social view of understanding mourning and loss considers features of grief systems, including rituals, local cultures and discourses that communities use to shape and understand the significance of loss (Neimeyer et al., 2002). From this perspective, the grieving process is inherently active rather than passive, characterized by the need to make decisions and to reconstruct one's life in both practical and existential terms (Tyrrell et al., 2023).

As is expanded upon in the next section, the IPA methodology focuses on people's lived experiences and how they make meaning of them. Using IPA for grief studies is a good fit as, for some, the death of a loved one can significantly challenge core beliefs about themselves and change their sense of identity and self, and this process may require recreating meaning for themselves in their life without the deceased (Janoff-Bulman,

1992; Neimeyer, 1999; Park & Folkman, 1997). In addition, investigating the lived experience of the meaning-making process, including social views of ritual, grief systems, local culture, and discourses (Neimeyer et al., 2002), may illuminate how some individuals' experiences of grief are disenfranchised.

Criticisms and Views on Social Constructionist Views of Grief as Applied to Animal Bonds

From a social constructionist view, “grief as a human experience is both a natural and constructed event” (Neimeyer et al., 2002, p. 235). This view suggested that grief is both a biological evolutionary response to loss, stemming from a disturbance in the attachment bonds essential to survival and social beings and that how we view grief is shaped by culture, society, and personal meaning. The way in which grief from loss is narrated, legitimized, mourned, and made meaningful is shaped by social interactions, institutions, language, and culture (Neimeyer et al. 2014).

Each society has its own cultural norms regarding the acceptable and proper ways to grieve (Walter, 2006). When applied to human-animal bonds, grief is not universally recognized as significant. The term *pet* is, in itself, a cultural construction. For some, pets are considered integral members of a family system (Toray, 2004); for others, they are viewed as property, and neither is universally true.

Morley and Fook (2005) described the construction of animal companionship and suggested there is a dominant narrative to “dichotomise human/ animal relationships by comparison with the relationships between humans” and if “understood and defined solely in terms of human companionship, rather than in its own terms, and suffers in the comparison” (p. 134). They described how this can lead to some people's relationships with animals being socially considered second-rate (not the first choice for a human-to-

human relationship as the ideal), which may reinforce the experience of disenfranchisement. As disenfranchised grief may stem from a lack of societal acknowledgement of loss, the societal meaning around relationships with animals may play a role (Doka, 2025).

Using a social constructionist lens to understand pet grief could both pathologize the grief, as it may be seen as excessive because it involves an animal rather than a human, and simultaneously deny the validity of the grief experience, as it is not the same as losing a human. When viewed through a social constructionist lens, the grief of a pet reveals what society considers “normal” and what constitutes grief. However, by focusing heavily on the social and cultural constructs of grief, it may overlook some of the biological, evolutionary responses to loss and the breaking of attachment bonds.

Worden’s Tasks of Mourning

Worden (2003) differentiated grief as the experience of loss and mourning as the process that follows death, and suggested that this process has been viewed from many perspectives, such as phases, stages, and tasks. Worden advocated for tasks, as phases may have implied passivity, while tasks implied that the bereaved could take action. Worden’s first task was to accept the reality of the loss. This meant the individual needed to accept the reality that death has happened and the deceased will not return. In the explanation of how denial served against this task, several situations are discussed, ranging from a “slight distortion to a full-blown illusion,” which included seeing a deceased person on the street to keeping the deceased close after death (Worden, 2003, p. 15). Worden’s second task was working through the pain of grief, which included the emotional, behavioural and physical pain that can be experienced in grief. Worden discussed the many ways people try to avoid experiencing the pain and also pointed out

that there are other emotions, such as anxiety, anger, guilt and loneliness, that need to be confronted in this task. Task three was the process of adjusting to an environment where the deceased was no longer living. Worden divided these areas into external (how the death affects day-to-day functioning, internal (how the death affects the individual's sense of self), and finally, spiritual (how beliefs, values, and attitudes are affected by the death). Worden's fourth task has evolved throughout his writing and has now included an understanding of continuing bonds. Task four was finding a place for the deceased where there is still a connection with them but done in a way that allows the bereaved to continue with their life (Worden, 2003).

Continuing Bonds Theory

Expanding on the evolution of continuing bonds discussed earlier, Klass et al. introduced the continuing bonds theory of grief in their 1996 book, *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. They suggested that the origins of the continuing bonds model of grief stemmed from the recognition that dominant Western models of grief did not adequately address essential aspects of the bereaved's experience. According to Klass and Steffan (2017), these dominant Western models were primarily shaped by a Freudian perspective, as outlined in his 1917 essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, in which the "success" of mourning was defined as disengaging from the deceased and moving on.

Early work in the continuing bonds theory considered the "adaptiveness" of not breaking a bond and considered what may be "maladaptive" versus "adaptive" continuing bonds (Klass & Steffan, 2017, p. 5). Klass and Steffan's 2017 book, *Continuing Bonds in Bereavement*, described the model's central themes. First, continuing bonds (CBs) were intersubjective, in that grief was "intersubjective between the individual griever and community of people to whom they are bonded" (p. 7). The bonds with the deceased are

not individual but complexly woven into communities and narratives. Second, CBs become integral to the construction of meaning. This meaning-making is not individual; instead, it is socially constructed in that “communities, ranging from groups of friends to nations and religions, offer narratives that are the templates from which individuals construct their individual and family narratives” (Klass & Steffan, 2017, p. 8). Another integral theme of the model was that CBs were best considered within their cultural setting, which is useful for relating this model of grief across cultures. With the understanding that the dead may be regarded as among the living, we can see how they play a role in narratives, family, community, and politics.

Discussion of Grief Models

Various grief models have been developed to understand how people process/adapt to, and cope with grief. Although these models are distinct, they share similarities and differences. All models of grief acknowledge that grief is not a linear or straightforward path. However, only Neimeyer and the continuing bonds model lack defined phases, stages, or tasks, instead emphasizing the process of meaning-making. As these models have been developed, it could be argued that they have evolved alongside our changing perception of grief. For instance, the earlier models (such as Bowlby’s and Parkes’) emphasized the human tendency to form strong bonds and the emotional impact when those bonds are broken or threatened (Smit, 2015). Both the Kubler-Ross and Bowlby’s and Parkes’ models place the bereaved in a passive role compared to models in which the bereaved play an active role, such as those of Worden, Neimeyer, and the continuing bonds models. More recent models (Neimeyer and the continuing bonds model) emphasized the integration of the deceased into the new reality of the living. In addition, Neimeyer brings a narrative approach to the grief process. It is also important to

note that the more recent models (Neimeyer, Worden, and the continuing bonds model) consider gender, culture, and personality (Smit, 2015). However, as McNeish (2013) asserted, these models may be helpful to consider as “frameworks upon which grieving can be negotiated rather than as a mould into which grieving must fit” (p. 200).

Continuing Bonds and Companion Animal Bereavement

Continuing bonds (CB) are enduring connections after the death of a companion animal and are expressed as continuing bonds expressions (CBEs) (Field et al., 2007). These CB are frequently manifested through actions such as recalling fond memories, creating memorials, cherishing meaningful possessions, and even experiencing sensations such as hearing or sensing the presence of the departed animal companion (Habarth et al., 2017; Lykins et al., 2024). Literature and research on CBs have questioned whether this is an adaptive or maladaptive means of coping with loss (Hughes & Lewis Harkin, 2022; Schmidt et al., 2020).

Recent studies have indicated that maintaining a connection with a deceased animal can be beneficial for individuals coping with grief. Engagement in activities that foster continuing bonds with the departed companion animal has been shown to have clinical advantages, including lower grief intensity compared to those who do not engage in such activities (Lykins et al., 2024; Packman et al., 2014). Bussolari et al. (2021) found that bereaved pet owners with higher reported self-compassion may engage in more CB expressions, as evidenced by a willingness to take risks and care for their distress through self-soothing efforts. Field et al.’s (2007) continuing bonds interview items included (a) sense of presence, (b) use of belongings, (c) associated places, (d) fond memories, (e) dreams, (f) reunited with deceased, (g) living up to ideals or wishes, (h) everyday decisions, (i) reminisce, (j) memorials, (k) intrusive symptoms, and (l) lessons learned.

For some, a way to cope and manage the pain of grief is to maintain the feeling that the loved one is close. Multiple studies have investigated the use of CB expressions following the death of a pet. Packman et al. (2011a) studied the relationship between twelve CB expressions, grief impact and the death of a pet. Among the findings from interviews with 33 individuals, the majority maintained meaningful, ongoing ties with their deceased pet through CB expressions such as fond memories, rituals, and dreams. While 79% of participants reported they held on to particular belongings of their pets, for example, wearing their pet's tags, having jewelry made from paw prints or sleeping with their favourite toys, 49% suggested they avoided viewing their pet's possessions to keep themselves from getting upset. Overall, the study suggested it is not the number of CB expressions used but the degree of adaptability that is significant in the grieving pet owner's total experience.

A similar study by Packman et al. (2011b) investigated CB expressions and the psychosocial adjustment following the death of a pet, and found that fond memories (85%), belongings (79%), reminiscing (79%), and lessons learned/positive influences (76%) were the most commonly endorsed CB expressions. The researchers suggested that helping individuals recognize how often these behaviours occur validates them and allows them to express their grief without feeling abnormal.

Packman et al. (2011a) described how memorials and rituals facilitate grief. Some respondents in the study held or created memorials immediately after their pets' deaths, while others needed time to process and waited to honour their animals. These memorials and rituals took multiple forms. For example, some had photographs with the ashes kept in a box, created shrines, had keychains made of their animal's fur, scattered ashes in meaningful locations, and took the ashes to an animal sanctuary.

The investigation of the unique grieving experiences of companion animals, including ritual, memorialization, and funerary practices, may help recognize their importance. In doing so, recognizing the significance may help impede experiences of disenfranchised grief. Less research has focused on the individual lived experiences of grief due to the loss of a companion animal. Kogan et al.'s (2022) research was among the first to explore individual pet owners' memorialization choices. It focused on how people memorialize their pets through CB expressions, how their religious orientations may affect their memorialization decisions, and how they care for the deceased body. This was an online survey, and the researchers found the pet owners' choices were distinctive and profoundly personal. The use of CBs in the grief process of pet loss has proved to be adaptive for some in re-establishing the attachment with their deceased companion animal, yet for a significant number of bereaved owners of companion animals, their experience is not validated.

Ritual

According to Xygalatas (2022), rituals, a genuine human universal, are structured activities that must be performed correctly. They are predictable and provide order amid the chaos of everyday life and, according to Rossano (2020), may strengthen "prosocial dispositions" (p. 24). Scholars of ritual have significantly differentiated between ritual and routines or habits. For Rossano (2020), rituals are impractical, while routines are not; rituals are mindful, while routines are not. Xygalatas (2022) distinguished between ritual and habit: habits directly affect the world, whereas rituals have symbolic meaning and are performed for their own sake.

Rossano (2020) argued that true rituals are unique to humans, and although we may see ritualized behaviour in animals, such as mating dances, humans embed such

behaviour in ritual practices like weddings. Conversely, Xygalatas (2022) asserted that rituals are widespread in the animal world, including death rituals and suggested a pattern of higher-intelligence animals having a more robust repertoire for rituals. When considering grief rituals, death is often associated with rituals that support the bereavement process in expressions of grief and can encourage the process of healing (Kagawa-Singer, 1998).

The Social Function of Rituals and Memorialization

Ritual and memorialization practices are common following death (Romanoff, 1998), and individuals have been assisted in supporting psychological difficulties, especially around separation and loss, for centuries (Reeves & Boersma, 1990). This present study focused on rituals and examined their social functions within the context of animal bereavement. For example, Bardina (2017) suggested that the primary social function of cemeteries is memorialization, while Francaviglia (1971) described them as spaces where the living can communicate with the deceased. Rituals can be performed publicly or privately (Romanoff, 1998). The functions of ritual in social group behaviours included demonstration of allegiance to in-group values and fostering cooperative actions among in-group members (Watson-Jones & Legare, 2016).

Grief Rituals

Castle and Phillips' (2003) study of grief rituals demonstrated that appropriate rituals can support bereavement and that performing these rituals has significant positive outcomes for participants. Furthermore, they discussed certain vital factors for the ritual's success, including personal meaningfulness, inclusion of others, a sense of sacredness, structure, and the use of symbolic objects. Notably, a minimization of bereavement rituals has occurred in the last decades, which may, as a result, lead to a lack of adequate

mourning and an incomplete resolution of grief (Bolton & Camp, 1987; Podrazik et al., 2000; Romanoff, 1998). In the context of companion animal bereavement, the lack of ability to participate in bereavement rituals due to a sense of societal judgment may impede the grieving process and lead to the disenfranchisement of grief.

Mourning Animals

Humans currently share their lives with companion animals in significantly different ways than in the past. Recent trends in the animal death care industry have also changed to mirror this shift, consistent with the evidence of memorials and rituals being used to cope with the grief of losing an animal companion. Although there is evidence of humans being buried with animals in prehistoric and protohistoric funerary contexts, it remains unclear why these animals were buried alongside humans (Laffranchi et al., 2024). According to DeMello (2016), pet cemeteries emerged in Europe and America in the nineteenth century. The primary reason for the development of pet cemeteries in Victorian culture was the growing domestication of animals and the human-animal relationship, as well as the question of the animal afterlife. The need for a separate space to bury the beloved “pets” was due to the belief that “dogs, like all animals, could not of course be buried in consecrated ground, though clandestine funerals were not unknown” (DeMello, 2016, p. 11). In an analysis of epitaphs in a Moscow pet cemetery, Bardina (2017) found that animals have come to assume “humanlike identities” and are mourned as close friends or family members (p. 424). Increased urbanization, to be sure, has affected the space where animals are laid to rest. For example, the legality of burying an animal in a backyard varied according to municipal laws in Canada, with some urban areas prohibiting the burial of an animal on your property (Province of Alberta, 2014).

Emerging Trends in Companion Animal Memorialization

Some owners are moving towards more human-like death rituals for their deceased companion animals (DeMello, 2016). Surprisingly, limited statistical data were available on after-death choices for companion animals. However, a study by Kogan et al. (2022) found through a survey that cremation was more common than burials, and those who chose to bury their pet did so at home. There is an increase in pet cemeteries worldwide and recent trends in the pet death industry have included “green” burials for companion animals whereby, similar to humans, it follows five principles: No embalming, direct earth burial (a shroud or fully biodegradable casket), ecological restoration and conservation, simple memorialization (sometimes communal), and an optimization of land use (The Green Burial Society of Canada, 2025).

Memorialization choices may include paintings of their companion animal, headstones, eulogies, and human-like funerals. However, “alternative” pet memorialization services have emerged, such as creating casts of body parts, preserving coats and tails, mummification, and skeletal work ranging from bone cleaning to full articulation. A company in England has advertised that it creates balls of deceased pets’ ashes and wildflower seeds to grow floral memorials (Veterinary Record, 2022).

Taxidermy for companion animals is also a trend that has emerged in memorialization. A taxidermy company in Missouri offers taxidermy and freeze-drying preservation of pets (Eddy's Wildlife Studio LLC, n.d.). Interestingly, some may see having a companion animal undergo taxidermy as socially unacceptable compared to a wild animal. Packman et al. (2011a) reported that people are hesitant to share their experiences of CB expressions as they fear being perceived as odd and worry about others' opinions.

Clinical Practice Findings in Animal Bereavement

There was scant research on the importance of the mental health field in supporting individuals through the bereavement of their companion animals (Brown, 2024; Cordaro, 2012; Crossley & Rolland, 2022; Hess-Holden et al., 2017; Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Toray, 2004). In a survey of older adults and companion animal death, Brown et al. (2023) found that 43.9% of the sample identified a pet loss counsellor as “not available but potentially helpful” (p. 4). However, Sharkin and Knox (2003) noted that the field of psychology has generally neglected companion animal bereavement. Furthermore, they suggested that psychologists still exhibit skepticism about the important role companion animals play in their clients' lives. They indicated that because of a societal lack of acknowledgement and potential embarrassment, clients may not share their grief and may minimize the experience.

Counsellors can, first and foremost, support their clients by validating their experience (Brown, 2024; Cordaro, 2012; Hess-Holden et al., 2017; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Brown (2024) suggested that counsellors may also help their clients with activities such as journaling and storytelling to support the integration of their loss. Cordaro (2012) provided insight into how counsellors may support their bereaved clients by providing psychoeducation around disenfranchised grief. Counsellors may also help clients recognize triggers of their companion animals, such as anniversaries and familiar walking spots (Brown, 2024). The incorporation of journaling exercises and meaningful memorization may help clients integrate the loss of their companion animal into their new reality (Cordaro, 2012). Crossley and Rolland (2022) argued that counsellors need to understand the bond between the client and their deceased companion animal and be aware of any biases they may hold towards these relationships. Mental health professionals play an essential role in community outreach, such as creating pet loss

support groups for bereaved pet owners (Hess-Holden et al., 2017; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). More broadly, Cordaro (2012) suggested an emerging call to normalize the grieving process for companion animals in society.

Summary

The number of companion animals has steadily grown in North America (Canadian Animal Health Institute, 2022; American Veterinary Medical Association, 2021), and research has shown that the roles animals serve in our society are changing (Toray, 2004). Newer understandings of the human-animal bond have demonstrated that emotional and attachment bonds, first conceived between humans, may expand beyond species boundaries (Prato-Previde et al., 2022). Humans have appeared to form attachments and emotional bonds with their companion animals, similar to those with friends and family (Stokes et al., 2002). Further, the experience of bereaved pet owners has often been overlooked by veterinarians and mental health professionals (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022; Morley & Fook, 2005). With these foundations, we aim for a deeper comprehension of the profound grief humans sometimes experience at the loss of their companion animals in this study.

Multiple models and stages of grief are presented to understand the grief process. Newer models, such as Neimeyer's constructivist model, Worden's tasks of mourning, and the continuing bonds model of grief, move away from the understanding that to "successfully" grieve, one must cut ties with the deceased. These models considered the bereaved's active role in meaning-making during the grief process and in integrating the deceased into the living's reality. Given that CBs may play an integral role in maintaining an enduring connection with the deceased, grief rituals and memorialization become important expressions of CBs that support the grief process and the bereaved's meaning-

making of the experience. It also became apparent that the relationship between the living and the deceased is not strictly dyadic; rather, it is situated within narratives, community, culture, and society. While the relevance of continuing bonds has been explored concerning human loss, this area has not been thoroughly investigated for companion animal bereavement. The current research underscores the need for greater understanding of the grieving process following the loss of companion animals, which will benefit the bereaved, the mental health profession, and society more broadly.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Methodological Framework

This study utilized the comprehensive methodological framework of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The IPA method was developed in psychology in the 1990s by Smith et al. as a response to the need for more structured approaches to qualitative phenomenological research at the time (Zahavi, 2018). A significant portion of the initial endeavours in IPA focused on health psychology. Over time, the methodology has expanded its application to encompass clinical and counselling psychology and, more recently, has found relevance in other various disciplines (Alase, 2017; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The focus of IPA is to investigate individuals' lived experiences and to understand how they made sense of and found meaning in these experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2022; Zahavi, 2018). IPA goes beyond summarizing statements and seeks to make sense of the experience from the person's perspective (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Smith et al. (2022) outlined IPA as a qualitative research approach for exploring how individuals make sense of significant life experiences. As sense-making creatures, humans will provide accounts of their experiences that reflect attempts at meaning-making of their experiences. According to Smith & Nizza (2022), experiences studied must be of existential or experiential importance, meaning they must matter to the individual, and although the experience does not need to be recent, when people are engaged in thinking about these experiences, hot versus cool cognition is required (both cognitive and affective).

Smith and Osborn (2003) suggested that, as IPA emphasizes the sense-making of the researcher and the participant, cognition is then a central analytic consideration that

may parallel the dominant cognitive paradigm of contemporary psychology. Yet it diverges from mainstream psychology in its commitment to in-depth qualitative analysis rather than to quantitative and experimental methods. IPA's goal is to get as close as possible to the experience rather than staying distant, as many positivistic approaches aim to do (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA focuses on how an individual, within their own social and personal constructs, interprets and makes meaning of their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Theoretical/Philosophical Underpinnings

The theoretical underpinnings of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis are rooted in three areas: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022). The following three sections provide a brief discussion of the key features and philosophers of each, aimed at understanding the development of the IPA methodological framework.

Phenomenology

Smith et al. (2022) considered phenomenology as the philosophical approach to the study of experience. They pointed to the four major phenomenological philosophers to show the emphasis on phenomenology: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Each has a core consistent with phenomenology, but their applications move it in different directions. According to Smith et al. (2022), "The founding principle of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms" (p. 8). For Husserl, phenomenology considered the examination of human experience and the need to return to the meaning of things themselves. It considered the "thing" to be "experiential content of consciousness" without looking at it with preconceived and pre-existing categorization systems (Smith et al., 2022, p. 8). For

Heidegger, the view of a person must always be understood as a person in context. This means a person's intersubjectivity is the overlapping nature of a person in engagement with their world (Smith et al., 2022).

Merleau-Ponty suggested that humans see themselves differently from everything else in the world, and one's own embodied perspective develops one's perception of others. As put forth by Smith et al. (2022), Sartre argued that we are not a pre-existing unity to be discovered; instead, we are constantly in an ongoing project of becoming ourselves.

Phenomenological psychology, initiated by Husserl, aims to study intentional consciousness in a manner that avoids reductionism. Its primary focus was to explore individuals' lifeworlds, understanding their priorities and how they interpret their experiences (Zahavi, 2018). IPA's interest in experience is strongly linked to phenomenology, as the first-person subjective accounts are considered in IPA (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Much of the IPA data collection methods and the nature of the research question are highly similar to the data collection practices and formation of a research question put forth by Moustakas (1994) in his book on phenomenological research methods. A phenomenological research question thus has definite characteristics:

1. It seeks to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of human experience:
2. It seeks to uncover the qualitative rather than the quantitative factors in behaviours and experience;
3. It engages the total self of the research participant and sustains personal and passionate involvement;
4. It does not seek to predict or determine causal relationships;

5. It is illuminated through careful, comprehensive descriptions and vivid and accurate renderings of the experience rather than measurements, ratings, or scores. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105)

Hermeneutics

In IPA, hermeneutics influences meaning-making as the interviewer's interest is in the subjects meaning-making and sense-making of their experience. Thus, the analysis process interprets and makes sense of the participants' making sense (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Smith et al. (2022) suggested that hermeneutics, particularly the hermeneutic circle, describes the relationship between the part and the whole at multiple levels. The circle is as follows: to understand the part, one must look at the whole, and to understand the whole, one must look at the part. Smith et al. (2022) used the example of the part as a word and the whole as the sentence in which the word is embedded. The word only has meaning in the context of the sentence, and the sentence only has meaning in the cumulative meanings of words. This understanding helps comprehend interpretation as an essential tenet of IPA and emphasizes a non-linear way of thinking. Subjectivity, on the part of both the researcher and the participant, is considered an essential component of the research process (Van Manen, 2023).

Idiography

Smith et al. (2022) describe idiography as “concerned with particular” in contrast to most psychological research, which is nomothetic and takes its interest in group-level or population-level claims (p. 24). IPA sees nomothetics as problematic and, as an alternative, uses “the case for the case,” suggesting that utilizing case studies or even a singular case study may challenge preconceived notions, assumptions, and theories (Smith et al., 2022, p. 45). Smith and Nizza (2022) indicated that the most critical

consideration in case analysis within IPA is analyzing each case in turn, meaning each case is examined in its own context before proceeding to the next.

Research Questions

To fill the gaps in the current research, this study used IPA to address the following research questions:

1. How do pet owners make sense of their grief through rituals and memorialization?
2. How do pet owners see these as connected to societal ideas around grief of losing a companion animal?
3. What role do cultural and social attitudes play in shaping the rituals and ceremonies surrounding companion animal death?

The first question explores rituals and memorialization as meaning-making processes in grieving, and the second and third aim to understand how social and cultural understandings of companion animal grief affect these bereavement rituals.

Participants

For participant selection, I used non-probability, purposive sampling, as “samples are selected purposively (rather than through probability methods) because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience” (Smith et al., 2002, p. 43).

According to Alase (2017), “Participants must be selected from amongst a homogeneous sample pool of participants to understand the true make-up of the research subject-matter” (p. 13). This study's participants were homogeneous (recruitment representing a specific subgroup with key characteristics), as I recruited a specific group with defining characteristics that represented the purpose of the study. Because IPA focuses on idiographic detail, selecting participants who share a similar experience revealed subtle personal meanings within the group (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It

also allowed the study to focus on the depth of individual experiences, as exploring deep insights was the primary goal rather than achieving broad representation. This study recruited a relatively homogeneous group of participants.

Participants were selected based on their use of ritual and memorialization practices following the death of their cat or dog, in order to interview participants who have gone through a similar experience. This homogeneity enhanced the study's ability to identify common themes and differences stemming from similar backgrounds, rather than from wide variations in experience or context. Narrowed participant selection in this way aligned with IPA's focus on depth over breadth (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Because IPA research designs are laborious to analyze transcripts and the interview process is time-consuming, it is recommended to have a smaller number of participants, ideally 6-8 (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Nizza, 2022). An IPA study entails a thorough, detailed examination of the accounts of a relatively small group of participants (Lykins et al., 2006). According to Smith and Osborne (2003), IPA studies are conducted with small participant groups because the level of detail required to analyze individual transcripts takes significant time. They suggested that there is no right answer for the number of participants; recently published IPA studies have ranged from 1 to 15 participants. Smith and Osborne (2003) initially recommended six participants for a student project, but have scaled that back to three recently, as they suggested the concern that a newcomer may become "overwhelmed by the vast amount of data generated by a qualitative study and is not able to produce a sufficiently penetrating analysis" (p. 57). Additionally, the aim of an IPA study is to collect detailed understandings of the participants' perceptions rather than making generalized claims, as IPA is an "idiographic

mode of inquiry” as opposed to nomothetic (see “ideography” in the methodological framework for further discussion) (Smith & Osborne, 2003, pp. 55-56).

Thus, for this specific study, a smaller group of 4 participants was adequate, as this was a novel area of study, and the goal was to elicit “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 27) of the participants ‘lived experience’ (Alase, 2017, p. 9), there was a sole researcher who was be analyzing and transcribing the data, and the researcher was working in an academic compressed time frame.

The participants in this study included four women aged 45 to 55. Three of which were located in Lethbridge, AB and one was from a community outside of Calgary, AB. Three of the participants had experienced the death of their dog, and one participant experienced the death of her cat. Please refer to the findings section for a more in-depth overview of the participants, including their pseudonyms.

Participant Recruitment

I recruited my participants using a staged approach. After I received ethical approval, the first stage involved posters placed in veterinary clinics, counselling offices, and at local animal shelters in Lethbridge (Appendix C). Based on the interest I received (none), I posted an online recruitment poster on social media platforms, including community Facebook groups, pet networks, pet grief sites, and counselling clinics’ social media (Appendix D). Once prospective participants emailed me to express interest, I sent a follow-up email with more information regarding the study (Appendix E). If they were interested, I scheduled a screening phone call (Appendix F). If they were chosen for the study, an invitation email was sent, including a letter of consent and arrangements to set up the interview (Appendix G).

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion/exclusion criteria for this study included the age group of participants (45-54), the time frame since the death (at least two weeks since death and the death has occurred in the last three years), the participant must be willing to discuss the topic, the type of animal (dog or cat), the type of death that occurred (natural or vet assisted euthanasia), and have used a ritual or memorialization practice following the death of their pet. The following section discusses the rationale for these criteria.

Surprisingly, few statistics were available for Canada on pet ownership by age. However, sources indicated that those aged approximately 45-54 years in Canada and slightly younger (early mid-forties) in the United States had the largest share of pet owners (Statista, 2013; Urban Wire, 2023). The participant age group was chosen to capture the age range that, according to statistics from Canada and the United States, has the highest number of pet owners.

In Statistics Canada's publications, an "older adult" generally refers to individuals aged 65 or older. This age cutoff is widely adopted by various Canadian government agencies when collecting demographic, health, and social data (Statistics Canada, 2022). Older adults and aging populations were excluded from this study due to the potential for more complex or cumulative experiences with grief. Grief is a commonly experienced adverse event in older age (Bonanno, 2004), and findings suggest that older adults were more vulnerable to complicated grief (Newson et al., 2011), with its prevalence increasing with age (Mason et al., 2022). We made this decision to maintain a more homogeneous sample and to focus on less complicated grief experiences, allowing for clearer interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, pet ownership has been found to decline with age (American Pet Products Association, 2016). Those ranging in age from children to emerging adults were excluded to reduce variability related to developmental

factors and differences in emotional processing (Hochberg & Konner, 2020; Vink et al., 2014).

Participants who have experienced the death of their animal in the last three years were recruited. The participant may have required time (since death) to process these events and enact ritual or memorialization practices. The participants were asked to discuss these practices based on the most recently deceased dog or cat. By keeping the time since their CA's death at three years, this captured a span of memorialization and ritual processes. Continuing bonds may be a long-term process (Klass et. al. 1996). Using a study by Kogan et al. (2022) on pet owners' memorialization choices, they found a range of memorialization practices that could span in time from immediately following the death of the pet, such as cremation or burial, to longer enactments such as getting tattoos or commemorative portraits that may emerge in the months and years following the death of their pet. Castle and Phillips (2003) also discussed that grief rituals (in the context of human bereavement) may be understood as specific rituals performed after a funeral that may include "displaying photos of the deceased, burning candles, reading or writing poetry, singing or playing special songs, reminiscing about the deceased during a special meal, saying prayers, and visiting places that were special to the deceased (p. 43). These examples illustrate that grief rituals can be performed years after the death, rather than immediately, such as on birthdays and anniversaries.

Studies that have explored the use of CBs in pet bereavement have collected data from participants who have lost their pets within the last six months (Bussolari et al., 2021) and within the last twelve months (Habarth et al., 2017). A study by Kogan et al. (2022) focused specifically on memorialization practices following the death of a pet but did not specify the time since the pet's death. Lykins et al.'s (2024) research on pet

bereavement and CBs extended the period to the past three years, which highlighted a gap in research that had previously examined only shorter periods since the pet's death. To further this exploration, broadening the time frame to three years could shed light on how memorial and ritual interactions evolve over time.

Guided by the foundational work above, choosing three years after the pet's death aligns well with IPA research methods. Using a three-year time frame since death ensures that the ritual and memorialization practices are recent enough for participants to describe details and physical and emotional sensations of the experience (Van Manen, 2023).

We made the decision to wait at least two weeks after the death of their companion animal for several reasons. This time frame allowed certain rituals or memorial practices to take place, as some might require time to arrange (e.g., receiving the remains). I did not want to include participants who were in acute distress immediately following their loss. In their study of cognitive and emotional processes in bereaved dog owners, Tzivian et al. (2014) found that two weeks following the death, pet owners were able to complete semi-structured interviews and discuss their experiences. Westland et al. (2025) suggested that emotional distress caused by researchers' interviews is understudied, but found no evidence that the distress experienced during interviews is any more significant than that experienced in everyday life.

This leads to the next criterion: participants were willing to discuss this experience. Willingness to discuss the memorialization and ritual process surrounding the death of their companion animal was outlined during the initial screening, in the consent form, and throughout the process as part of informed consent.

The animals considered in this study were dogs and cats. Companion animals are defined as “animals kept as companions to humans and generally of domesticated

species” (Hewson, 2014, p. 103). This included dogs, cats, horses, reptiles, smaller mammals, rabbits, and birds, but excluded fish. Only dogs and cats were included as they are the most common pets in Canada (Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2022).

Although humans can form solid affective bonds with various animals (Prato-Previde et al., 2022), this study focus was on dogs and cats, as most of the research on the strength of attachment bonds between animals and their human caregivers has focused on these two animals and has shown that dogs and cats form strong bonds with their human caregivers (Udell & Brubaker, 2016; Vitale et al., 2019). Furthermore, dogs and cats are most often kept in homes and are considered part of the family (Archer & Winchester, 1994).

The death of the companion animal must have been from vet-assisted euthanasia or natural causes. There are few statistics available showing how many pets die at home naturally compared with how many veterinarians euthanize. Some of the available data is specific to shelter animals, and the mortality profiles of pets versus shelter animals differ. Two studies provided some data. For dogs, a survey by Pearson et al. (2024) found that in the United States, out of 2,570 responses, 85.4% of dogs had been euthanized and 14.6% experienced “unassisted” or “natural” deaths. For cats, Kent et al. (2022) conducted a necropsy study and found that 16.5% of cats died naturally, while 83.5% were euthanized. However, it is essential to note that there may be less documentation overall of pets that die at home, as these often go unrecorded. This study focused exclusively on natural death and vet-assisted euthanasia, which omit pets that have been killed, gone missing, lost in natural disasters, rehomed/given up for adoption, unknown deaths (e.g. road trauma, predation, poisoning) or euthanized by the owner. This is because there may

be less ambiguity surrounding death, and owners are involved in end-of-life decision-making.

The participants must have used ritual or memorialization practices following the death of their companion animal. A qualitative systematic review of grief following the loss of a pet found that a key theme was the importance of rituals in the grief process (Adams et al., 1999; Cleary et al., 2022). This study builds on previous research that found most bereaved pet owners use CB practices such as ritual and memorialization to maintain ongoing ties to their deceased pet (Carmack, 1985; Kogan et. al., 2022; Packman et al., 2011, 2011b). Participants must be able to speak and read English adequately and will not be excluded on the basis of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or religious beliefs. Participants must have provided free and informed consent to be eligible for this study. To ensure participants can provide free and informed consent, I confirmed their understanding of the study's risks and benefits, its nature, and their right to withdraw at any point. Consent was an ongoing process that started with my initial contact and continued until the study ended or the participant chose to withdraw (Government of Canada, 2024).

Data Collection

The interview process is fundamental in IPA. The engagement and depth of experience the participant is willing to share is integral, as the quality of analysis is capped by the quality of the data collected in the interview (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I conducted semi-structured, in-depth, one-on-one interviews using open-ended questions and an to elicit rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomena under investigation (see Appendix I). The interview guide was informed by the research questions, the emerging literature, and the gaps in the field of CA bereavement. For the interview guide, I drew

minimally from inventory items from the continuing bonds interview developed by Field et al. (2007). This was an unpublished instrument; however, because it was not administered, I did not seek permission from the creators and instead adapted and cited their inventory as the basis for some questions in the interview guide.

The interview guide was built as per Smith & Osborn's (2007) recommendations, whereby questions are structured using a funneling technique, moving from more general questions to more specific ones. This encourages participants to provide their own views before moving to more specific interview questions relevant to the research questions (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The interview guide contained open-ended questions to prompt participants to elaborate on and articulate their experiences of memorializing and rituals following the death of their companion animal. Smith and Nizza (2022) suggested that prompts are helpful in eliciting conversation within the interview guide. Because this was a semi-structured interview, there was space for participants to share what they deemed relevant and essential in their experience of the phenomenon, which I as researcher could explore with further questions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Each interview lasted approximately one hour, per the recommendations for a proper IPA interview (Alase, 2017).

Overall, the project's semi-structured interview was well aligned with the aims of the broader qualitative research interview (Kvale, 1983). A qualitative interview aims to understand the interviewee's life-world and the meanings of phenomena within it. It is characterized by being qualitative, descriptive, and specific, and it avoids presuppositions. The interviewer focuses on certain themes but remains open to ambiguity and change. The process depends on the interviewer's sensitivity, occurs through interpersonal interaction, and can be a positive experience for interviewees (Kvale, 1983).

During the interviews, I used interviewing micro-skills as necessary aspects of the critical skill of listening, including attending behaviours such as appropriate vocal quality and the use of body language and facial expressions. At times, I redirected participants' attention to refocus on the questions in the interview guide (Ivey et al., 2008). All participants in the study were asked all of the questions in the interview guide. At times, participants' answers proactively addressed follow-up questions. When this happened, I let participants know that they had already answered some of the follow-up questions, restated them, and asked if there was anything else they wanted to add.

Although I have advanced interviewing skills from my background as a counselling student, I made a conscious effort to remain within my role as a researcher rather than a therapist. While I hope to have provided warmth, a non-judgmental space, and active listening to elicit rich, thick description from participants (Perry & Bigelow, 2020), I remained consistent in my role as researcher to follow the interview protocol in the same manner with all participants. Participants were told that they could take a break at any time, and, as part of ongoing informed consent, they were reminded at the beginning of the interview that they could end the interview at any time.

Procedures

As above, I posted recruitment posters in local counselling service offices and veterinary clinics in Lethbridge (Appendix C) then moved to online to community social media groups (Appendix D). Once prospective participants contacted me, I contacted those individuals with a follow-up recruitment email regarding their interest in the study (Appendix E). In this email, individuals were informed of the time commitment and timeframe of the study, as well as the requirements, including the criteria for their participation (Appendix E). This included informing them that their participation in

the study would take about 2-2.5 hours of their time overall. It included a screening call to describe the study and ensure they qualify (about 15 minutes), an audio/video recorded interview via Zoom (around 60 minutes), and a follow-up discussion (roughly 30 minutes). It described the time frame in which the screening and interview happen over about 3 weeks, and at around 2-4 months, there would be a follow-up discussion with them. They were asked to provide a contact number and a date and time for a screening call.

During this phone call, I introduced myself as a Master of Education student in counselling psychology at the University of Lethbridge and explained my current interest in this study area. I provided participants with an explanation of the research, and the nature of the study was discussed. The screening requirements were gone over with prospective participants.

Participants who were chosen for the study through the screening phone call were sent the letter of consent/invitational email (Appendix G). This was sent to participants prior to the interviews taking place. Within the document, it stated that if the participant had any questions or concerns or was in need of additional explanations, they may reach out to the researcher directly, and the contact information was included. In this email, I provided instructions on how to electronically sign the document and arranged a date and time for the interview.

Following the initial screening phone call and initial consent process, I conducted a semi-structured, in-depth interview with each participant using open-ended questions and an interview guide (Smith & Nizza, 2022) (see Appendix I). These occurred over Zoom, and the participants were told they may have their camera off if they wished, and only audio data would be collected. All participants engaged in the interview with their

cameras on. Alase (2017) described that the interview site in IPA (including the date, time, and place) should be left to the participant to decide. With this in consideration, I scheduled Zoom interviews based on the convenience and ease of the participant.

While some IPA researchers choose not to overburden participants by returning their transcripts for comments or corrections (Price et al., 2025), I chose to have participants review their transcripts to ensure I had captured their words without distortion (Alase, 2017). Within the email, I clearly stated the purpose of this was to review the transcription for accuracy and confirm the meaning of their statements was not changed in the transcription process. They were also given the opportunity to remove anything they wished to not include. Participants were given one week to identify any omissions or edits in the transcript, and then two weeks from receipt of the transcript to withdraw from the study. Ethically, I wanted the participants to have full informed consent regarding what from their transcript was being used in the study, given the window provided for them to choose to withdraw.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were discussed with participants during the initial screen phone call, during the process of filling out consent forms, and throughout the entire process. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves and their companion animals, and names of children, spouses, geographic locations, businesses, and any other identifying information were removed from the transcript. Participants were informed that I would record and transcribe the interviews. All data, recordings, and transcripts were encrypted and stored in a locked drawer or in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal computer. Only the audio data would be collected, and the video would be destroyed. Audio files would be transcribed in a private space using

headphones, and transcripts would not be viewed in public spaces. As per ARISE protocol, this data would be saved for five years. The only people who would have access to the collected data were the researcher herself and her academic supervisor.

Due to the potentially emotional and psychologically distressing nature of the research question, participants were told the risks and benefits of this research, including contact information of local mental health care professionals and pet loss grief websites. Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed that they may withdraw during the interview by verbally informing the interviewer, or they may withdraw their data two weeks following receiving their transcripts from the interview. They could withdraw their data up to this point by contacting the principal investigator, Bronwyn Davis (Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca). After that point, we could not remove them from the study because we would have incorporated their data into the general analysis. This was written in the consent forms. All data collected if participants choose to withdraw within this time frame would be destroyed.

The researcher informed the participants in the letter of consent how this research would be disseminated. It was also discussed with participants that there may be a follow-up to review the quotation(s) to be used. A list of counselling support resources and websites was provided in the consent form, as participants may not have been comfortable asking the researcher for additional support if distressed.

Method of Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, and I utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis procedures to analyze these transcripts. Smith and Nizza (2022) proposed a four-step procedure as a guide for analyzing and interpreting data collections. Although this was

not meant to be prescriptive, using a template set forth by Smith and Nizza benefited me as a researcher new to this methodology.

Step one was reading and re-reading the transcripts, and I created exploratory notes (see Appendix J). At this point, I repeatedly read the transcript while making notes. During this step, I noted key phrases and processes within the transcript (Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999). This process included reading transcripts line by line and focusing on words and comments that might be relevant (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Step two was formulating experiential statements (see Appendix J). By using the exploratory notes, I began creating experiential statements, which were interpretive summaries about what happens during specific portions of the text (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

For step three, I found connections and clustered experiential statements. This stage involved me looking for ways statements were similar or different from one another. This stage often required me to return to the transcripts and reread them (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The fourth step, I completed the table of the person's experiential themes (see Appendix A). This also included snippets of the participant's quotes, allowing my interpretation to be thoroughly grounded in the data (Smith & Nizza, 2022). It was integral to the analysis process that I reread and returned to the transcript multiple times. During IPA, the researcher must understand that these steps may need to be repeated, and at times, the researcher may need to go back and reread. It was also necessary in IPA to follow the process case by case before moving to making connections and clustering quotes between participants (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

After completing these steps for each participant, I moved to cross-case analysis. I looked across the tables for threads, connections, and themes across the group. At this point, I re-examined individual cases to see if what has been discovered from one case

illuminates an area from another case that had not been considered in the initial reading of the transcript (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The table of group experiential themes consisted of high-level themes and, within them, sub-themes (Appendix A). Under the various sub-themes, the participant and an excerpt from the transcript were included (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The final process was writing up the analysis, where I summarized the themes and discussed their interpretations using explicit excerpts from the participants' transcripts (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Positionality Statement

As a researcher embarking on IPA, the analysis both depends on and is also complicated by my personal conceptions. These conceptions are required in the interpretation process to invoke a double hermeneutic approach. I am making sense of the participant, making sense of “X,” where “X” is an event or experience (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Because both the participants and I are making interpretations, it is imperative to acknowledge and articulate my positionality as a researcher.

I love and have always loved animals. I grew up in a household with family dogs, hamsters, snakes, birds, and lizards. As an adult, I share my home with several companion animals. I have experienced the deaths of my childhood dogs and participated in rituals to scatter their ashes in familiar spots. Paintings of them and their collars were placed in our home. While working on this thesis, one of the animals I had died, and we created a memorial in his honour. I recognize that as more of my animals approach the end of their typical life expectancy, I will soon be experiencing their loss. I am also aware that the relationship I have with each of them differs, and I assume this will affect the significance of my grief experience.

In my adult years, multiple acquaintances, friends, and family members have shared experiences of grief over the loss of their companion animals. In some of these conversations, they described feeling unsupported and misunderstood in their grieving process by their support networks and, more broadly, their society. Some have also shared memorials they have created to remember their pet, such as shrines, portraits, fur, decorative urns containing their ashes, or tattoos. My experiences with ritual and memorialization as part of the grief process of my own companion animals have led to my curiosity about the significance of these practices with others.

Personal Theory of Grief

Through my research and experiences with grief accumulated over the years, my personal theory of grief continuously evolves. I strongly agree with Cave (2018) when he put forth, “If we love, we grieve. That’s the deal. That’s the pact. Grief and love are forever intertwined” (p. 1). Interestingly, this perspective closely aligned with Forslund and Duschinsky’s (2021) interpretation of Bowlby that “a liability to experience separation anxiety and grief are thus the ineluctable risks of a love relationship, of caring for someone” (p. 67). Part of human nature is grief, and although universal, the process is unique.

I draw from Neimeyer, in which “the loss of a loved one can challenge the validity of core beliefs and undermine the coherence of the self-narrative” (Neimeyer et al., 2010, p. 74). The meaning-making process encompasses the integration of the connection with the deceased into the present reality. To me, meaningful remembrance and memorialization reinforce the connection between the living and the deceased. Selvili and Klass (2025) have discussed the continuing bonds model of grief as “relational continuity” between the living and the deceased (p. 12), which resonates with the

meaning-making process articulated by Neimeyer. The continued bonds model of grief and Neimeyer complement each other in understanding the importance of meaning-making and that it is not individual but situated within our culture, society, narratives, community, and relationships. Furthermore, I am inclined towards models of grief that deviate from a linear perspective. I am aligned with Worden's (2003) model of grief, situating the bereaved as an active, rather than passive, part of the process.

Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

As an IPA researcher, I have a crucial role to make space for the participants in the research having the opportunity to share their "lived experience" without fear of judgment (Alase, 2017, p. 9). The approach of IPA explores how participants made sense of their world and uses a double hermeneutic approach in which the I make sense of the participant making sense of a phenomenon. Therefore, as the researcher, I become a co-creator of meaning rather than only extracting meaning. I undoubtedly bring my own world views, biases, and preconceptions into my analysis. As stated above, my interest in and fondness for animals led me to my research topic. I am also aware that my interest in this topic derives from a curiosity about my own experiences of grief, understanding, and thoughts on death.

Larkin et al. (2006) argued that the researcher is identified as an included part of the world they are describing. Rather than suspending my preconceived understanding of the world, biases, and personal experiences, I choose to embark on this research using radical reflexivity, which involved "the messy, complex, and at times, unknown processes researchers attend to throughout their inquiry and even after the inquiry ends" (Smith & Luke, 2021, p. 167). According to Smith and Luke (2021), reflexivity involves researchers placing themselves within the "social and contextual aspects of their study",

while continuously “openly exploring the self, others, and relationships as the field work proceeds” (p. 165). Smith and Luke (2021, pp. 167-168) provided a framework which I have adapted, which served as my framework for radical reflexivity as a researcher.

My Framework Adapted from Smith & Luke (2021, pp. 167-168).

1. I will foster closeness and practice vulnerability by approaching each interaction with the participant with openness and genuine curiosity. I will be eager to hear their experiences and will express my gratitude and appreciation for their willingness to share important personal stories.
2. I will engage with myself, others, and self-other relationships by continually questioning myself through reflective practice (such as journaling) with prompts like: Who am I becoming through this research? How are my worldviews and assumptions shaping my interpretation of others' experiences? What areas feel uncomfortable? Are there tensions? Why might this be? What can I do to sit with these feelings and engage with them with humility, curiosity, and self-kindness?
3. The journey of self-knowledge and understanding myself more deeply is ongoing, having begun before this research and will continue long after. Every interaction, engagement, and conversation will form a part of an ongoing process of self-awareness.
4. I will find ways to incorporate creativity into my work. In this research, I will use art in my presentations and posters.
5. I am transparent and open about the messiness that emerges during this process. Some of this in my reflective journal, and some through conversations with supervision. These considerations stem from curiosity rather than a need for solutions or answers.
6. I am aware and acknowledge my role in this project is a researcher, not a therapist, and will maintain appropriate boundaries as an essential part of ethical research practice.

To address the points above, particularly #2 and #5, I have maintained a separate journal to record self-reflective statements throughout the research process. Meeting with my supervisor at various stages of the analysis is essential to receive support and guidance in this area. Additionally, I allowed participants to review their transcripts for accuracy and to engage in follow-up discussions, as I saw this was crucial to ensure I had accurately captured their experiences.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study aimed to deepen understanding of how people used ritual and memorialization after a companion animal's death and explored how owners made sense of these experiences. Further, the objective was to expand the limited research on individual experiences of ritual and memorialization following the loss of a companion animal (CA). I chose Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the method because it focuses on capturing participants' unique lived experiences by allowing them to share openly without "distortion and/or prosecution" (Alase, 2017, p. 9). In line with IPA's methodological approach from Smith et al. (2022) and Smith and Nizza (2022), the analysis aimed to explore and summarize how participants made sense of their experiences, and focused on both individual perspectives and shared patterns. This section presents the study's findings using an IPA framework. It will provide an overview of how the IPA analysis process was followed (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022) and a brief introduction to the study's participants, followed by an interpretative analysis of the Group Experiential Themes (GETs) that emerged (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022).

After I transcribed the interviews, I invited participants to review their transcripts to confirm accuracy or to request corrections for omissions. All responded, and one clarified a few statements and words, which I adjusted. Following IPA guidelines (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022), I read the transcripts multiple times and took *exploratory notes* (descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual). I then constructed *experimental statements* to capture the core meanings from participants' accounts, which informed the development of personal experiential themes (PETs). After further review, I clustered experimental statements based on their common meaning and

discussed and revised the resulting tables with my supervisor. I created a PET table for each participant, capturing personal experiences at a thematic level (Smith et al., 2022). I followed this sequential process for each participant before moving on to the next, resulting in the tables of each participant's PET table (Appendix A).

Participant Overview

A total of four participants took part in this study. All participants were between 45 and 54 years old, in line with the study's inclusion and exclusion criteria. The death of their cat or dog occurred within the range of the past two weeks to three years. All participants engaged in a ritual or memorialization practice following the death of their companion animal (CA). Specific demographic details were not collected. This brief overview below of participants also includes their self-selected pseudonyms. They were also invited to select a pseudonym for their CA if they wished. All participants were interviewed via Zoom at a time of their choosing.

Participant 1: Catherine

“Catherine” shared her experience of the death of her CA “Ziggy”, a tortoise-shell cat she had adopted as a kitten. The cat was 20 years old and was euthanized after its health had declined. “Catherine” had her CA cremated and returned to her. She did not mention who else lived in the home with her. She had memorial jewelry made from the remains of her deceased CA and had kept several keepsakes, including her food dish.

Participant 2: Rowan

“Rowan” shared her experience with her rescue dog, “Eddie”. Her CA was euthanized following a decline in his health as a senior dog. She shared that she got Eddie near the time when her mother died, and when she had “Eddie” euthanized, it was in proximity to her father’s death as well. She had a vet come to her home for the process of

euthanasia and was with “Eddie” during the process. “Rowan” referenced having a fiancé during the interview. She had kept many keepsakes, displayed photos, and had his paw print collected. She also had a memorialization tattoo of his paw print.

Participant 3: Marie

“Marie” shared her experience of her dog “Marvin’s” death from vet-assisted euthanasia. During the interview, intertwined with the experience of “Marvin’s” death was the previous death of her dog, “Jake”. She shared that she lived with her husband and had no children. She kept most of the deceased’s belongings, displayed their ashes in urns, and had several portraits of all her past and present CAs around the home.

Participant 4: Virginia

“Virginia” shared the experience of the death of her dog, “Lucy,” who was older and had been experiencing significant health concerns and was euthanized as a senior dog. She was present during the euthanasia process at the vet’s office. This dog was raised alongside her young family and had been with her since she was a puppy. She shared that she had children and a husband. “Virginia” also had a puppy that needed to be euthanized within the study’s time requirements, but chose to discuss “Lucy” because it was the more recent experience. She performed a cleansing ritual of her home following the death of her CA and chose to keep very little or nothing of the physical objects connected to “Lucy” other than her tags. She has photos of her CA around her house.

Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

As per Smith et al.’s (2022) guidelines, I compiled PET tables, discussed them with my supervisor, and clustered PETs to identify convergences and divergences across cases. Participants were invited to review a summary of preliminary themes and were offered the opportunity to discuss them further in a brief meeting. Only one participant

responded to the email and requested no changes; therefore, I made no changes to the themes.

As I began clustering the PETs and the experimental statements that emerged from this process, I reviewed the transcripts again. Some new entities emerged only upon revisiting the original transcripts and exploratory notes (Smith et al., 2022). This process occasionally led me to adjust how specific PETs informed the development of GETs, as GETs are explicitly designed to capture patterns of meaning across multiple participants rather than within a single narrative. This distinction helped me highlight both convergence and divergence of experiences at the group level rather than only at the individual level.

I then organized the GETs in a table that included a superordinate theme and subthemes for each of the three GETs. In the tables, I included quotations that support the themes to ensure they were grounded in the participants' own words. The table of GETs is included as Appendix B

The findings of the GETs are presented to illustrate the research's hermeneutic/interpretative process. Findings are written in a narrative style and grounded them in the participants' words from the transcripts (Smith et al., 2022). I present transcript excerpts using participant pseudonyms to protect anonymity and include corresponding page and line numbers to ensure transparency and traceability of analysis. Below, I have provided the written interpretative analysis of the superordinate and subordinate themes that arose in the GETs.

Interpretative Analysis of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

The analysis identified three superordinate themes that were central to the participants' accounts of their grief experiences and use of ritual and memorialization

following the death of their companion animal (CA). These superordinate themes were: Holding the Past in the Present, Grief in Social Contexts, and the Ebb and Flow of Grief. Each superordinate theme contained two to three subthemes, which together captured key aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. The superordinate themes and their associated subthemes have been outlined below and illustrated with participant quotations.

GET 1: Holding the Past in the Present

This theme centered on the varied ways in which participants maintained a bond with the deceased following the death of their CAs. This superordinate theme is a combination of three subthemes, which include: (a) motivations for bond maintenance, (b) the essence continues, and (c) embedding ongoing bonds through memorialization and daily practices. Collectively, these subthemes highlight the enduring, multifaceted, and embedded nature of continuing bonds within these participants' experience.

Subtheme A: Motivations for Bond Maintenance

All four participants described how they have maintained a bond with the deceased following the death of their CA. However, their intentions and motivations for maintaining the bond varied and were multifaceted across their individual experiences. Catherine talked about her strong bond with her CA, which reflects its deep integration into her daily life and whom she regarded as a friend and companion. As she described her way of maintaining the bond with the deceased, it appears her motivation was both to preserve that sense of closeness she shared with the CA in life and to witness/remember/acknowledge the profound importance of their relationship. Catherine described that keeping the physical remains close provided comfort and a sense of enduring presence. There appears to be a clear certainty in her choices as seen in her use

of these words: (I definitely knew, I just knew, it wasn't even a question). For example, she said, "*I definitely knew* that I would get her cremated and bring her home" (p. 37, line 75). "*I just knew* that I, I wanted her with me, so *it wasn't even a question* of whether or not I would" (p. 36, line 74). In addition to a felt sense of closeness, keeping the remains close appears to be an important way to acknowledge the relationship's significance. Catherine shared, "That she was loved, and just important for her to be around still, and just always know that she's here in some way, right?" (p. 24, line 51).

For Rowan, scattering ashes at locations associated with positive memories seemed to provide motivation to reconnect with and recall significant moments shared with the CA. She described, "Having some of him there forever, I mean, that will always bring me back to good times with him, and I think to have that in different places makes it such a wider-reaching thing and not just here" (p. 64, line 283).

The motivation behind maintaining a bond with the deceased for Rowan appears to differ from that of Catherine. For Rowan, it seemed to be a way to reconnect and revisit associated positive memories, while for Catherine, it appeared more about the maintenance of the connection, which may provide her comfort. For Marie, seeking out olfactory cues (smell) acts as a powerful way through sensory input to evoke a perceived sense of reunion with the deceased's memory, eliciting emotional connection and comfort. She said:

I desperately wish that the stuff smelled like them still. So, I often times try and smell some of that stuff. Didn't want to wash things for a really long time after they went 'cause I just didn't want.... I try and smell their hair to see if it still smells like them. But I do, I do seek comfort. I wish I had a bit more, like I wish I could just breathe it in and just be like ohhhhh just what a memory, right? Because

I do think that smells of such an important way of bringing you right back to a place that that's not there anymore, so I really wish that...try to smell their collars.

It's a lot about smell. (p. 50, lines 132, 133)

Similar to Catherine, Marie expressed that this feeling of reunion was comforting and motivated her to engage in the practice of associating smell with memories in the present. Yet it appears that Rowan and Marie may be attempting to reconnect through actions that help them recall, while for Catherine, it may be more about comfort and the sense that she is not gone.

As with Catherine, Marie indicated that memorialization practices serve as an important means of honouring the deceased and communicating to their CAs that they remain loved and remembered, thereby giving these practices significant emotional meaning. She said, “Just thinking that they know how much we love them if we talked about them, kept the pictures, all of that stuff. Just, they’d know how much they meant to us and how deeply we loved them” (p. 33, line 94). In this statement, there appear to be motivations similar to Catherine’s in wanting to witness and affirm the importance of the relationship as a relational acknowledgement that the bond they shared mattered to them.

While Marie described memorialization practices as a means of honouring the deceased, she also considered them a way of preserving a sense of closeness, similar to Catherine. The motivation for Marie's seeking closeness, as she described it, may be more about a reminder or an anchor to a memory. Marie said:

Everything now is just kind of displayed on a shelf in my living room, together, of course, with their collars, and just little tiny candles with their initials and stuff on it. So, they will just be close to us forever. (p. 24, line 72)

In contrast to physical objects, Virginia expressed that preserving a connection through storytelling and narrative was a significant way to honour her CA. She said, “Yeah, the honouring for me is more, in story, again, not to sound pretentious, but that’s where I find value” (p. 72, line 156). “So, it’s talking about her. Do you remember her? Thinking about the good experience, even in the missing now, it’s a testament to how much she meant and how much she did do” (p. 72, line 157).

Although there was different way of preserving this bond, Virginia described seeking comfort from feeling the presence of the deceased. This sense of comfort is also evident in Catherine and Marie's motivations for maintaining the bond. Virginia said:

I feel her presence in the sense that it was something to me, and I find a lot of comfort in that. The comfort to me is not in things. But that’s also how I think about life. I don’t have a lot of attachment to things. I don’t place value in them.
(p. 46, lines 145-148)

This diverges from the other three participants, who were motivated to keep physical objects as a means to continue to feel a bond in the present.

Subtheme B: The Essence Continues

This theme captures how participants experienced the deceased's presence as continuing into the present. Each participant held different beliefs about where the *essence* of the deceased resides. While some sensed a felt presence, others described it as more tied to the physical remains.

For Catherine, a sense of presence is embodied in the mementos, for example, a pendant made with the CA’s remains. She described, “It just feels like she's still here, in some way, you know, having the necklace, and she's just here with me, and just seeing her ashes and just knowing that, yeah, she's not, she's not gone” (p. 26, line 53). While

Rowan felt the essence of the deceased in a felt presence. She shared, “He’s here. He’s here with us” (p. 36, line 170).

At a certain stage in the interview, Rowan articulated her appreciation for moments when she and her partner shared with each other that Eddie had entered their thoughts. She said, “Him [Partner] and I keep Eddie’s (*pause*) “*ness*” with us” (p. 51, line 229). In this line, she expressed a sense of essence or “*ness*” as she reflected on how Eddie remains alive in memory.

Throughout the interview, Marie actively negotiates her beliefs around the essence of the deceased. She said:

Sure, sure, we just always want them to be included, still, even though they're not with us physically. But. Yeah, I think that there's just always a little, we wouldn't maybe take them physically, well, for one, like where there's lots of talk about spreading their ashes over their favourite spots and stuff, I have this weird thing about separating *their bodies*. Like, I just, I want it to be whole. Which I don't know where that comes from because, you know, *whatever it's ashes* and but I just want them to be whole and feel like *we're taking a piece of them* if I, if I, we do spread some of those ashes. (pp. 45,46, lines 123,124)

From this excerpt, Marie seemed to prefer keeping all the ashes together rather than spreading them, as she described it as “their bodies, whatever it’s ashes”. Yet she also felt that separating the ashes would feel like “we’re taking a piece of them”. Marie’s understanding of her beliefs might be linked to more religious or spiritual ideas that were not discussed in the interview. However, Marie does not explicitly specify whether the deceased's ashes are symbolic or contain the departed's essence.

Virginia was firm in her beliefs and had no doubt that the essence of her deceased is not in material objects; she holds it internally. She said, “I don't want the ashes in my house. That's not her to me. That's a jar of ash” (p. 41, line 69). Following the cremation, when asked about her preferences for placement of the remains by the vet, she said, “I didn't want to know where it was. I don't wanna go to it again. For me, just in my beliefs, that's not where she is. Like she's in my heart. She's in my memory” (p. 42, lines 71,72).

While Virginia discussed having a photo of her deceased dog in the home, other memorialization practices, such as keeping remains or keepsakes, were of little value to her. She felt her CA's presence. She shared:

But sometimes I'll be sat alone, in those quiet moments, and she'd just walk up to me and nudge me. I find myself occasionally just putting my hands down, like, as if to pet her and go, hey, Luc, hey. (p. 59, line 112)

Subtheme C: Embedding Ongoing Bonds Through Memorialization and Daily Practices

Most participants described how they maintained these bonds through their memorialization choices and how they embedded them into their daily practices. Rather than existing only in moments of explicit remembrance, these bonds were sustained by integrating them into daily practices.

Catherine shared that wearing memorialization jewelry containing the ashes of her deceased loved one provided a sense of closeness. The physical remains of the deceased in the piece may provide a sense of closeness in a tangible way (of her) rather than only being a symbolic representation. She shared, “It was just nice to have something with her, like *of her* with me whenever I wanted to wear it” (p. 22, line 44).

For Rowan, her memorialization practices were twofold. The CAs' leash remained hanging by the door. It appears that the leash by the door has become a way for the deceased's values and lessons to guide her current practices. The leash seems to serve as a reminder to look after herself and get out for walks. She said, "His leash being by the door makes me think of my own health" (p. 38, line 178). She also shared, "Through him, living and also gone, it made us aware that we should get outside and look after ourselves as much as we looked after him" (p. 39, line 183). This quote suggested that the relationship with the deceased is reconfigured internally based on its influence. However, for Rowan, having a memorialization tattoo may be a more symbolic reminder, and she describes a connection to the deceased while maintaining their daily ritual. She said, "I got a print of his paw just above my ankle so he could be with me as we walk forever now" (p. 36, line 143).

Similar to Rowan, Marie described an activity she engaged in daily. She shared a daily ritual of physically touching their urns and saying goodnight, which appears to be a way Marie believes the deceased could still feel cared for and loved. She said she would "touch their urns every night and told them goodnight, and, just so that, you know, they knew" (p. 24, line 75).

In describing their placement of the memorials in the home, the participants indicate that the deceased are embedded in their everyday lives, even in ordinary activities like watching TV. Marie said, "So yeah, the decision was intentional where we were going to leave them because we wanted them to still watch TV with us on Friday nights and things like that, right?" (pp. 43, 44, line 119).

Virginia differs significantly from the other participants. Rather than engagement in ritual practices or memorialization, as seen with the other participants, Virginia's

connection endures in a felt presence. She described speaking to her deceased CA and a spiritual connectivity that endures. She described in the interview that she wouldn't seek out keepsakes or memorials to remind her of the deceased, but rather open herself to a felt sense of presence. Virginia said, "I feel her presence. Not weird things happening, but that's just me manifesting a sense of it or just acknowledging that in myself, and I'm fine with that" (p. 58, line 111). She shared in the interview that she has a photo of her deceased CA in her office, which was a space where they spent a lot of time together. However, she said she doesn't seek out memorials or perform daily rituals. In connection with her earlier statements that she does not find value in material things, for Virginia, the connection is maintained in a spiritual sense. She said:

I don't do it because I'm sad. In that moment, I'm not thinking I'm sad, go find the photo or pretend she's there. I think it's just those quiet moments when she and I would connect that I remember. And whether I'm doing it for my own peace of mind, I really think, what if she is there? What if there's dog spirits in my house? It makes me feel good. (p. 80, line 173)

GET 2: Grief in Social Contexts

In this superordinate theme, I examined how individual participants experienced and managed their grief within their broader social worlds. The ways in which participants described navigating complex interpersonal dynamics and also managed the expectations, responses, and perceived understanding of those around them are overviewed in the following three subthemes: (a) seeking and receiving support, (b) solitude within a shared experience, and (c) testing the waters: the vulnerability of voicing grief. This superordinate theme and its subthemes highlighted the relational aspects of how participants engaged with their grief through interactions with others, as well as the

challenges they faced while navigating this experience in social contexts. Social media also played a notable role for some participants, serving as a space where they could, sometimes anonymously, seek and receive support from friends or others on social media who had experienced a similar situation.

Subtheme A: Seeking and Receiving Support

In this subtheme, participants' accounts revealed whether meaningful support was present or absent and how that shaped their grieving experience. One participant reported that the loss of their CA came up in a therapy session, and others reported they did not seek out formal support from counsellors or spiritual/religious advisors. Close personal relationships were a source of support for some during their grieving process. Participants explained this theme in several ways: navigating social support became a source of tension for some, while for others it was a way to have their experience understood and validated.

For example, Catherine described having social support from friends who have experienced a similar loss and felt somewhat supported and perhaps understood. She said, “I have friends that have animals, though, and they've all been through, you know, having to put their animals down, so yeah, everybody was pretty supportive” (p.15, line 30). From this, it became clear that friends have been supportive of her experience as they, too, have experienced a similar loss. However, she later described using social media as a different means of seeking support. She said:

I read a lot online with different forums on stuff like Reddit and stuff with people that have also posted that their pets have passed away, and it's, yeah, I mean, I guess you just sort of feel like you're not alone, right? (pp. 44, 45, line 95)

Here, the online community may serve as a form of support, allowing her to seek out others who have experienced a loss and shared their experiences in forums. She said, “I never really posted anything about her. I just never felt like I was ready, but just reading other comments, right?” (pp. 45,46, lines 97, 98). Yet, from this statement, there is a sense of passive participation. While reading about other people’s experiences, she has not felt comfortable sharing her own, which may have led to a sense of support, though potentially only on a superficial level. While passivity on social media websites may not foster a sense of deep connection, there may be benefits to observing others’ conversations, such as learning from others' experiences and feeling validated or acknowledged by reading about similar ones. While she may have been seeking support vicariously through others' experiences, it may also offer a sense of self-protection by providing a space that maintains some emotional distance.

For Rowan, her experience navigating support seems very much tied to familial roles. She said, “I’m a very internal person. I’m the helper like my mom. She helped everyone else but never got help for her and I think I’m the same way” (p. 22, lines 103-105). Her description of herself as an internal person and a caregiver creates a conceptual lens that complicates help-seeking. Although in the interview she described her fiancé and close family as being very supportive in her experience, she stated again later in the interview, “Like I said, I’m the one that usually is the giver and haven’t asked for that help even though I probably need it at some point” (p. 24, line 112).

Social media also became a form of support for Rowan as she described posting a picture of the commemorative tattoo of her deceased companion animal on her Facebook page. Her description of others' responses is as follows. She said, “To have that, and I guess, that flow of love come through my phone was a huge help for sure” (p. 58, line

260). Rowan goes on further and shared, “I wasn’t looking for sympathy, but I eventually did accept it as it poured in” (p. 60, line 267).

As also heard in Catherine’s account, social media may offer an avenue for individuals to maintain a degree of emotional distance from their experiences compared with seeking or receiving support in person. The ability to access social media at one’s discretion might afford individuals control over the timing and context of their engagement with grief and acceptance of expressions of sympathy. However, for Rowan, when people reached out to her to see how she was following the death of her CA, at the time, she describes not being able to accept support. She said, “I know that, people said that like are you ok? Are you ok? And I was like, yeah, I’m *fine*” (pp. 16, 17, lines 77, 78). Although she described not being “fine” following the death, the support offered at the time appears to be somewhat superficial, perhaps prompting a self-protective response.

Marie found her parents and her partner to be her supports following the loss of their CA. She also used social media by posting to the group where she rescued the CA from. Although she was aware that others sympathized with her, she suggests that was not the intention behind posting on social media. She said, “I mean, I told people, of course, but not looking for any type of support or sympathy. I know everyone was sorry” (p. 18, line 51). From this statement, we can see that it is perhaps the case that sympathies from an online community may not be the support needed at the time.

Virginia reflected that sharing her experience with close friends was tied to a need for acknowledgement. She shared, “One, I wanted to share it with them but, two, you know, whether subconsciously or consciously, you know, you were also going to get that,

oh... acknowledgement of what you've experienced and a bit of sympathy, right?" (p. 82, line 185).

However, how she navigated support was also tied to her familial role, similar to Rowan. Unlike Rowan, for Virginia, it was very much tied to the role and identity of a mother. She described the emotional labour of needing to prioritize her daughter's grief reaction over her own. Virginia said:

I was worried about, as a mom, my priority was then, as soon as I got in the door, how are the kids going to feel, and I have to manage and support their reactions to it, not as much as my own, or as opposed to. (p. 56, line 106)

Even as she began to reflect on how she and her husband were sources of support for each other, she shifted the focus back to her role as a mother, revealing that her own need for support became less of a priority than supporting her children. She said:

I think my husband and I were probably, again, my priority was the kids and how they felt, and my daughter had been through a lot in the past year so much how's she's going to be. So that was probably my priority more than how I felt. (p. 83, line 186)

Subtheme B: Solitude Within a Shared Experience

I observed that the participants acknowledged that grief following the loss of CAs is a somewhat shared common experience, yet their narratives frequently reflected a tension between a shared commonality of grief and their deeply personal experience of it. Catherine was clear that grief following the loss of a CA was a universal experience. She stated, "It's a very universal experience, *right?*" (p. 83, line 99). However, within what she described as a universal experience, she shared wanting to turn inwards in her grief experience. "I had friends around, and that, and I don't know, I think I just wanted to be

alone more than anything, *right?*” (p. 14, line 28). Asking “right?” at the end of both statements suggested an active process of making meaning of her grief experience. As Catherine discussed the use of social media, it became clear that she was seeking a sense of commonality by observing others who had gone through similar experiences, recognizing that while her grief was uniquely her own, aspects of it were also universal (not alone, other people go through it too). She said, “Like it's just nice to read other comments and just realize *other people go through it too, right?*” (pp. 46, 47, line 103). She shared that:

I read a lot online with different forums on stuff like Reddit and stuff with people that have also posted that their pets have passed away, and it's, yeah, I mean, I guess you just *sort of feel like you're not alone, right?* (pp. 44, 45, line 95)

While Catherine expressed that she felt supported by friends who had experienced comparable circumstances, she also notes that her experience felt unique. This perhaps compounded her sense of solitude. She said, “She's mine, and I don't have a lot of people that know what it's like to have an animal for 20 years, like just such a long time span” (p. 14, line 29).

Rowan reflected on the general shared experience of the process of euthanasia with her CA. She shared, “It's never easy. I think with Eddie, given his health issues, I knew that this was the best thing for him. I think that made it less hard. Not easy, but less hard” (p. 15, lines 69-72). Rowan seems to accept the fact/acknowledge that this is a painful experience and does not need to buffer that reality. While framing this as a shared experience that many people may have, the commonality of that experience does not lessen its emotional weight. Her account also reflects a turning inward following the death of her CA, marked by withdrawal into solitude. She described needing to be alone

to experience her grief in solitude. She shared, “I think losing Eddie, I definitely sort of, you know, went into myself. I actually sent my fiancée away for a couple of days and just holed up” (p. 26, lines 121, 123).

Marie’s statement below highlighted the tension between the shared commonality of the experience of grief and the feeling of solitude. Hearing others’ stories of grief on social media may affirm a sense of connectedness to a shared experience. On a logical level, she stated that she is not alone; the way she described “just to make sure that...you’re not alone” highlighted a need for reassurance. She said, “So just maybe hearing other stories, just to let, obviously we’re not alone, *but just to make sure that you know you’re not alone, yeah*” (p. 74, line 182).

Virginia, like Rowan, shared an experience that highlighted solitude more than commonality, but it is worth noting for illustrating the variability of participants’ experiences. In the interview, she described her experience following a miscarriage, whereby she saw other mothers and felt a sense of unfairness, which then turned inward towards herself. She shared that she felt similar following the death of her CA. She said:

I had a miscarriage, and now I really wanted to have a baby, and I would see women out with presuming, or I was presuming at the time, with their baby and I would just think, that’s so unfair. How come, not that I didn’t want them to have one, but how come.... what have I done wrong? What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I have a baby? And I had a similar thought when the dog had passed for a couple of days. I would see people with dogs and think, why couldn’t my dog still be... it seems silly, but it’s more that it just popped in my head. I didn’t feel that way, but I was like, aww, that’s interesting that that thought came up, or that feeling again tied to that, I guess, a kind of grief. (p. 61, lines 120-123)

From this statement, she appears to find some solace in the commonality of her two experiences. Although she frequently acknowledged others' loss of their CA, she appears to perceive her own experience as unfair and felt alone in her lived experience of it. Trailing off at the end and saying that it seems silly, perhaps highlights the felt isolation of the experience.

Subtheme C: Testing the Waters: The Vulnerability of Voicing Grief

In this subtheme, I explored how participants navigated the vulnerability of expressing their grief to others. Initially, all participants were forthright in telling me that they had shared their grief experiences with others. However, it became evident to me that some of these conversations and interactions were approached with caution and selectivity. For some, sharing grief meant they were more open with certain individuals and communities. The participants also differed in their willingness to share memorialization or rituals with their smaller social groups and the wider community. This theme brought to light the navigation of trust, social norms and perceived emotional safety when sharing their grief experience.

Catherine said that she has only discussed her experience with certain friends. The friends she felt comfortable sharing her grief with were those who had also lost a CA. She said, “I haven't really talked about it with anybody outside of my friends” (p. 43, line 91). When asked about their response, she shared, “Oh, I'd say really well, they've been really supportive, and like I said, I've had lots of friends that have gone through it as well, so you know they, they know what it's like, so yea” (pp. 43,44, line 93). It seems that Catherine was protective of herself when sharing her experience of loss, and sharing with individuals who had a similar experience may have been easier than with those who did not.

Rowan was more open to discussing the experience with her close family; however, as the interview progressed, her experience of navigating how to share it with her workplace emerged. She had taken time off from work following the death of her CA, and at first, she described them as very understanding. However, she is aware that people in her workplace may not understand her grief experience following the loss of her CA. She said:

My work (*laughs*), place family, I work in a little company, and they're like a family, was after they figured out how what, when I didn't come into work, and they were like, ohh, and they're like farmers, so life on the farm is very different when it comes to animals and losing them. (p. 59, line 264)

When sharing the death of Eddie at work, she said, "I don't think they quite understood that the loss of a pet was such a big thing" (p. 26, line 119). In this statement, she described their reaction and how it would be difficult to explain her grief to them due to their views on animals, so the validity of her grief may not have been understood.

Both Marie and Virginia, similar to Catherine, were open to sharing their grief experiences but only with others who had experienced the loss of a CA. Marie shared that she was willing to speak to her parents about the loss. She said, "They're pretty much the only ones that we've asked to kind of that could really feel the pain like we felt it" (p. 65, line 162).

Virginia, too, was willing to speak to close friends and family, with the selected confidants who had similar experiences. She said, "I think I connected with other close friends that, or like family that I know are animal lovers" (p. 82, line 184). She also shared, "Because it's only really other pet people that get the pet thing and even then, you don't want to talk about it all the time with them" (p. 73, line 159).

All of the participants described their disclosures to others as being selective rather than indiscriminate. They have all stated that they shared their experiences with others whom they believed could relate to their situations. Marie shared that when telling others, negotiating others' responses to her grief was also an aspect of sharing her experience. She said:

I think I feel like they didn't know how to act sometimes, right? They didn't know what to say. If it was if it was better to not talk about it or if it was better to talk about it. (p. 64, line 160)

However, when asked whether they would share their memorialization or rituals they engage in with others, the circle becomes smaller. Marie said, "I think that my husband and I do a lot of that stuff kind of privately because I think that we know, we feel the same way" (p. 66, line 164). She shared:

We just know. Maybe we think that maybe people would think we're a little bit over the top in some of the things that we feel or think or do for them, and so really, only the two of us understand. (p. 67, line 165)

Marie kept her memorialization and rituals private, shared only within her and her husband's relationship. She appears to perceive that others might be judgmental of her grief process. Virginia, too, believed her ritual and memorial practices are private, but she says that keeping them private is not due to embarrassment or shame. Virginia said, "I think that they're personal. It's not something I hide or are ashamed of, and I tell the kids, but I probably wouldn't do it in front of them" (p. 75, line 162).

GET 3: The Ebb and Flow of Grief

This superordinate theme highlighted that participants experienced their grief in various ways and how they actively engaged in understanding their experiences through

self-reflection, seeking to construct meaning and significance from these events. I captured this in two subthemes: (a) working through dynamic emotional shifts and (b) the journey of grief. All participants shared a dynamic, evolving experience of their grief. This was evident in how they described various emotional responses and behaviours during their grieving process, and how, at times, they experienced their grief in unexpected or unpredictable ways. This was reflected in how they navigated their feelings, attempted to describe their experiences with clarity, and in the clarity that emerged as they revisited and interpreted their feelings. When discussing their experiences, participants often paused, taking a moment to ground themselves after discussing emotionally sensitive topics. They frequently used phrases like “right?” as a subtle way to seek validation, invite agreement, and check for shared understanding. Additionally, they used qualifying language such as “I think,” “kind of,” “sort of,” and “maybe,” which, to me as a researcher, indicated emotional sensitivity and ongoing meaning-making. It became apparent that the interview process itself was part of an ongoing negotiation of their experience.

Subtheme A: Working Through Dynamic Emotional Shifts

I found that participants worked through a range of emotional shifts as they processed their grief, and they articulated to me varied emotions throughout the grieving process. To me, this emphasizes the temporal nature of their grief experience. Catherine said:

Sort of everything I guess like at first it was just really hard and then like I still miss her a lot but I just find now almost kind of guilty that I'm moving on like you know that I've got a different routine and that I sort of appreciate not having to

care give as much 'cause it was stressful and it was hard so um, but yeah. (p. 18, line 39)

Catherine described mixed emotional responses following the death of her CA. She described in the above statement that it was a hard experience, a feeling of missing, moving on, but also relief from the pressures of caregiving and guilt.

Rowan described the process of having a vet come to her home and euthanize her CA as a highly emotional experience, and she cried heavily that day, and then there was a marked change in her emotional response. Following the procedure she described, “I think I was in a little bit of shock because I didn’t cry for days after that” (p. 16, line 76). She also said, “I think it took me definitely one week or two to fully feel that he was gone, and then also during that time, I was just numb about the whole situation” (p. 21, line 98). Importantly, Rowan shared she had experienced other significant losses prior to losing Eddie and is reflective that the experience of losing Eddie and her emotional reaction following was perhaps a cumulative grief response. She said, “I think lots of that was due to losing Dad not very long before too. Just everything sort of hit hard and then didn’t hit at all” (p. 19, lines 88, 89). She shared, “I looked ok outwardly, I think I was just numb with Eddie this time” (p. 17, line 79). For Rowan, it appeared that her outward expression and internal feelings were misaligned, and she underwent a significant change in her emotional state in the days following Eddie's death. She then went on to describe how, more recently, she had been feeling more emotional about the experience than in the weeks following the death. She said, “I thought I’d be much, much more emotional and the whole ugly cry, but I don’t think I’ve felt that up until a week or two” (p. 20, line 94).

Marie described a similar initial, highly emotional response to the death of her CA on the day of the death. In the days following, she described feeling distracted and that

her emotional response was “unusual” to her, as the grief she experienced with a previous CA (Jake) was more outwardly emotional and felt different for her than this time. She said:

I was very distracted, so honest to goodness, I cried pretty hard the day of, and I haven't been able to shed too many tears since. Which is just so unusual 'cause with Jake it was like a year of deep grieving and lots of crying and lots of like little memorials and things that will get into later, but yeah, Marvin was a bit different. (p. 20, lines 58, 59)

Even in her description of her experience, she seemed to struggle to identify her emotions. She said, “To be totally honest, surprisingly *super numb*. Super *not even really numb, just like normal*. I don't know why” (p. 21, line 63).

Virginia also described feeling numb following the experience of euthanasia. She said, “We felt *numb* and *shell-shocked*, to be quite honest” (p. 37, line 59). She continued to share the experience and said, “*It felt traumatizing to be honest*, not to be catastrophizing, but it was emotional. It was, it was” (p. 44, line 80). She was profoundly emotionally affected by the experience, and in stating that it felt traumatizing, she also felt the need to validate that emotion for herself. During the interview, she shared, “*I don't feel sad*. I don't feel sad about it at all. *Unless I'm in denial*” (p. 80, lines 177, 179). In this statement, there was a change in her perception of the experience and how she feels it now compared to before, whereas above she talked about being profoundly affected. Interestingly, she added “unless I'm in denial,” suggesting that, similar to above, she has some uncertainty about the “validity” of her emotional response.

While all the participants shared varied emotional responses following the death of their CA, there were distinct differences among them. For Catherine, most of her

statements were presented in a both/and manner, in which she described feeling multiple emotions from the experience at the same time, such as guilt and relief, missing and moving on. This highlights the complexity of the emotional experience and the tensions that arise in the narrative of holding multiple and sometimes conflicting emotions at once.

Rowan's account was marked by her description of having an outward emotional response during the euthanasia procedure, followed by a feeling of numbness in the days and weeks following the death. Yet she described in the interview that she was willing to express her sadness with the person who gave her a memorialization tattoo and had been feeling more emotional about the death in the weeks leading up to the interview.

Marie was unique in that she attempted to describe the emotional response following the death as "surprisingly super numb" but then revised her description of the emotion to feeling "just like normal", which was very different than her grief experience with a previous CA, where she was much more outwardly expressive of her grief.

Virginia also shared a unique perspective: she initially described crying and feeling "numb" and "shell-shocked," and later, in the interview, perhaps as time has passed, said, "I don't feel sad. I don't feel sad about it at all" about the experience.

There are similarities between the participants' varied grief reactions in that both Catherine and Marie expressed feelings of guilt. For Catherine, this was about feeling that she was relieved from the stress of caregiving and a feeling of moving on, while for Marie, her guilt centred more on how she was grieving the loss of her CA. Although Marie revised her statement of feeling "numb" to more of a feeling of "normal", Rowan and Virginia describe a feeling of numbness following the death, which may signal an internal struggle with acknowledging grief or, more broadly, how this emotional response is considered in conceptualizations of grief. Additionally, all participants described their

grief responses as emotions that varied over time and were neither linear nor prescriptive stages, aligning with the theme of dynamic shifts.

Subtheme B: The Journey of Grief

Through their narratives, I traced each participant's unique journey of grief. While each experience was distinct, all participants described an evolving relationship with their loss, marked by personal growth and shifts in meaning. In this theme, I highlighted the participants' interpretative work in constructing meaning and their personal reflections on their grief experiences.

Following the death of her CA, Catherine chose to have her CA cremated. For Catherine, her grief came in waves rather than in a linear way. She said, "I felt like I *had a couple of weeks to sort of get a handle on it*, and then it just sort of felt like it just happened all over again" (p. 40, line 82). It seemed this grief response was different from what she expected, as she said she had felt like she "had a couple of weeks to sort of get a handle on it," but then experienced intense emotions when she received the remains of her CA. During the interview, Catherine reflected on the meaning this experience has had for her. She said:

I, you know, I'm sure I love animals, and I'm sure it won't be the end, and I think that's a good way to memorialize, is to give another animal a home and so that's, you know, probably something, I don't know, I'm at this stage I'm not ready but I think I will be. I think so because there are so many animals that need help, and I think that if you have the ability to love an animal, it's probably the best you could ever do. (pp. 51, 52, lines 113-115)

Through her grief, Catherine reflected on how this loss has solidified her values and her belief in the importance of helping and caring for animals as part of her identity. The

experience seems to have integrated the loss into her identity and choices moving forward, as part of her meaning-making process.

Rowan, Marie, and Virginia were actively reflecting and making sense of what it means to grieve and what the process meant for them. Rowan was actively working through how this experience shaped her understanding of processing grief in the seven months from the death of her CA (May) to the time of the interview (December). She repeated the word “processed” and assigned value to how she perceives “how well” she has processed the death of her CA. She said:

I don’t think I’ve *processed* it very well yet (*laughs*). Even now. Months and months. This was in May of this year. *I’m still not over it. I don’t know if that’s the word.* I haven’t *processed* much since that day. If that makes sense. (p. 18, lines 81-87)

She seemed unsure of what it means for her to have “processed” her grief and perhaps, for her, was grappling with the idea of grief as a journey rather than a destination (being “over it”). She described that although she wanted to continue her connection with the deceased, she is unsure of whether this is part of processing her grief. She said:

I’m not good at processing. I haven’t really got through that yet with him or Dad and so I like the fact that I can still have Eddie with us so many of these little plans going forward. *I don’t know if I’m processing or prolonging (laughs).* (p. 56, lines 251-253)

She continued and shared, “I don’t think I’ll want to look at it as a grief process rather as a, more of a remembrance of him” (p. 55, line 247). These statements highlight her making sense of whether continuing activities that help to remember her CA are part of processing her grief or prolonging her grief, leading to a sense that perhaps for her, there

is an expectation of a linear progression of the grief experience. She is also considering for herself what remembering means for her and how this is tied to her conception of grief. In the following statement, Rowan is actively reconstructing meaning as she is facing a changed reality. She said, “So yeah, his role *has*...I keep saying *has*, but it should be *had* (*pause*). It’s really tough to get around that” (p. 6, lines 26, 27). In this statement, she is shifting her language from “has” to “had,” suggested to me she is reflecting on it as something in the past rather than in the present.

Marie, too, reflected on what a grief process means to her. She said, “I just felt I was distracted, and maybe that's why I didn't have time to grieve him, because I was so distracted with these three other dogs. Which is a *good or a bad thing*, right?” (p. 19, lines 54, 55). She shared:

I haven’t grieved him yet either, and so I think this is a bit of a problem. I have some guilt around how long I grieved Jake for and how little I've grieved Marvin for, so far, and I'm not sure why. So, I knew this would get me going a little bit. (p. 8, lines 28, 29)

By stating that she felt she hadn’t grieved him, she questions whether this is a “good or bad thing,” indicating to me that she is interpreting what it means for her to grieve. She is actively reflecting on how her grief was experienced and why it was different from previous grief experiences.

Virginia reflected how this grief experience has shaped and cemented broader meanings of death and life as a whole. She said:

I started reflecting on it a bit, and it made me realize that my reaction, or my husband's.... our reaction, very much fit with my own beliefs without me consciously thinking of that, if that makes sense. It kind of organically, naturally

came, which in hindsight, is kind of reassuring because (touches head), touch wood, I have had people pass in my life, but no one immediately close (*knocks on table*). Like my parents are still alive, my husband's parents are still alive. (pp. 56, 57, lines 107, 109)

She appears to have interpreted her grief experience as influential in shaping her beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife. She said:

I think it just reaffirmed for me how I feel about life and spirituality. For me, I don't believe this is it. I'm very firm in that belief, and it doesn't come from religion. I don't believe when you die, you die. I just believe that there's so much...I have peace with it and for myself, and others, not that I wish it upon them. And I find comfort in that, I guess. It's something I consider somewhat unshakable. (pp. 77,78, lines 168-170)

This grief experience then becomes not isolated but deeply informs and becomes integrated into her larger worldview.

My interpretation of the participants' experiences also demonstrated (as discussed above) that the interview process was part of some participants' meaning-making in allowing them to reflect on and talk through their experiences. At times during the interview, all the participants shared an emotional response with me as they recounted these experiences. This included shedding tears, pausing, and moments of silence to sit with their reflections.

This was particularly evident for two participants, Rowan and Virginia. I was struck by the level of reflection they demonstrated in the interview process. I asked Rowan about engaging in expressions of continuing bonds. She shared that she speaks to Eddie all the time. Throughout the interview, she realized, as she described it to me, that

she actually speaks to the cats about Eddie more than directly to Eddie, as she said that speaking to Eddie would bring up a feeling of “huge sadness” (p. 44, line 202). She shared, “*Interesting....I’m just sort of firming up that I speak less to him than about him. Interesting. This is really bringing things into my own head.* So thank you” (p. 45, lines 205, 207). By thinking about this question, she appears to realize that talking to others (her cats) about Eddie is perhaps easier than talking directly to him, and that it creates some emotional distance. The repetition of the word “interesting” and stating the discussion was “bringing things into my own head” demonstrates to me how she is working through her experience and making sense of it. It also seems that having the interview provided an opportunity to think through some of this, and she was thankful to me for the that. Virginia, too, expressed gratitude for the opportunity to speak through her experience as part of the process. She said, “Thank you for this space because it’s really nice. In my other life, I write, and that’s what I do, and that’s how I process the words and the talking, so thank you very, very much” (p. 65, lines 130,131). She continued and shared this insight:

On reflection, maybe I do need to talk about it a little bit more, because maybe I’ve been shutting the door on it. I don’t think it’s impacting me negatively, but it’s interesting that I thanked you, and after this call, I’ll feel a bit emotionally drained, but I’m really glad I’ve had the experience, and it has been helpful. (pp. 81, 82, lines 182, 183)

Both Rowan and Marie actively interpreted and reflected on their experiences throughout the interview process, making meaning of them. They both spoke about being appreciative of the opportunity to talk about their experience and their gratitude towards

me for providing the space. This possibly suggested that the act of narrating their stories is part of their ongoing process of meaning-making.

All participants shared deeply reflective insights into how this grief experience shaped their broader understanding of what it means to grieve. These experiences show how they have navigated their emotions while processing their grief, and their reflections demonstrate how this experience has contributed to a deeper process of making meaning from their loss. This is an area of strong convergence among all the participants: while each has unique experiences, they all derive meaning from them in different ways.

Summary

In this section, I analyzed the transcripts from interviews I conducted with four participants, using the IPA framework. I focused on understanding the participants' lived experiences of grief following the loss of a companion animal, their use of rituals and memorialization, and how they constructed meaning from their experiences. I also highlighted how these experiences converged and diverged as a group, as well as the themes that bridged them. In the following section, I further explore these perspectives to deepen understanding of the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this IPA study, I interviewed four individuals who recently experienced the death of a companion animal. The interviews generated rich qualitative data on how they experienced and made sense of their grief. The study also explored how rituals and memorialization function within that meaning-making process. Specifically, this project addressed the following research questions:

1. How do pet owners make sense of their grief through rituals and memorialization?
2. How do pet owners see these as connected to societal ideas around grief of losing a companion animal?
3. What role do cultural and social attitudes play in shaping the rituals and ceremonies surrounding companion animal death?

The analysis resulted in three superordinate themes: “Holding the Past in the Present”, “Grief in Social Contexts”, and “The Ebb and Flow of Grief”, and led to the development of subthemes grounded in the participants' experiences and accounts. In this chapter, I will explore how literature on changing perceptions of grief helps contextualize the thematic findings and will revisit theoretical approaches and grief models in view of the findings. Further, I will examine how complexities of companion animal bereavement are influenced by social and societal contexts.

In addition, I will discuss implications for counsellors, psychologists, and mental health professionals working with individuals experiencing companion animal (CA) bereavement and consider these implications for therapeutic settings. In addition, the strengths and limitations of this study's findings will be outlined. Additionally, areas that have emerged from the findings that suggest further exploration will be discussed, along with a concluding summary of the project.

Holding the Past in the Present

In this section, I discuss literature relevant to superordinate theme 1, "Holding the Past in the Present," to frame participants' experiences for alignment with current literature relevant to this theme. I outline key theoretical perspectives, including the human-animal bond (HAB) and continuing bonds theory (CBT), to contextualize how these frameworks inform understandings of the participant narratives. In doing so, I aim to situate the various ways participants maintained connections with their deceased companion animals, examine how these were related to the use of ritual and memorialization, and consider them in light of current literature and understandings.

Human-Animal Bond

It is evident from Catherine, Rowan, Marie, and Virginia's responses to the interview questions that their relationships with their CAs were deeply meaningful. In the initial stages of the interview, they recalled fond memories, shared the individual characteristics of their CAs, such as their temperament and personalities, and later spoke tenderly of the time leading up to, and for some, during, and following their deaths. They consistently described the experience of the death of their CAs as one of grief and loss marked by profound sadness.

The HAB is considered "the dynamic relationship between people and animals such that each influences the psychological and physiological state of the other" (College of Veterinary Medicine, 2023, p. 1), and the importance participants attributed to their relationships with their CAs is generally consistent with established literature on the HAB (Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Walsh, 2009). Fine and Mackintosh (2016) indicate that the reasons humans develop these deep, family-like relationships or affectionate attachments with animals are explained by three main theories: attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969),

social support theory (Beck & Katcher, 2003), and biophilia (Wilson, 1984). Together, these theories help explain why many people develop close, familial-like bonds with animals and participants in this study provided narratives that demonstrate alignment with these theories. The participants' accounts align with these theories and add depth to these theoretical approaches by illustrating how these bonds are individually interpreted and shaped by personal meaning. This is explored below.

Participants' descriptions of their bonds with their CAs reveal notable variation in how they perceived and described these relationships, which suggests that the formation of these bonds is diverse and complex. Catherine described the bond as that of a 'best friend', or her "soul cat", indicating a strong, emotionally attuned relationship with an element of interspecies attunement. Rowan described her CA as a constant companion, one that has been there with her through life's ups and downs. These descriptions align with social support theory, which holds that animals can provide a multitude of roles, including companionship, comfort, and emotional support, and that people may consider their pets confidants (Beck & Katcher, 2003).

For Marie and Virginia, their CAs were, without a doubt, from their accounts, firmly placed within the familial fold as family members, at times described as having childlike roles. This finding may be explained by looking to the literature which indicates that a pet may serve as an attachment figure for humans (Kurdek, 2009; Sable, 2013; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2012). The participants' experiences regarding their bond with their CAs were consistent with prior literature, which proposes that CAs may be regarded by some as companions, family members, best friends, "soul" animals, and/or children (Kemp et al., 2016; Planchon et al., 2022; Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Toray, 2004). This finding further supports the notion that CAs can occupy diverse and meaningful relational

roles in individuals' lives. Furthermore, this aligns with emerging literature indicating that strong attachment, emotional, and affectional bonds may extend beyond species boundaries (Planchon et al., 2022; Prato-Previde et al., 2022).

Continuing Bonds

It is evident that the death of the participant's CAs was an experience of profound grief, consistent with literature on CA bereavement, which indicates it may be comparable for some to losing a significant person (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Participants described engaging in a range of activities that appear to help them maintain a bond with their deceased CA. In alignment with continuing bonds theory (Klass et al., 1996) and its application to CA bereavement (Habarth et al., 2017; Hughes & Lewis Harkin, 2022; Lykins et al., 2024; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b), these activities appear to serve as meaningful ways to preserve a sense of connection, remembrance, and an ongoing bond, and as extension of a pre-existing relationship despite the physical absence of the deceased (Sevili & Klass, 2025). Although the motivations and the ways these remembrances were expressed varied for each participant, it was a common experience among all of them. Consistent with the literature on CBT, rather than 'relinquishing' or 'severing' the bond with the deceased to 'overcome' grief (Freud, 1917), participants maintained an ongoing connection to the deceased through memory, identity, and meaning, integrating the loss into life (Klass et al., 1996).

Participants' descriptions of their CAs as companions, family members, best friends, 'soul' animals, and 'children-like' further underscored the diverse ways in which these bonds were experienced and understood. It becomes evident to me that the participants' bonds with their CAs were also strengthened by a relational continuity and familiarity fostered by the CA's daily presence. While the literature continues to evolve in

its exploration of the bonds between humans and their CAs, my understanding of the participants' experiences was that these bonds (emotional, relational, affectional, and/or attachment) were solid and provided the foundation through which CBs were maintained following loss.

Continuing Bond Expressions

The findings showed that the actions participants engaged in to express or communicate their continued bond could be considered CBEs across a large group of studies that provide an overview of this (Habarth et al., 2017; Kogan et al., 2022; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b). Consistent with Packman et al. (2011a, 2011b) and Kogan et al.'s (2022) research on CBEs and pet loss, this study's participants demonstrated a high prevalence of engagement in these activities and variation in the activities themselves. Participants' engagement with CBEs is consistent with general themes in CB literature through which people maintain bonds with the deceased. These include: a sense of presence, use of belongings, associated places, fond memories, dreams, reunion with the deceased, living up to ideals or wishes, everyday decisions, reminiscing, memorials, and lessons learned (Field et al., 2007; Habarth et al., 2017; Kogan et al., 2022; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b).

Rowan's CBs were expressed as fond memories, reminiscing, associated places, everyday decisions, and memorial use. Catherine shared reminiscing and memorials, and Virginia described life lessons learned. Marie also used memorials and was unique among the group in describing the use of belongings, seeking out objects that still carried the scent of her deceased CA, and said she found the experience comforting. And while there is no literature in the field of CA bereavement that discusses olfactory cues, odour cues may be linked to pleasant and emotional memories more than other cues, such as visual or

word cues (See Rubin et al., 1984). It appears that seeking items with a familiar scent facilitated a sense of connection and comfort.

Dreaming of the Companion Animal

Both Marie and Rowan shared they dreamed about their deceased CAs, and dreaming of the deceased in human loss is found in most studies to be impactful in bereavement and commonly seen as comforting, a source of guidance, and a way of continued connection with the deceased (Mamat et al., 2026). Dreaming of the deceased has received limited attention in pet bereavement literature as a way of maintaining bonds with the deceased.

Presence

A felt sense of presence was described by all participants and informed the subtheme, “The Essence Continues”. Feeling the presence of the deceased is a common CBE (Field et al., 2007; Kogan et al., 2022; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b) and seemed for Rowan, Catherine and Marie to be connected to being around objects they associated with their deceased, such as their urns, photographs, or places associated with their deceased CAs. In contrast, Virginia’s account suggested a more internalized experience of continued connection and that, at times, she has felt a nudge from her deceased CA. She shared that she reached towards it and spoke to it. Experiences of feeling the deceased's presence may be common among bereaved CA owners, and the participants' descriptions of this as comforting with previous studies in the CA bereavement literature (Carmack, 2003; Klass et al., 1996; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b).

Current Debates About Continuing Bonds

While foundational literature debates whether CBs are helpful in coming to terms with grief over the loss of a human (Neimeyer et al., 2006; Root & Exline, 2014; Stroebe,

& Schut, 2005), much of it focuses on human loss and is deeply intertwined with research on the type of death (accidents, suicide, homicide) and attachment styles (Field & Filanosky, 2009). Our study expands this focus on grief and loss in humans by showing that maintaining a bond with the deceased is a source of comfort, an acknowledgement of the relationship's meaning, and a way to integrate the loss into participants' new realities. (Klass et al., 1996).

Previous literature on CBs with human loss has separated CBs into two groups: internalized bonds (contemplation, reflections, reminisces) and externalized bonds (hearing, seeing the deceased), which suggests 'externalized' bonds may be less 'adaptive' to human loss (Black et. al, 2022; Field & Filanosky, 2009). While very little literature on CBs in CA bereavement considers this distinction, the analysis in our current study aligns strongly with the literature suggesting that CBs can be equally comforting through both internal and external bonds (Field et al., 2009; Golbeck, 2024; Kogan et al., 2022; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b). Furthermore, participants' selective, rather than uniform, choice of CBEs suggests that these experiences and choices are shaped by personal interpretation, meaning, and individual context, highlighting IPA's idiographic focus (Smith et al., 2022).

Ritual, Memorialization, and Continuing Bonds

An important consideration from this study is the interrelation between CB expressions and ritual and memorialization practices. An ongoing connection with the deceased is often acknowledged in grief rituals (Castle & Phillips, 2003). Through ritual and memorialization, participants appear to embed their connections with deceased companion animals into everyday life, allowing those bonds to persist and evolve,

forming the foundation of the subtheme, “Embedding Ongoing Bonds Through Memorialization and Daily Practices”.

From a CB lens, ritual and memorialization practices can be understood as the behavioural and symbolic expressions of the ongoing relationship with the deceased. Rather than experiencing detachment from the deceased, participants in this study maintained enduring bonds that sustain emotional connection with their deceased and appear to have become embedded in their daily lives (Field et al., 2009). Marie described that nightly, she touched the urns of all her deceased CAs and said goodnight to them. Perhaps the repeated actions of CBEs gain symbolic significance (Xygalatas, 2022), and some of the rituals observed by the participants may be actions that facilitate or express CBs. Similarly, some memorialization practices observed among the participants, such as Catherine’s memorialization jewelry and Rowan’s tattoo, overlap with CBs in their function as a way to maintain a connection to the deceased.

Grief in Social Contexts

The following section contextualizes the participants' experiences that formed the foundation of superordinate theme two, “Grief in Social Contexts”. Below, I revisit the tensions that arose for participants as they negotiated their grief in a social context and how we might understand these within the body of literature that has emerged on Western society’s changing perception of CAs and navigating social worlds.

Evolving Attitudes Towards Companion Animals

Participants all used different terms to describe the significant roles their CAs played in their lives. Consistent with contemporary research, these findings suggest that animals have increasingly occupied intimate and emotionally significant roles in people's lives, with some participants describing relationships that appeared highly humanized and

comparable to close human relationships (Kemp et al., 2016; Planchon et al., 2022; Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Toray, 2004; Walsh, 2009).

The relationships between the participants and their CAs appear to be of considerable significance to the individuals involved. While shifts have emerged in how CAs are perceived in society, dominant perspectives have often dichotomized human–animal relationships and human-to-human relationships. This may mean the relationship between humans and animals is never fully understood on its own terms. If the human-to-human relationship becomes the “normative” relationship, human-animal relationships may be considered of lesser importance by comparison (Morley & Fook, 2005).

Disenfranchised Grief

Each participant’s account shared how they navigated expressing their grief to others, which informed the subtheme, “Testing the Waters: The Vulnerability of Voicing Grief”. When they discussed who they shared their grief with, three out of four participants were selective about whom they were willing to disclose it to. Participants felt they could only confide in a small group of close peers and family members they perceived as empathetic to their loss.

Doka’s concept of disenfranchised grief as “grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned” (Doka, 1989, p. 4) offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding the participants' experiences. The value of this concept is in its integration of the social perspective on the grief experience (Doka, 2025). Doka suggests that in modern Western societies, the family is the primary unit of social organization and that grief rules within society are limited to family members; thus, tension would arise about ‘socially acceptable’ grief if a CA is seen as a family member/child, as Virginia and Marie

said (Doka, 2025). Disenfranchisement of grief has emerged as a significant area of research in CA bereavement literature, as it appears to be highly salient in many cases of CA bereavement (Sharkin & Knox, 2003), and, unfortunately, seems to be a component of the grief experienced by the participants in this study.

While Rowan mentioned her family was a strong support for her, she also described her experience of taking time off from work following her CA's death. It is rarely accepted societally to take time away from work following the death of a CA (Toray, 2004). There is no doubt a stigma attached to CA bereavement (Packman et. al, 2014), and Rowan described her co-workers' reaction and the difficulty of explaining her reasons to them because of how she perceived their views on animals. We may understand that her perception of others' views regarding the legitimacy of her grief reflects an experience of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2025).

There are societal norms or rules about who, how, when and for how long people should grieve (Doka, 2025). Due to the lack of social acknowledgment and validation in our society for expressing grief over deceased pets (Sharkin & Knox, 2003), participants' reluctance to share their grief more widely indicates they may have believed that others could not understand their grief (Cameron, 2025). Participants also seemed to feel a sense of solitude in their experiences, which concurs with the literature on CA bereavement; specifically, that which outlines how socially isolating grief experiences can be due to the lack of cultural recognition (Cameron, 2025; Doka, 1989).

Societal Grieving Rituals

Societally, funerals and the grief rituals that follow have become typical when a person dies, to honour the person and the relationship held with the deceased (Castle & Phillips, 2003). Yet with animals, many individuals have been left to create their own

meaningful rituals and memorialization practices (DeMello, 2016), as evidenced by the findings in this study. I observed that participants were more open to sharing their memorialization choices than their rituals with others outside of their immediate family. Grief rituals may help the bereaved validate their grief, acknowledge that a transition has occurred, and elicit support (Doka, 2025), but perhaps memorialization practices are shared more openly, as they may be seen as more socially acceptable in CA bereavement.

It is important to examine participants' experiences within the concept of disenfranchised grief, to highlight a broader social context in which the death and culturally sanctioned grief rituals for CAs are not widely recognized. As a result, the bereaved may experience isolation and a lack of recognition for their experiences, which limit opportunities for acknowledgment and support from others. Although disenfranchised grief has been extensively documented in the literature on CA bereavement, participants in this study demonstrated active efforts to validate and express their grief through memorialization and the maintenance of continued bonds, even if some were not shared openly.

Social Media and Digital Mourning

The findings highlight how social context and social media can be important outlets for sharing grief experiences. While there is some research on the use of social media as a site of digital mourning for human loss (Moore et. al, 2019; Moules et al., 2024), this topic has only very recently become part of CA bereavement literature, and studies remain scant to date (Downing & Hjorth, 2026; Eason, 2021).

Rowan and Catherine shared that social media provided a way to cope with their grief and that it may have provided them some emotional space. Catherine shared that she was able to use social media to read and comment on other people's experiences but was

not ready to share her own. These findings are consistent with the literature suggesting that both expressing emotions online and receiving sympathy may be easier than doing so by telephone or in direct face-to-face conversations (Levitt, 2012; Moore et al., 2019; Raun, 2017). Furthermore, it aligns with literature indicating that social media sites for pet bereavement may serve as spaces for witnessing and validating others' grief (Downing & Hjorth, 2026).

However, Catherine's more passive experiences with social media may not have had the relational aspect needed to foster a sense of acknowledgement, aligning with the literature on active versus passive social media use, which highlights that passive social media use is negatively associated with social connection (Roberts & David, 2023).

Catherine expressed that being able to read forums and other people's posts about the loss of their CAs made her feel less alone in her grief. Consistent with the literature, a space where people share their stories and their emotions can be validated by others who have had a similar experience, may help to normalize the experience of grief, supporting a reduction in shame, and providing a place for meaning-making (Cameron, 2025; Crossley & Rolland, 2022; Hess-Holden et al., 2017).

It is important to note that Downing and Hjorth's (2026) study focused on a member-only Facebook pet loss support group, and such sites may offer a different relational space than posts on individual Facebook pages or potentially anonymous forum-style pages for pet loss. Additionally, social media use for pet bereavement can take many forms, and individuals may seek it out for different reasons (memorialization, support, acknowledgment). However, literature on social media use as a digital mourning space for bereaved pet owners suggested that online communities may support the bereaved by validating their grief experience socially and providing a space to continue

their bond with the deceased through memorialization (Downing & Hjorth, 2026; Eason, 2021).

The Ebb and Flow of Grief

When participants reflected on their experiences following the death of their CAs, they described a range of emotional shifts in their grief experiences. Their accounts revealed that grief was not a static experience but one characterized by evolving emotions and ongoing adjustment to their loss. Through the process of sharing and reflecting on their experiences, participants seemed to engage in meaning-making and considered the personal significance of their grief. These experiences were captured in superordinate theme 3, The Ebb and Flow of Grief. Their narratives, therefore, provided insight into how they interpreted and understood their own experiences of grief. Elements of this sub-theme will be explored below.

Working Through Dynamic Emotional Shifts

The findings strongly imply that participants had a range of emotional shifts in their grief experiences. We might understand this result by looking at the dual processing model of grief (DPM) (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). DPM is a taxonomy for describing how individuals cope with and come to terms with their loss following the death of a loved one, but I see its usefulness in understanding the grief experiences of the participants in the current study of CA bereavement. It appeared participants engaged in the dynamic process of *oscillation*, which is outlined in the DPM, moving between loss- and restoration-oriented coping. This model is one that explains coping, whereby “coping refers to the processes, strategies or styles (reducing, mastering, tolerating) the situation in which bereavement places the individual” (Stroebe & Schut, 2010, p. 274), and the range of emotional reactions that can be involved.

All participants shared some type of initial experience of feeling ‘shock’ and ‘huge sadness’ and reported crying on the day of the death of their CA, which in the DPM would be a “loss-oriented coping”. This type of coping involves concentrating on and processing certain aspects of the loss. Participants subsequently described feelings of numbness and distraction, which we may consider as evidence of moving into “restoration-oriented coping” or as a distraction or avoidance of grief within the DPM (Stroebe & Strut, 1999, 2010). Restoration-oriented coping involves addressing secondary stressors or losses resulting from the original loss to maintain a functioning, meaningful life (Mouton, 2023).

The DPM outlines oscillation as a regulatory process that, at times, requires confronting grief and, at other times, avoiding it (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Participants shared these oscillations back and forth between facing grief at times and, at other times, attending to life changes, avoiding grief, and considering new identities and relationships. This is consistent with what Stroebe & Schut (1999, 2010) describe as a “dosage” of grief, as grief is exhausting and at times, individuals need to take time away from it (p. 220).

What becomes clear is that this model supports the notion that numbness and avoidance are not ‘unhealthy’ or ‘maladaptive’, but rather ways of coping and adjusting to the loss, and it appears that the participants' experiences of various emotions may be considered ways they were adapting to their loss. These experiences seem to be resonant with more recent grief models that focus on adaptation to loss rather than a ‘recovery’ from it and push back against a sense that there is a universal trajectory to grief that is predictable (Neimeyer et al., 2001).

Meaning-Making Through the Grief

The subtheme entitled “The Journey of Grief” captured the narratives I observed among the participants as they shared the meaning made from their losses. Meaning-making broadly refers to the processes by which individuals attempt to understand and to integrate stressful life events into their existing beliefs and assumptions (Park, 2010). When major disruptions occur, such as a death, there is an attempt to reconfigure sense and order, and often people use stories and interpretation to integrate the event into their ongoing life narrative, and this certainly was the case for the participants (Bruner, 1991; Crossley, 2000).

Participants seemed to question whether their reactions and their emotional responses to their loss were a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ thing, or that, in moving from a place of sadness to more of a sense of acceptance, they were ‘in denial’ and questioning if they were ‘processing’ or ‘prolonging’ their grief; or that they were ‘still not over it’. The participants seemed to grapple with what grieving meant to them. We can turn to some of the sociocultural literature to find a frame for this grappling. Humans make sense of their lives through narratives, and that meaning is created within cultural and social contexts. (Bruner, 1990). The narrative of grief broadly accepted in the 20th century considers grief a process of ‘letting go’, ‘relinquishing’ bonds with the deceased, and then ‘moving on’ to return to a state of “normal” prior to the loss (Neimeyer et al., 2001). Yet, without a doubt, grief changes our lived realities, and grief is complex and often a long adaptation to loss. The findings which speak to the participants’ responses to expectations about grief aligns with this perspective.

Lastly, by sharing their grief experiences and the subsequent CBEs they engaged in, participants illustrated how they made meaning of their loss, specifically with respect to their conceptions of the afterlife and life lessons about self-care. These specific

findings are consistent with a growing trend in bereavement literature that point toward meaning-making as a way of renegotiating life events into a coherent narrative following loss (Neimeyer et al., 2006, 2010).

Implications for Counselling and Mental Health Professionals

The results from the study have some potential implications for counsellors, psychologists and other mental health care professionals, emphasizing the need for a client-centred approach. The study has shown that individuals who have companion animals (CAs) will inevitably experience loss, which, can evoke profound grief. Despite this, limited attention has been given to how grief following the death of a CA is addressed and supported within therapeutic settings (Cleary et al., 2022; Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022; Toray, 2004). Although awareness of the impact of pet bereavement is growing (Behler et al., 2020; Bussolari et al., 2021; Cleary et al., 2022; Field et al., 2009; Gosse & Barnes, 1994; Hewson, 2014; Morley & Fook, 2005; Park et al., 2023), there is still a lack of consistent recognition and response among psychologists and counsellors (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Literature indicates that grief following a CA loss is often minimized or pathologized, with limited sensitivity toward those experiences in the mental health field, and bonds with animals have sometimes been viewed through a “deficit lens” and interpreted as an inability to form human relationships (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022; Morley & Fook, 2005; Toray, 2004; Walsh, 2009). This may suggest that psychologists and counsellors do not ask or recognize bereavement due to their own biases around the meaning of pet death. Therefore, I recommend counsellors need to be aware of any biases they may hold towards these relationships (Crossley & Rolland, 2022).

By validating and normalizing CA bereavement as a legitimate form of grief, which is often disenfranchised by society, counsellors can foster a supportive environment that encourages clients to express and process their emotions around pet loss openly (Cordaro, 2012; Crossley & Rolland, 2022; Doka, 2025; Toray, 2004). Some individuals may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about sharing the importance the CA played in their lives, and counsellors should ask questions about the role and meaning the CA held for them (Toray, 2004). Further recommendations that the literature has discussed as potentially helpful for bereaved CA owners include: 1. Counsellors create or refer clients to group counselling and support groups for animal bereavement, as they may provide spaces where individuals have their emotions validated by others with similar experiences, helping to normalize their grief (Crossley & Rolland, 2022; Hess- Holden et al., 2017). 2. Counsellors support clients by helping them appreciate that grief is often an ongoing process and by acknowledging that each person's response to loss is unique (Klass et al., 1996; Neimeyer et al., 2006; Root & Exline, 2014; Stroebe & Schut, 2010). 3. Counsellors might encourage self-kindness and self-compassion during the grieving process (Bussolari et al., 2021) and reinforce the value of seeking support from others, such as friends and family members (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

Further, a unique aspect of CA loss that we recommend counsellors be aware of is the heaviness that can surround a decision of euthanasia, and we urge counsellors to support clients both before and after a CA's death (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). While some individuals may find peace with their decision (Packman et. al, 2014), feelings of guilt, self-blame, and second-guessing are also common reactions in the euthanasia process (Reisbig et al., 2017). Counsellors need to be aware of the stress this decision may cause,

as individuals may struggle with the desire for more time, concerns about their pet's quality of life, and financial considerations (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

Overall, professional support that recognizes the importance of the human-animal bond and affirms its ongoing significance can be deeply helpful (Reisbig, 2017; Toray, 2004). Additionally, as continuing bonds and memorialization are common coping mechanisms for dealing with CA loss (Park et al., 2023), counsellors can help clients develop meaningful memorials and, in line with clients' preferences, encourage the sharing of memories as a way of coping with and adjusting to loss (Cordaro, 2012).

Ethical Practice Regarding Working with Clients

Counsellors working with clients experiencing grief after the loss of a companion animal may also have experienced the loss and grief of a companion animal in their own lives. Acknowledging, understanding, and managing countertransference within the counselling relationship is essential to ethical and effective counselling practice. Self-insight, or reflective practice, is a key element in managing countertransference and involves the therapist's awareness and examination of their own attitudes, personal biases, personality, motives, and history (Hayes et al., 2011). This is highlighted in the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (CPA, 2017), Principle II. Responsible Caring in Values Statement (para 5): “psychologists recognize the need for competence and self-knowledge. . . They also engage in self-reflection regarding how their own values, attitudes, experiences, and social context (e.g., culture, ethnicity, colour, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, age, socio-economic status) influence their actions, interpretations, choices, and recommendations”. Similarly, psychologists must “evaluate how their own experiences, attitudes, culture, beliefs, values, individual differences, personal needs, and historical, economic, and political

context might influence their interactions with and perceptions of others, and integrate this awareness into their efforts to benefit and not harm others” (Ethical Standard II.10; CPA, 2017). In this light, this study’s findings support that counsellors working with bereaved pet owners may need to continue to reflect on their own values, attitudes, experiences, and social context that influence their actions toward clients, and to do their own inner work to process or manage their own grief experiences, which may take many varied forms such as seeking counselling themselves, mindfulness practices, journalling, expressive art, etc. (see Luft & Stevens, 2024).

Additionally, psychologists must “keep themselves up to date with a broad range of relevant knowledge, research methods, techniques, and technologies, and their impact on individuals and groups” (Ethical Standard II.9; CPA, 2017). Therefore, ongoing continuing education is recommended to understand the complex nature of human-animal bonds and companion animal grief, and to recognize how contemporary research identifies this as an emerging need in the mental health field.

Furthermore, working with clients often involves navigating the emotional intensity of grief work, which may lead to compassion fatigue and the risk of burnout. Psychologists must “engage in self-care activities that help to avoid conditions (e.g., burnout, addictions) that could result in impaired judgement and interfere with their ability to benefit and not harm others” (Ethical Standard II.12; CPA, 2017). Self-care is an ongoing, proactive process which depends on strong self-awareness and the willingness to recognize one’s weaknesses and blind spots in practice, and it becomes important to be aware of how these needs change over time (Di Benedetto & Swadling, 2014; Pope & Vasquez, 2016).

For counsellors working with clients, ethical questions, issues, and/or dilemmas arise. It is essential for counsellors to engage in an ethical decision-making process using the steps of the CPA's ethical decision-making model and to "seek consultation from colleagues and/or appropriate others, including advisory groups, and give due regard to their advice in arriving at responsible decisions, if faced with difficult situations (Ethical Standard II.8; CPA, 2017).

Therefore, counsellors should:

- Continue to treat CA bereavement with sensitivity.
- Sustain ongoing self-reflection and manage their own grief experiences to ensure ethical, effective practice.
- Pursue ongoing education to stay current with research and best practices, including those related to human-animal bonds and companion animal grief.
- Proactively engage in self-care and ongoing self-reflection to prevent compassion fatigue and maintain ethical, effective practice
- Follow the CPA's ethical decision-making model and seek guidance from colleagues, supervision, or advisory groups when facing ethical dilemmas

Strengths and Limitations of Current Study

There are several strengths of the study, which stem from the methodology. The methodological approach of IPA focuses on how individuals make sense of and interpret their lived experiences. A small group of participants and IPA's idiographic focus allows for detailed exploration of personal experiences, capturing participants' meanings and perspectives, thereby becoming a strength of this study. In light of this topic, the ability to conduct in-depth interviews over longer periods is crucial in giving participants the time

and opportunity to share their experiences and how they came to make sense of them. In addition, given the complexity of the topic, a small, homogeneous group is a strength, prioritizing quality over quantity, as IPA allowed for a detailed account of each participant's lived experience (Smith et al., 2022), and an open discussion of their bereavement experiences and meaning-making processes (Alase, 2017). Through the interview process, I witnessed participants' narratives of grief showing how their responses to bereavement were connected to their understandings of their personal and social identities.

The interview thus allowed both the participants and me to get close to their experiences rather than remain distant (Smith & Nizza, 2022), with participants engaging in self-reflection on how the loss was experienced and how it has become integrated into their conception of a changed reality. Participants expressed sadness and acknowledged it. Some shared gratitude for being able to tell their story of grief, which I see as a way of processing and finding meaning through them.

A further strength of the study was me utilizing my counsellor-in-training skills to help create an exploratory space of non-judgment and warmth by providing empathy, active listening, reflections of affect and meaning, and remaining present rather than moving away or minimizing participants' open displays of emotion (Perry & Bigelow, 2020).

The study also has some potential limitations. In accordance with IPA, the study's scope was narrow, as participants were selected based on a shared experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2002). The study goes in-depth into the experiences of four participants, all women, living in southern Alberta, who had their cat or dog die, all from euthanasia. Subsequently, their experience is not generalizable to individuals from other

countries, provinces, genders, or age groups, to other forms of pet death, or to animals not considered in this study. However, in IPA research with small participant groups, nomothetic generalizability is not the goal; rather, the aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Instead, as with many qualitative research methods, transferability is emphasized. This concept refers to the extent to which findings resonate with readers, enabling them to assess their relevance to their own situations. Providing rich descriptions of participants' experiences, the setting, and the methods enables others to assess whether the findings apply to their contexts. Although the study's findings may not be universally generalizable, they can still guide practice, policy, and future research in similar settings (Drisko, 2025).

Another potential limitation of our study is the use of the Zoom platform to conduct in-depth interviews with participants. While it offers flexibility in scheduling and ease of access for participants, and there was some ability to observe participants' movements, facial expressions, and other non-verbal communication, more subtle non-verbal cues may have gone uncaptured (Perry & Bigelow, 2020).

Despite these limitations, the research fills a gap in understanding how individuals experience grief and use rituals and memorialization to make meaning of their grief experience following the death of a CA.

Areas for Future Study

Our study focused on grief following the death of a cat or dog, yet further research may consider how people grieve for other companion animals (smaller animals, horses, reptiles, birds, etc.). Additionally, more research on grief experiences following other losses of CAs, such as rehoming, missing, and surrendering, may add valuable insight to human-animal grief experiences and impacts on continuing bonds. A further area for

consideration is how grief is experienced in relation to the bond between humans and their service animals. Additionally, grief experiences, as well as ritual and memorialization practices, that fall outside the scope of this study but warrant further investigation concern how these are experienced across genders, cultural contexts, and rural/urban settings.

The use of longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis (LIPA) in future studies on CA grief experiences and subsequent engagement with memorialization and ritual practices may help capture more longitudinal and temporal aspects of the phenomena. In its idiographic focus over the course of a person's life, this specific method may reveal how the meaning of these experiences changes as they are lived in time (Farr & Nizza, 2019; Smith, 2007).

As our present study demonstrated, and as emerging literature on CA bereavement suggests, future research is warranted on how social media may provide a space for the bereaved to have “permission” to mourn openly within a community that may mitigate the disenfranchised nature of grief (Mouton, 2023). Within this vein, there is still much room to explore how the use of social media may create space for anonymity and, in some cases, provide distance, and how this can facilitate acknowledgment and witnessing of grief experiences (Kemp et al., 2016). Furthermore, understanding how memorialization pages can serve as digital continuations of bonds may be an area in CA bereavement studies that requires further investigation.

As there has been limited focus on how therapeutic settings address and support grief after the death of a CA (Toray, 2004), with a significant gap in the literature exploring counsellors' experiences of clients experiencing pet bereavement, we recommend that this under-researched area receive further scholarly attention.

Conclusions

Through an in-depth qualitative investigation using IPA, this study explored the use of rituals and memorial practices surrounding the death of a companion animal (CA) using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The study explored the lived experiences of individuals' bereavement following the death of their CA and their subsequent use of rituals and memorialization in making sense of their experiences. Each participant's account revealed deep, detailed understandings of their lived experience and how they came to make sense of it, which informed their personal experiential themes (PETs). These then became the foundation for moving to cross-case analysis, which highlighted convergences and divergences in their experiences. These informed the three main general superordinate themes (GETs): "Holding the Past in the Present", "Grief in Social Contexts", and "The Ebb and Flow of Grief".

The themes of the study revealed significant depth and complexity in how participants grieved their loss and came to make meaning from their experiences. The superordinate theme "Holding the Past in the Present" provided insight into how participants experienced their bond with their CAs, which showed a desire to maintain that bond after their CAs' deaths. This aligned with literature on the significance of HAB (Toray, 2004; Walsh, 2009) and on how CBs support enduring connections and "relational continuity" with individuals and the deceased (Crossley & Rolland, 2022; Klass et al., 1996; Klass & Goss, 1999; Neimeyer et al, 2006; Selvili & Klass, 2025, p. 12).

Furthermore, the study strengthened the link in the literature between participants' use of rituals and memorialization to express these continued bonds (Field et al., 2009; Kogan et al., 2022; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b). The superordinate theme "Grief in Social Contexts" highlighted how participants navigated their grief both within their

social worlds and the broader social context in which the death and culturally sanctioned grief rituals for CAs are not widely recognized. Their experiences provide valuable insight into this as a lived experience, contributing to the literature whereby we conceptualize CA bereavement as a form of disenfranchised grief (Brown, 2024; Brown et al., 2023; Cordaro, 2012; Doka, 2025). The superordinate theme of “The Ebb and Flow of Grief” suggested that participants' grief experiences were uniquely experienced. Their accounts revealed that grief is not a fixed experience but involves varying emotions and continuous coping and adaptation to loss.

Participants engaged in CBEs as meaningful ways to preserve a sense of connection rather than a relinquishing of the bond (Klass et al., 1996). In contrast to the bulk of the literature, participants found the use of CBEs as comforting rather than distressing (Golbeck, 2024; Kogan et al., 2022; Packman et al., 2011a, 2011b). Their selective disclosure of their experiences of grief and their subsequent rituals aligns with literature suggesting CA loss is often minimized by others, including those in the mental health field (Morley & Fook, 2005; Toray, 2004; Walsh, 2009). The present research, therefore, contributes to the growing call by researchers that counsellors may play an important role in the validation, acknowledgement, and normalization of grief and practices following the death of a CA (Toray, 2004; Walsh, 2009).

Collectively, the participants' accounts of their lived experiences of CA bereavement highlighted the deeply personal ways of maintaining bonds with the deceased through ritual and memorialization. Overall, the study illustrated the complexity of grief after the loss of a CA due to the meaningful bonds humans can form with their CAs, and led to a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of CA bereavement and memorialization.

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APPENDIX A: TABLES OF PETS

Catherine: Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	Experiential Statements That Support Themes	Quotes with Page/Line
Theme 1: Grief Process Unfolded in an Unpredictable Way	Experiencing a mixed emotional response, including feelings of being "hit hard," as well as guilt and relief from the stress associated with caregiving. (line 39) When remains were returned, there was a reexperiencing of the initial grief reaction. A wave of grief emotions. (line 79) Experience of shock and surprise when remains were returned. (line 80) The progression is not linear (waves)/ unpredictable. (line 82)	"Sort of everything I guess like at first it was just really hard and then like I still miss her a lot but I just find now almost kind of guilty that I'm moving on." (p. 18, line 39) "Like she died again." (p. 38, line 79) "It was a surprise." (p. 39, line 81) "I suppose was more final having her come home." (p. 38, line 79) "Lonely and so yeah, hard to get used to that routine of her not being there." (p. 17, line 35) "I felt like I had a couple of weeks to sort of get a handle on it, and then it just sort of felt like it just happened all over again." (p. 39, line 82)
Theme 2: Memorialization Choice Aims to Preserve Physical Proximity and Sustain a Continued	Relationship is integrated within daily routines and close physical proximity. (line 20) Experiencing a loneliness in the absence. (line 35)	"Oh, she was velcro." (p. 8, line 19) "Definitely lonely and so yeah, hard to get used to that routine of her not being there" (p. 17-18, line 35) "It was just nice to have something with her, like of her

Presence with the Deceased.	Having a memorialization piece that is “of her” keeps the closeness, unlike a symbolic representation. (line 44) Keeping cremated remains at home holds significant importance. (line 47) Sense of presence is embodied in the mementos. (line 53) The material persists -Tangible piece (rather than symbolic) sustains physical closeness. (line 54) Experiencing a sense of finality when the physical ashes were returned. (line 73) Physical remains being close is comforting. (line 74)	with me whenever I wanted to wear it” (p. 22, line 44) “I definitely knew that I would get her cremated and bring her home” (p. 37, line 75) “That she was loved, and just important for her to be around still, and just always know that she's here in some way, right?” (p. 24, line 51) “It just feels like she's still here, in some way, you know, having the necklace, and she's just here with me, and just seeing her ashes and just knowing that, yeah, she's not, she's not gone” (p. 26, line 53) “I suppose was more final having her come home” (p. 36, line 73) “I just knew that I, I wanted her with me, so it wasn't even a question of whether or not I would.” (p. 36, line 74) “I definitely knew that I would get her cremated and bring her home” (p. 37, line 75)
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Theme 3: Experiencing Grief is a Both/And Experience	Tension between stating that she wanted to be alone but also that she had others who were supportive. Support given vs the support needed not consistent. (line 32) Dialectically experiencing the sadness of the quietness of the home, not having her CA to greet her, and feeling a weight lifted from the significant care provided in her later years and the emotional toil. (line 34) Experiencing a mixed emotional response, including feelings of being "hit hard," as well as guilt and relief from the stress associated with caregiving. (line 39) Moving on and holding on. Being able to move on and holding onto significant memories simultaneously. (line 56) Looking forward to potential possibilities but holding onto this relationship as well. (line 65) Reliving the initial pain from the experience, but also finding comfort in having the	"I had friends around, and that, and I don't know, I think I just wanted to be alone more than anything, right?" (p. 14, line 28) "She's mine, and I don't have a lot of people that know what it's like to have an animal for 20 years, like just such a long time span" (p. 14, line 29) "I have friends that have animals, though, and they've all been through, you know, having to put their animals down, so yeah, everybody was pretty supportive." (p. 15, line 30) "You don't have your pet coming to greet you and just you know a quiet house?" "I guess the difference of having freedom, to just go and do something, and not have to worry about coming home or not having a concern about losing sleep over her being sick" (p. 16, line 34) "At first it was just really hard" (pp. 18-19, line 39) "I sort of appreciate not having to care give as much 'cause it was stressful and it was hard" (pp. 18-19, line 39) "Just being able to guess, sort of, move on knowing that she's, she's here with me in some way." (p. 28, line 57) "I, you know, may have other animals moving forward but just always knowing that, that she will always be with me." (p. 31, line 65) "It was almost like it happened again, but I just knew that I, I
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	remains returned to her. Physical remains being close is comforting. (line 74) Tension between it being a common experience, but not an easy one. Commonality of experience doesn't mean ease of experience. (line 112)	wanted her with me." (p. 36, line 74) "Everybody goes through it, and it's really difficult." (p. 51, line 112)
Theme 4: Solitude Within a Collective Experience	Sense that losing a pet is difficult for anyone who has experienced it- Commonality of the experience. (line 25) Although there were supports through friends, the participant wanted to be alone initially in her grief (line 28) Her experience may be different that others who have not had the same longevity in the relationship. (line 29) Lacking others who understand the experience, yet also having friends who have undergone similar circumstances. Other friends of participant (right?) have needed to euthanize their animals, but not those that have been with them for as long as this particular participant, so the experience feels different for her? (line 30) Participants' memorials serve as visual cues for quiet, private reflections and remembrance, and sharing these practices with others and the subsequent reactions may	"I had friends around, and that, and I don't know, I think I just wanted to be alone more than anything, right?" (p. 14, line 28) "She's mine, and I don't have a lot of people that know what it's like to have an animal for 20 years." (p. 14, line 29) "I have friends that have animals, though, and they've all been through, you know, having to put their animals down." (p. 15, line 30) "To see them and sort of quietly reflect." (p. 30, line 63) "Everybody was really obviously very sympathetic

	feel superficial, possibly reflecting a level of comfort or willingness to share. Perhaps created a feeling of solitude in the experience. (lines 63, 86) Discomfort in sharing the experience with those outside of close relationships -Personal or societal (potential stigma?) (line 91) Engaging (even in a passive observational sense) with others who have encountered a similar experience (communal) facilitated her sense of connection (not feeling isolated in the experience). (line 96) Commenting on others' loss but not (willing/wanting/comfortable) sharing their experience with others- Skimming the surface. (line 97) Not prepared to actively participate by sharing personal experiences on a deeper level. Keeping it surface level was safer? (line 98) Willing to express sympathies to others who have lost a CA but reluctant to share their own experience which may enforce a sense of solitude. (line 105) The experience is shared, but how people experience it is unique. (lines 99-101) Commonality in a shared experience. (line 106) Recognizing it as a common experience, but not an easy one/ commonality of experience doesn't mean ease of experience. (line 112)	about it, and you know, I told everybody I got the necklace, and they've all seen it, and you know, they think it's pretty." (p. 40, line 86) "I haven't really talked about today with anybody outside of my friends." (p. 43, line 91) "I read a lot online with different forums on stuff like Reddit." (p. 44, line 95) "I guess you just sort of feel like you're not alone." (p. 45, line 96) "Just more reading comments and just offering sympathies. I never really posted anything about her. I just never felt like I was ready." (p. 45, lines 96-98) "Just more of a passing comment about you know, like I you know had a pet that passed away or whatever, just more sympathetic." (p. 47, line 105) "It's a very universal experience, right?" (p. 46, line 99) "But just reading comments and reading posts about you know, just how people go through this as well." (p. 48, line 106) "Everybody goes through it, and it's really difficult." (p. 50, line 112)
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Theme 5: Relational Bond Embedded in Daily Life (Emerged after revisiting PETs and cross-case analysis)	Both a companion and best friend. (line 13) The relationship lasted for a substantial period, leading to a strong attachment. (line 15) Relationship is integrated within daily routines and close physical proximity. CA as a constant presence. (line 20) CA was regarded as a friend, involving an emotional bond rather than solely providing companionship. Missing more than just a companion, but a friend (emotion bond). Distinct bond – “soul cat”	“Companion, best friend.” (p. 6, line 13) “I mean, you have an animal for 20 years, you know you get very attached, and she was nice to always have an animal in the house and be around she was always some just really good companion in and, um, and just a good cat friend to have around, right?” (pp. 6,7, line 15) “Oh, she was velcro,” (p. 8, line 19) “Well, so she was like constantly, constantly around and plus I work from home so yeah she was allowed everywhere I mean she slept with me we get up I feed her breakfast and she kind of follow me around the house and slept most of the day but yeah she was always around we would go out on my balcony and hang out and watch TV and she was always on my lap or had to be somewhere on me so...yeah, just always, always there.” (pp. 8, 9, line 20) “We spent most of the time and then of course she was an only cat so just very attached, right?” (p. 9, line 21) “Best friend for sure, it's one that's there for you every day when you're home and yeah.” (p. 11, line 23) “Just missing, missing her and missing having a you know a companion and especially her, you know.” (p. 11, line 40) “Just reminding that she probably was my soul cat.” (p. 31, line 65)
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Rowan: Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	Experiential Statement That Supports Theme	Quotes with Page/Line
Theme 1: Control: Unable to Control the “If”, Able to Control the “How”	Comfort and familiarity to reduce some of the stress. (line 53) Within the framework of an inevitable outcome, <perceived> control may influence the subjective experience. (line 54) Familiarity and comfort. (55) Certainty of wanting warmth, familiarity, comfort vs cold, unfamiliar vet office. (line 61) Creating a space that was intentional and comforting for all involved. (line 63) Acknowledging the experience as difficult while also acknowledging that it was for the best. (line 70) Sense of control perhaps in anticipating the experience. (line 136)	“If I had to say goodbye to Eddie, it would be here.” (p. 11, line 54) “In his own yard and his own house, whichever worked out best.” (p. 12, line 55) “I knew that I couldn’t take Eddie into a cold vet clinic.” (p. 13, line 61) “I think with Eddie, given his health issues, I knew that this was the best thing for him.” (p. 15, line 70) “We knew this was going to happen.” (p. 29, line 136)
Theme 2: Processing Grief: Something to be Achieved or Experienced ?	Actively making meaning of their grief experience through the interview process. (line 16) This is part of the grief process perhaps before the death even occurs. (line 54) Self-reflective of the initially intense outward expression of emotions that then shifted to not crying at all – part of the process/experience. (line 76) Is the interview part of processing? (line 81) Sense of a linear progression of grief. (line 82) Grief as final objective to be achieved. (line 84)	“Eddie's been with me, was with me for 13 [years].” (p. 4, line 16) “So yeah, his role has...I keep saying has, but it should be had. (pause). It’s really tough to get around that.” (p. 6, lines 25, 26) “If I had to say goodbye to Eddie, it would be here.” (p. 11, line 54) “I think I was in a little bit of shock because I didn’t cry for days after that.” (pp. 16,17, line 76) “I don’t think I’ve processed it very well yet.” (p. 18, line 81) “Even now. Months and months. This was in May of this year. I’m still not over it.” (p. 18, lines 82-84)

	Actively making sense of what the process of grief is. What does it mean to be “over it”? (line 85) Confronting loss/avoiding loss. (line 89) Actively processing the experience and reflection on it. (line 90) Shock- The reality has not been integrated. (line 92) High intensity of an emotional release and then moved to “numbness”. (line 92) Feeling numb- Part of the process/experience? (line 92) Incongruence – self expectations with how the grief should look. (line 98) Engaging in reflection through the interview process-reflecting on their sense-making process. (line 207) Grief unfolded in an unpredictable way or differently than expected. (line 94) Grief is beyond the dyadic rel’nship – affects your routines and the person in the community. (line 122) Participants self-reflection (during the interview) of their initial grief response illuminated the heaviness of the experience for them. Interview was place to process the loss/experience. (line 130) Wants to continue rituals in an ongoing way rather than as a marked finality. (line 240)	“I don’t know if that’s the word.” (p.18, line 85) “I haven’t processed much since that day. If that makes sense.” (p. 18, lines 86,87) “Just everything sort of hit hard and then didn’t hit at all. If that makes any sense.” (p. 19, lines 89, 90) “At the time, going into it really, really, really affected me, and once it was done, out this window that I’m looking out right now, I was just numb to it.” (p. 19, line 92) “I think it took me definitely one week or two to fully feel that he was gone, and then also during that time, I was just numb about the whole situation” (p. 21, line 98) “This is really bringing things into my own head. So thank you.” (p. 46, line 207) “I thought I’d be much, much more emotional and the whole ugly cry, but I don’t think I’ve felt that up until a week or two.” (p. 20, line 94) “I didn’t go out, I didn’t see many people. I didn’t do my daily things.” (p. 26, line 122) “But yeah, definitely had a big impact on my day-to-day in terms of work, eating, sleeping. Huge. Now that I think of it.” (pp. 27, 28, lines 128, 131) “I would like to do, I guess, over the next two or three or five years
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	Actively thinking about their personal perspective of grief. (line 247) Participant struggling with conceptualizing processing vs prolonging the grief experience.	and not just be done with Eddie now.” (p. 54, line 240) “I don’t think I’ll want to look at it as a grief process rather as a, more of a remembrance of him.” (p. 56, line 247) “I’m not good at processing. I haven’t really got through that yet with him or Dad.” (p. 56, lines 251, 252) “I don’t know if I’m processing or prolonging. Does that make sense? I don’t know.” (p. 57, lines 253, 255)
Theme 3: Seeking vs Receiving Support	External presentation and internal experience misaligned. (line 79) The lack of depth in a meaningless check-in doesn’t support or allow for vulnerability of a meaningful answer. (line 77) Polite, socially acceptable methods of reaching out to the bereaved may be perceived as superficial. (line 77) Seeking individual to do memorialization tattoo and sharing experience was part of the grief process. (line 95) More open to sharing grief with this person that coworkers. (line 96) Their role as caregiver creates a conceptual lens that makes help-seeking more complex. (lines 103-105) Should- Incongruence between what others expect and what they are doing. (line 111)	“People said that like are you ok? Are you ok? And I was like, yeah, I’m fine.” (p. 17, lines 77,78) “I looked ok outwardly, I think I was just numb with Eddie this time.” (p. 17, line 79) “I was just numb about the whole situation.” (p. 19, line 98) “I asked my tattoo artist if I could come in and get his paw done on my leg because I wanted him there for every walk I do. I cried with her. I cried with her quite a bit.” (p. 20, lines 95-97) “I’m a very internal person. I’m the helper like my mom. She helped everyone else but never got help for her and I think I’m the same way” (p. 22, lines 103-105) “I’m the one that usually is the giver and haven’t asked for that help even though I probably need it at some point.” (p. 24, line 112) “I know that my sister has really pushed me to talk to someone, and I just haven’t, and I probably should at some point.” (p. 24, line 111)

	Experience of others show up <when required> rather than seeking it out. (lines 109,110) Participant felt others may not understand her grief experience from the loss of CA - knowledge that maybe their CA loss is not as valid. (line 119) Work culture holds a different value system concerning animals than she does. (line 264) Not wanting to authentically express her grief to co-workers due to perceived stigma. (line 264) Lack of support from work, and her reluctance to ask because of the values of where she works. Sense of community and willingness to share on Facebook platform. (line 258) Participant experienced a flow of love coming from her social media community. (line 260)	“I think through it all, family, my sister and her son have been really, really supportive, but I don’t actively seek them. They come to me.” (p. 23, lines 109, 110) “My fiancée has been a rock. He’s there through everything.” (p. 23, line 107) “I missed all the work. I missed work for about a week.” (p. 25, line 116) “They were very understanding.” (p. 25, line 117) “I don’t think they quite understood that the loss of a pet was such a big thing.” (p. 26, line 119) “I work in a little company, and they’re like a family, was after they figured out how what, when I didn’t come into work, and they were like, ohh, and they’re like farmers, so life on the farm is very different when it comes to animals and losing them.” (p. 59, line 264) “Everyone my age is on Facebook.” (p. 57, line 257) “I got my tattoo, and it was posted, because I loved it, and everybody who knew Eddie was like, Oh my gosh, that’s the best thing you could do.” (p. 57, line 258) “But I think sharing, like I said, on Facebook was (<i>pause</i>) for me.” (p. 59, line 266) “Part of me being this age, that’s our outlet, being able to also share things like that on Facebook and such.” (p. 60, line 269)
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	Able to absorb the sympathy that is flowing in when it feels like they are ready to accept it. (line 269) Felt a sense of connection/support of other who knew him and were thinking about both her and CA. (line 272) The loss impacted a wider community other than just herself and sharing the communal love feels like support. (line 279)	“To have that, and I guess, that flow of love come through my phone was a huge help for sure.” (p. 58, line 260) “I wasn’t looking for sympathy, but I eventually did accept it as it poured in.” (p. 60, line 267) “Mostly knowing that lots of those people had actually met and interacted with Eddie to know that they were thinking of him and thinking of me. Yeah, it was huge, huge, huge, help and support system of knowing that lots of them are like, oh yeah, we were there when you guys did this thing with Eddie.” (p. 61, lines 272,273) “I think you’re posting your pictures of Eddie, when they come up in my feed, I was like, oh, yeah, you think about him too, and I think it’s a huge, huge support for sure.” (p. 62, line 275) “There’s lots of people who really, really loved him, and that helps.” (p. 63, line 279)
Theme 4: Static vs Fluid Memorialization	Both static and fluid. (lines 139,140) Physical symbolic reminder and continued presence when walking every day. (line 143) Permanency of keepsakes. (line 164)	“We have his ashes. We took some to his walking path. The rest is actually sitting next to my Dad up on a shelf.” (p. 30, lines 139-141) “I got a print of his paw just above my ankle so he could be with me as we walk forever now.” (p. 30, line 143) “Because now he’s with me on every walk.” (p. 31, line 147) “The ankle tatt was my most meaningful piece for Eddie for sure... Because now he’s with me on every walk.” (p. 31, lines 146, 147) “His collar is on my mirror in my car. It’s gonna live there forever.” (p. 35, lines 162, 163)

	Juxtaposition of these home/comfort/fixed pieces with the more fluid. (line 167) His essence is with them. Leash (staying in a permanent spot) is a static reminder to go for a walk (movement - fluid). Movement and sharing when spreading CAs ashes to new and also old places. (line 236) Memorialization and remembrance as an ongoing and evolving practice (fluid).	“We have his leash at the door cause that’s where it lived, and that’s where it’s going to live forever.” (p. 35, line 164) “There’s some up in my office, my fireplace, my home screen on my phone is him.” (p. 36, line 167) “The entire house has a picture at least in every room, except for maybe the washrooms.” (p. 37, line 169) “He’s here. He’s here with us.” (p. 37, line 170) “His leash being by the door makes me think of my own health.” (p. 39, line 178) “He was the instrument for us getting out every day and making sure we were looking after ourselves, and he was a huge thing.” (p. 39, line 180) “Through him, living and also gone, it made us aware that we should get outside and look after ourselves as much as we looked after him.” (p. 40, line 183) “I was telling my fiancée about this, and he’s like I think it’s a really great thing that you share this and also we should really go and take some of the ashes to a different place that we’ve also been with Eddie.” (p. 49, line 219) “I want to go to that ice cream place and take some of his ashes out to some of the walking trails there, and then also we went to [CITY] with Eddie and want to go back there and take a bit of him.” (p. 52, line 235) “We lost (air quotes) “our” cat, and there was a cairn at the side of the city, and they were the best of
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	Participant acknowledging that permanence and movement co-exist. Anchoring while also dynamic. (line 283)	friends, so I'll take some of his ashes there." (p. 52, line 236) I want some of him to be there with her as well." (p. 53, line 239) "I want Eddie to be in all the places where there's good memories and we had fun." (p. 53, line 237) "I think we should keep that bond with him and keep it going. Well, every time we go for a walk I think of him. We don't say that. It's not necessarily implied and so I even said to him, if you feel like that, just let me now because I like to hear it." (p. 50, lines 222-225) "I would like to do, I guess, over the next two or three or five years and not just be done with Eddie now." (p. 54, line 240) "You know plan to take him to different places, when we get there. If that is not in the next month or year, that's ok. I just want to have him in five years to be part of our lives." (p. 54, lines 242-244) "Facebook is an interesting system because you do get to see pictures from a year ago, and to see him pop up is such a neat thing." (p. 62, line 276) "I love that he's been so out there and shared with so many people." (p. 63, line 278) "Having some of him there forever, I mean, that will always bring me back to good times with him, and I think to have that in different places makes it such a wider-reaching thing and not just here." (p. 64, line 283)
Theme 4:	Awareness that he is aging and will need to be euthanized. (line 50)	"Eddie was an old dog. We had been seeing his health declining,

Compassion Helps You Make Sense of it/Deal with it/Cope	Familiarity and comfort. (line 55) Intention of creating a space that was familiar to the animal and to her. (line 58) Participant was familiar with the vet. (line 60) Certainty of wanting warmth, familiarity, comfort vs cold, unfamiliar vet office. (line 61) Creating a space that was intentional and comforting for all involved. (line 63) Both/And - Acknowledging the experience as difficult while also acknowledging that it was for the best. (line 72) Honouring them through an act of compassion. (line 73)	and I knew that at some point we would need to let him go and say goodbye.” (p. 10, lines 49,50) “In his own yard and his own house, whichever worked out best.” (p. 12, line 55) “Yeah, there’s an apple tree out in my yard, and we put out a bunch of blankets and had the vet come here, and the vet knew Eddie from our old house.” (p. 12, line 58) “She [the vet] knew Eddie from then. She was accommodating for us to come to the home because I knew that I couldn’t take Eddie into a cold vet clinic, and so she was able to do it here.” (p. 13, lines 60,62) It was very peaceful, and I know that Eddie was comfortable in his last moments.” (p. 13, line 63) “He was much more comfortable at home, and I think so were we.” (p. 14, line 66) “I think with Eddie, given his health issues, I knew that this was the best thing for him. I think that made it less hard. Not easy, but less hard.” (p. 15, lines 70-72) “We were doing the right thing for him.” (p. 16, line 73)
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Marie: Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	Experiential Statements That Support Themes	Quotes with Page/Line
Theme 1: Family Status	Dogs in their home hold a familial status. (line 4)	“We got him and he joined his brother.” (p. 1, line 4)

Without Being or Having Children	Take on the role of a family member that is like a child but not a child. (line 7) The CAs were included and embedded into their daily lives and family unit, just like human children. (line 12) Perhaps some uncertainly about children and coming to that decision but there is certainty around a “divine” love for animals. (line 20) CA didn’t fill the role of a child but is used as a metaphor perhaps for the role the CA served? Kin-like role but separate from being considered children. (line 22) This is very different when asked about the role- previously as a child-like role and now is described as a soul mate. Even after the CAs are deceased, they are spoken about to new pets as their siblings. (line 87) Reflecting on that the reason these dogs were very important is because they were the first dogs that the couple got as a couple. (line 90) Only child- representing something in their family. (line 145)	“He was kind of the pesky younger brother.” (p. 2, line 6) We don't have children, so essentially, they are like our children. I know you hear that, but they really were, and are, all of our dogs are.” (p. 2, line 7) “We just did everything. Took them everywhere.” (p. 3, lines 9, 10) “All of our basically our lives were planned around our dogs.” (p. 3, line 11) “All of our trips, anything we did, had to include them.” (p. 4, line 12) “Well, I guess, thankfully, my husband and I agreed on the child thing. I don't even know if actually we even talked about that very much, like going into this relationship or this marriage, but we certainly knew that we had this divine love for animals and dogs.” (p. 5, line 20) “He kind of filled that, not the child role, but he certainly was a distraction, just as a child would be.” (p. 6, line 22) “They were just, I don't know, just family.” (p. 7, line 25) “Marvin was my soul dog. He would follow me everywhere. He knew if I was upset, or he just knew to be around me.” (p. 7, line 27) “We tell their current siblings all about them, compare them, you know, like all sorts of stuff.” (p. 31, line 87) “They were just our first dogs together as a couple, and I think that's where it was really important duo.” (p. 32, line 90) “I mean Jake, as he was an only child for say five years, we took everywhere, like it wasn't even a question.” (p. 56, line 145)
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	Stating again not like their children yet, maybe that is a role they served. Is there something around a stigma to say these dogs are like my kids? Loving their dogs like family, but perhaps having some reservations about expressing that, as they are conscious of how it may be perceived by others. (line 146) Life revolved around those two dogs – both small and very large life decisions were made considering the two dogs – deeply embedded as part of the family. (line 147) The love they expressed for their CA was similar to how they have loved humans, and therefore they should be honoured in a similar way. (line 129)	“But our Marvin and Jake.... just the bond was so different. I don't know how I could even explain that. I can't really say they were like our kids that we just certainly our whole entire lives were based around them.” (p. 56, line 146) “Everything. Every decision we made, plans to go out, travel plans, anything we made, houses to purchase, like everything was made around those two dogs.” (p. 57, line 147) “I just think it shows how important to us they were. Because we do that probably in humans that wanted that done in our lives, so we'd never not honour them the same way we would honour another human, 'cause to us, they are loved just as much. Yeah.” (p. 48 line 129)
Theme 2: Mourning Privately, Honouring Publicly	Mourning privately: Multiple keepsakes are collected and displayed in private home space with candle as a way for them to feel close to the deceased. (line 72) Physically touching the urns and speaking to them as a daily ritual -Sense that they will feel their owner caring for them still? (line 75) Kept everything from food to leashes and collars and even the clothing of both Marvin and Jake – this feels like there's meaning here. Not wanting to get rid of the physical items as part of holding on. (line 111) Not wanting to get rid of anything but also not having it all on display. Maybe this is actually more meaningful and part of mourning and grief – the attachment to the physical things -Some is more private than others? Private more meaningful than others? (line 112)	“Everything now is just kind of displayed on a shelf in my living room, together, of course, with their collars, and just little tiny candles with their initials and stuff on it. So, they will just be close to us forever.” (p. 24, line 72) “Touch their urns every night and told them goodnight, and, just so that, you know, they knew.” (p. 25, line 75) “Marvin, I haven't been able to get rid of his food or anything yet, so he's still there; it's kind of like he hasn't gone anywhere. Yeah, just like all the leashes we've ever got from when they were puppies, leashes and collars from when they were very, very small puppy all the way up until they grew out of them and that type of thing we still have all of Jake had some probably cancerous stuff going on too that he had to wear like little shirts and stuff for, so we have all of those little shirts that he wore.” (p. 40, line 111)

	Intentional in how things are displayed so they can continue to be felt/present during daily activities – private- part of remaining connected and feels intimate. (line 119) Deeply meaningful to smell objects of the deceased that can reunite them in a memory though smell- deeply personal experience shared. (Summary of lines 131-134) Rituals and memorialization are more private than commemorative activities. Rituals and memorials are done with the partner, who may hold similar views and values about these practices vs others who may not. Memorials and rituals are more private and are done with the husband. More intimate commemorative activities with parents and honours, such as donations, are more public in nature. (line 164) Honouring publicly: Financial donation in their honour. (line 74)	“Yeah, we don't get rid of a thing. Which is, I mean, it's packed away, it's not on display, you know, some of that stuff, but it's definitely won't be going anywhere.” (p. 41, line 112) “We just want them to be close to us. So yeah, the decision was intentional where we were going to leave them because we wanted them to still watch TV with us on Friday nights and things like that, right?” (p. 43, line 119) (context of seeking comfort of their belongings) “Probably like the little shirts and things and things that Marvin, we had to hold him up by a sling kind of at the end of his time, so I do seek comfort.” (p. 49, line 131) “I desperately wish that the stuff smelled like them still. So, I often times try and smell some of that stuff. Didn't want to wash things for a really long time after they went 'cause I just didn't want.... I try and smell their hair to see if it still smells like them. But I do, I do seek comfort.” (p. 50, line 132) “I wish I had a bit more, like I wish I could just breathe it in and just be like ohhhhh just what a memory, right? Because I do think that smells of such an important way of bringing you right back to a place that that's not there anymore, so I really wish that...try to smell their collars. It's a lot about smell.” (p. 50, line 133) Context-“ did you share any of your sort of rituals or memorials with [parents]?” (line 163) “Um, not so much. I think that my husband and I do a lot of that stuff kind of privately because I think that we know, we feel the same way.” (p. 66, line 164)
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	Self-awareness of considering the reasons for purchasing significant amounts of personalized jewelry and how it was part of the grieving process. Some of the purchased jewelry was done before the death so it's not really mourning jewelry – performative? (line 76) This is almost more about display- fun honour to keep the legacy maybe more than intimate memorialization. (line 82) Animal advocacy though rescuing and made financial donations- this is important to them. Honouring through financial donations. (line 84) Is this more about their animal philanthropy or about the meaningful memorialization of the two deceased dogs? Just curious- could be both. Donations made are more public as a honour or legacy. Centring themselves in an animal philanthropic narrative (performative). (line 85)	“But we don't share a lot of the memorials or anything.” (p. 67, line 166) “He would, usually without me, but he would usually go and make a donation to the rescues we got them from. Usually, the week following, just in their honour.” (p. 26, line 74) “For the first, with Jake, and kind of pre-emptively with Marv, I bought every, maybe it was an excuse, and maybe it was my coping, and my grieving but, I bought every single piece of jewelry I could that I could get engraved or put his initials on and Marvin's initials, because obviously I knew that one day.” (p. 26, line 76) “We had a dog bar made. So, kind of, their bowls are kind of elevated, and it looks like an old school bar with a nice little, like, footstool thingy underneath. So that's where they eat their food, and then we had a plaque saying Marv's bar established 2025, like they used to do with the old day bartender, we kind of put that up next to their bowls.” (p. 29, line 82) “In some of the bigger donations we've made, we've made donations to the [ORGANIZATION] in their name so that they can put work on their outdoor run, which I think happened a year or two ago.” (p. 30, line 84) “They had a big fundraiser to create this memorial to just honour all of the [CITY] police service animals, and so it has a big plaque that says Jake and Marv right in front of the statue. They just did that ribbon cutting a month or two ago, so that was really nice [NAME] sent pictures of it all, so it was really, really nice to see that.” (p. 30, line 85)
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	The act of donation in their names is therapeutic and a meaningful way of honouring them. (line 95) Maybe this is more about distraction than meaning/ outward display of grief than personal. Performative? (line 103)	“I think it was obviously therapeutic for us too, just to honour their memory with some of the donations and things we had made we always, it's always, you know, in their names. And yeah, just wanting to keep going.” (p. 34, line 95) “I just wanted some way to be reminded about them on the daily.” (p. 36, line 102) “So, that's kind of why we made, well, why I made some decisions I did with regards to like, yeah, the jewelry and stuff and probably shopping was a way of my coping, and it's just my husband will let me do it if I said it was for the dogs (<i>Laughs</i>).” (p. 37, line 103)
Theme 3: Coping: Turning Away and Turning Towards Grief Emotions	Being busy is a distraction and possibly an avoidance of grief. (line 54) Talking through inner conflict. Avoiding due to fear of being consumed by grief. If I let it in it will consume me. Guilt from not allowing the experience. (line 56) Distracting oneself from the grief. (line 58). Initially a raw display of sadness. However, crying is not the only way to process grief. (line 58) Deep grief experienced in the past involved memorialization and crying. (line 59) This has been a different grief experience than the previous loss of Jake who she doesn't describe as her “soul dog”. (line	“Well, because we have had two other dogs, when he passed away, we had the three other dogs when he passed away. Now, one was quite young. I just felt I was distracted, and maybe that's why I didn't have time to grieve him, because I was so distracted with these three other dogs.” (p. 19, line 54) “Which is a good or a bad thing, right?” (p. 20, line 55) “Because I can't let it consume me, but again, that's where that kind of like guilt and stuff comes.” (p. 20, line 56) “I was very distracted, so honest to goodness, I cried pretty hard the day of, and I haven't been able to shed too many tears since.” (p. 20, line 58) Which is just so unusual 'cause with Jake it was like a year of deep grieving and lots of crying and lots of like little memorials and things that will get into later, but yeah, Marvin was a bit different.” (p. 20, line 59)

	59) Processing grief differently or avoiding the grief though distraction? (line 60) Maybe not more or less but a different experience. (Summary of lines 59-61) The grief reaction differed from what they had previously experienced (with Jake who her husband was closer with) or anticipated, leading to confusion. (line 63) Avoidance coping or grief avoidance? Having good final memories – sufficient? Awareness of self, recognizing that they are avoiding painful memories but also acknowledging that they hold positive memories of the final walk and day. What significance do the pictures have for them? Is this connected to the earlier concern about the fear of being overwhelmed by grief? (line 64) Revisiting might consume her and shocked by the reaction. Self-protection or restraining herself from opening up an emotional wound. (line 65) Negative self-judgment of how they have experienced this loss. (line 65) Avoidance is not “bad” rather protective at times. (line 66) Trying to make sense of how progressive losses or cumulative losses affect her grief experience. (line 91) At the time, looking at pictures a year after Jake’s death was therapeutic (turning toward the grief). Given that she states this was therapeutic, she earlier discussed not wanting to look at Marvin’s pictures yet. Maybe needs time before she can bring up the painful emotions in a therapeutic way, rather than having them be too raw and become emotionally flooded (see above, “consumed,” “tailspin”). (line 150)	I don't know if it was just 'cause we were distracted. Life just went on pretty quickly without him.” (p. 21, lines 60, 61) Context- response to “how did you feel in the days and weeks following?” “To be totally honest, surprisingly super numb. Super not even really numb, just like normal. I don't know why.” (p. 21, line 63) “Yeah, I would try...I haven’t been able to look at any pictures like from that day or anything 'cause we took him on a really nice walk and had a really nice time with him on that last day, but I haven't been able to look at any pictures or anything, so I know that I'm avoiding dealing with some stuff too, right?” (p. 22, line 64) “Cause I know that would probably put me in a bit of a tailspin but... yeahit just.... I'm very surprised at how I react to this.” (p. 22, line 65) “I've actually kind of disappointed at myself. Basically, life went on.” (p. 23, line 66) “We love the ones that we have now, but nothing will ever be as hard, I say, as the first one we lost, and I hope that it doesn't get easier with every loss. Maybe it will. I don't know.” (p. 32, line 91) “For Jake on the first anniversary, of his first, we have looked at pictures so we did we put on a slideshow of all the pictures on the anniversary date of the first year. So we went through every picture that we had and just sat there and cried, and it was just very therapeutic in that way. Now, I mean, we can look at pictures, but I'm sure that will come for Marvin at some
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	Awareness that the process of grief is difficult, and although avoidance is a protection from emotions, feeling the sadness is also helpful. (line 171) Aware of the catharsis in being able to talk about her grief and share an emotional response through the interviewing process (turning towards). Ability to be sad about the experience without it overtaking her. (line 184) Coping with guilt in grief experience. What does grieving mean and what does it mean if I don't feel I have experienced it? (line 28) Different grief experience resulting from different losses causing confusion and guilt. (line 29) Guilt coming up again regarding the quantity of grief for one vs the other. CA grief experiences are intertwined with one another. (line 36) Guilt coming from quantifying the grief experience of one vs the other. (line 57) Guilt from an unexpected grief reaction.	point, I'll be able to look at some pictures and stuff of him.” (p. 59, line 150) “I did join a grief group recently, but I haven't seen much from it, or I haven't actively gone and looked at it.” (p. 69, line 170)- (for context) “I don't long to make myself sad, you know? So, I don't try and look for these things. Sometimes it's kind of nice.” (p. 69, line 171) “It felt good to cry for Marvin a little bit, so that's kind of nice.” (p. 75, line 184) “I haven't grieved him yet either, and so I think this is a bit of a problem.” (p. 8, line 28) “I have some guilt around how long I grieved Jake for and how little I've grieved Marvin for, so far, and I'm not sure why. So, I knew this would get me going a little bit. Anyway, because he was so much more to me, probably than Jake was. Not really, but he was just my puppy.” (p. 8, lines 29, 30) “With Jake, we don't regret the timing of it, but we were, so he passed away November 7th, 2021, so we could argue we're almost at the four years, so, 'cause I feel bad talking about him so much, but he was such a part of Marvin too, right?” (p. 11, line 36) “Because in a weird way, you just don't want him to think that you loved him any less than his brother.” (p. 20, line 57) “I've actually kind of disappointed at myself. Basically, life went on.” (p. 23, line 66) “Intentionally, I would go and pick out from this section of jewelry I have
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	There is tension for the participant in how she is trying to keep things even in the amount of grief she has for Jake and for Marvin. (line 79) She was less bonded to Jake and grieved him more than Marvin, whom she claims was her soul dog. She seems to have guilt and a need to make an effort to consciously grieve him. (lines 78, 79)	something to always remind me of, particularly Jake.” (p. 27, line 78) “I’m not doing it as much as I did with Marvin, but I try.” (p. 27, line 79)
Theme 4: Navigating Sharing Grief Experience with Others (Emerged after revisiting PETs and cross-case analysis)	Found her own parents to be supportive of their grief experience. (line 49) Sharing with others is perhaps different that who is sought out for support. (line 51) Familial support is there but both rely on each other as the primary form of support. (line 52) Aware that others may have struggled to respond to their grief. (line 160) It is important to talk about the deceased with individuals who knew them and to share stories to keep the memories alive. (line 161)	“Mostly just like, family supports. My parents recently moved here, so they were a big, big support.” (p. 18, line 49) “Just kind of, you know, or made a post on the alumni page that he passed, so that’s always, they’re always a supportive group, and that’s probably it.” (p. 18, line 50) “I mean, I told people, of course, but not looking for any type of support or sympathy. I know everyone was sorry.” (p. 18, line 51) “They’re always, you know, there for me if I need it, but we mostly depend on each other (my husband and I) for the support, so... “ (p. 18, line 52) “I think I feel like they didn’t know how to act sometimes, right? They didn’t know what to say. If it was if it was better to not talk about it or if it was better to talk about it.” (p. 64, line 160) “I think it is it’s better to talk about it together as four people who loved these animals so much. Just to talk about kind of funny memories or things they used to do that were super quirky that none of our other dogs do.” (p. 64, line 161)

	To share the experience of grief communally with others who feel the significance of the loss is both sad and therapeutic. (line 162) Rituals and memorials are done with the partner, who may hold similar views and values about these practices vs others who may not. (line 164) Aware that others may judge them for choices regarding the animals. (line 165) Strong sense of community through the rescue group that truly understand their experience. Shared grief experience with others they may not know but have a similar connection to the group and a similar experience of loss. Lack of willingness to share due to pot. stigma or whether the reaction brings no comfort or sense of support. (line 174) Sharing with online community validates experience by being acknowledged by others. (lines 179-181)	“I felt that was quite therapeutic. Just to talk about them, and yeah, sad sometimes it would just kind of strike a chord and things but they're pretty much the only people... we tell everyone of course like I said, like all the other family members and stuff, but they're pretty much the only ones that we've asked to kind of that could really feel the pain like we felt it kind of so...” (p. 65, line 162) “I think that my husband and I do a lot of that stuff kind of privately because I think that we know, we feel the same way.” (p. 66, line 164) “We just know. Maybe we think that maybe people would think we're a little bit over the top in some of the things that we feel or think or do for them, and so really, only the two of us understand.” (p. 67, line 165) “They just, you know, so sorry for your loss and I make sure I do I say the same thing to them too even though we haven't never even seen or met or anything these people before we're just kind of that alumni from certain rescues and stuff that could just appreciate, really appreciate the rescue and thank the rescue so desperately that we got these dogs from, but also just they just can feel the pain too... You know? With you.” (p. 70, line 173) “So that's pretty much the only community. Like work and stuff, people know, but not much is said or done.” (p. 71, line 174) “It obviously does do something for me if I'm posting it on Facebook. So, some kind of that feeling of that support from even friends that maybe
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		haven't spoken to in ages.” (p. 73, line 179) “Just knowing that it's out there, and maybe it's just, again, just making sure that people know when the dogs know just how important they were to me.” (p. 73, line 180) “So just sharing that with communities like online and stuff, maybe. Just maybe the responses validate me a little bit and how I'm feeling, and they can kind of, you know, connect with me on that level at that moment and tell me their stories sometimes, you know, in the comments or whatever.” (p. 73, line 181)
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Virginia: Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	Experiential Statements That Support Themes	Quotes with Page/Line
Theme 1: CA Assumed a Child-Like/Familial Role in the Family Unit that Fulfilled the Expression of Nurturance and Affection	CA was part of the growth and changes of a family unit. Unique deep emotional bond that differs from a romantic relationship. CA is profoundly intertwined with the changes within the family and her own changes (hormonal). Needing to have something to nurture as the children are growing older.	“She had been the dog that we had been that kind of, a family dog, we had her for ten and a half years. So, through the kind of, I would say, the thick of bringing up the kids and through that, kind of, that real think of young family life. So, she very much been our family dog and not the pet we had for longest.” (p. 1, line 3) “I called her [the vet] when she was nearly at the end, saying to the vet, she's the love of my life, and my husband would be sat next to me and, I'm like, oh, he knows, the dog is the love of my life.” (p. 2, line 5) (Context: When asked how the CA came into their life) “It was linked a bit, I don't whether it was a little hormonal, to be honest.” (p. 3, line 7) “I think it was, yeah, Grade 1, and so I felt like no more babies. There was some of that to it. So, it was it was

	very much, I was the one who instigated it, did the research. It wasn't kids saying, Can we have that puppy in the window, right? 'cause we've had that, but it was very much me, and I felt the need for it.” (p. 5, line 9) Having a dog from very young was a new experience for the whole family. Raising a dog from an early stage is similar to the experience of a new parent. CA was embedded in the familial routines. The CA was considered to be more like a child in the family dynamic than a dog. CA is considered to be part of the family and was treated in a way where she was included. Provided emotional support for the child and also for the other family members. Therapeutic aspect to the relationship between the CA and the child. Attempting to try to describe with words an intangible experience of attachment bond.	“We've never had a puppy. I'd never had a puppy. My husband had never had a puppy. She, in retrospect, was very good and fast learning puppy, but it felt a bit like a first child, to be honest. You're like, Oh my God, I'm clueless. I don't know what to do.” (p.7, line 12) “Like, because there was so much walking to bus stops, taking the kids to the park, taking all holiday trips, maybe she was just involved very much in a family life, then with children, and so even when she was old and dying, she saw the school bus get excited. Like, her tail would wag. I could tell it was very much like having a child, not like having a dog, in lots of ways compared to my other experience.” (p. 10, line 17) “Yeah, just the emotional offloading, emotional support, even that in intangible stuff we don't even have words for. The connection the kids, all of them got, but especially him. And it was noted.” (p. 11, line 18) “It wasn't, I mean, it might have been part of the reason we got her, I like my children to have pets and that connection, but at the same time, priceless, priceless. Then, even for us, she provided the same thing for us, too.” (p. 11, line 19) “She definitely has provided emotional support in the sense of you don't even, again, I don't think we have words for it. Just that presence, just that comfort.” (p. 13, line 24)
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	Experiencing separation. CA a way of getting a need for affection/ tactile needs met. CA was a way to express her affection/need for affection freely. -Thinking about this here about stages of development- were her kiddos pulling away from affection and the CA help in some way? Self- awareness that CA became a safe place (vessel) for her to display affection and receive tactile input. Unconditional love. Dog was seen more as a child than as a dog. Picture of CA placed in display of other family and friends. Holds a central place in the family portraits as a possible representation of her place in the family structure. CA represented life stage that is changing alongside family.	“I do find myself now missing... like I sit on the couch and I don't have that... I'm quite a tactile person and touchy, and I don't have that anymore.” (p. 14, line 25) “Yeah, like I say, she was the love of my life. I'd be on my own on the bed with her, and I'd just grab her face and be like, I love you (Kiss). Just loved that dog.” (p. 14, line 26) “And I probably projected a lot onto her in that way. I am, like I said, very affectionate and tactile, so she got to be a vessel for that to be directed towards.” (p. 14, line 27) “Our dog was like a child, not like a dog. She'd go to the dog park, but just to see the people. She wasn't interested in playing with dogs. So, she was very intimidated and scared a lot, so sometimes I worry if we expedited it.” (p. 21, line 39) “I think I'd like to get a picture up, at least in the house, so we ended up getting a couple, and we have these big high wall-to-wall bookshelves downstairs, and we have like, pictures of friends and family, so we got her up on there.” (p. 53, line 97) “But it's there, and it's the center, and the kids are around it, and it's in the center.” (p. 54, line 99) “So, I think that fits a little bit too, I'm like, menopausal, and I turn fifty in the spring, and my youngest is going into grade twelve next year. And so for me, that passing of that kind of family dog fits a little bit, my husband would
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	Contemplating looking forward to the next stage of life and whether another animal fits into that- moving out of a child stage. Still holds the role of a mother even if the children are getting older and needing her differently. Season of life is about caring and resting. Awareness of the energy (mentally and physically) involved for caring for a dog is not what is needed at this stage. A sense of injustice when seeing others with what she lost. A similar experience arose seeing people with dogs following the death of the CA. Feeling of things being unjust after losing the CA similar. (Summary of line 119-120) Significant experience is couched with (seems silly) as self-protection from potential judgment (that CA death and miscarriage could evoke a similar experience) to the experience of losing a child through miscarriage.	probably agree, the shifting in our lives as well.” (p. 55, line 102) “So, for this next phase of our life, we’re not sure how it looks. But we’d like to travel more, so we’re like, we don’t need to worry about grass or flowers. The trees will be fine. We don’t have a pet. Lock the door and go. It’s kind of been part of this reflection and transition in our lives.” (p. 55, lines 103,104) “I am still mothering, I’ll always be a mom, but those needy little years are passing, right? So, it kind of fit a bit with that.” (p. 56, line 105) “This phase of life where you’re caring for those below and above. So, I think we need a bit of time to just sleep and not worry about puppies and dogs.” (p. 60, line 117) “It felt at first when she first passed...it sounds silly, I’d see people with dogs, and I found, only the one time I think, again, just observed it, I thought a pop-up in my head or a feeling that I had when I had a miscarriage in the past. Like I had a miscarriage before I had my second child, and I’d kind of been... before I got pregnant with him, I was like, well, let’s try, let’s see, and then I had a miscarriage, and now I really wanted to have a baby, and I would see women out with presuming, or I was presuming at the time, with their baby and I would just think, that’s so unfair.” (p. 60, lines 119,120) “And I had a similar thought when the dog had passed for a couple of days. I would see people with dogs and think, why couldn’t my dog still be... it seems silly, but it’s more that it just popped in my head.” (p. 61, line 122)
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Theme 2: Essence of CA is Enduring and Held Internally, Not in the Material	There was a felt sense that only the shell remained and not the essence of the dog. Uninterested in keeping anything like remains. (line 68) Essence of CA is not in remains. (line 69) Clear sense of beliefs in that her essence is not tied to the remains. Her essence is felt in the internal world of the participant. (line 72) Complete change of heart from wanting to slow down and not be hasty to throwing out all of the pet's belongings.	(Context- following the euthanasia) "She was limp there was nothing much left on her and she had probably gone in the next day or so on her own and I think in hindsight, but you just felt her go and afterwards you know and then they leave and say, we'll give you some time, call us when you're ready, of course we're both crying, but we didn't want to stay very long because, yeah, her body is there but we just straight away, both of us were, like, that's not the dog. Just isn't. You could just feel it." (p. 40, line 66) "We said, no, she can be in like, be cremated with other animals or pets. That's fine with us, and they were going to... we didn't want the ashes." (p.41, line 68) "I don't want the ashes in my house. That's not her to me. That's a jar of ash." (p. 42, line 69) "I didn't want to know where it was. I don't wanna go to it again. For me, just in my beliefs, that's not where she is." (p. 42, line 71) "Like she's in my heart. She's in my memory." (p. 42, line 72) "We should just take some time and, you know, we don't need to rush getting rid of stuff and then I walked into one room where a dog bed was, except that, well, and the dishes and then for about two hours or so I cleaned, and I got rid, what we gathered together anything, that we could donate, whether it was to the shelter or stuff we can take, like the medication, to the vet to be shared with others and anything we could donate, we gathered it up, my husband took it." (p. 49, line 87)
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	Her essence isn't in material things but lives internally in her thoughts, heart, and the sense of her presence; holding her there is a form of honouring.	"So even just when we came home and there's all these reminders, there's food, there's bloody bags of pills everywhere, there's brushes and leashes." (p. 68, line 141) "I didn't keep her collar as my daughter did for the other dog because it just reminded me of how skinny she was, and we couldn't keep a collar on her, and it was just ratty, not ratty, but just like rattling on her." (p. 69, line 144) "I kept her tags, though. I didn't keep the beds or blankets. I just think, for me, that was more about, in a way, honouring her. I think for me, she's not in blankets and keepsakes, and she's in my heart and in my life in terms of it being a memory of a lifelong experience, and I feel her presence in the sense that it was something to me, and I find a lot of comfort in that. The comfort to me is not in things. But that's also how I think about life. I don't have a lot of attachment to things. I don't place value in them." (p. 69, lines 145-148)
Theme 3: Sharing Grief Selectively with Those Who Hold Similar Values and Beliefs.	Talking with someone who understands the bond with animals some form. Not wanting to talk about it all the time with people who understand- need to oscillate out of grief focus. Continuing bond expressions are private but not something she is ashamed of.	"Having that picture on my desk, because she would sit with me and that was our space, probably is the biggest way for me and us being able to talk about it with each other, because it's only really other pet people that get the pet thing and even then, you don't want to talk about it all the time with them." (p. 73, line 159) (Context: being asked what Continuing bonds mean to them) "I think that they're personal. It's not something I hide or am ashamed of, and I tell the kids, but I probably wouldn't do it in front of them." (p. 75, line 162)

	Talking about the experience might be a positive thing and questions if there has been some avoidance. Reflection that she doesn't feel it has been a negative experience yet sharing it with someone was meaningful. Talking about it was helpful and also emotionally draining. Sought out close friends or family that are animal lovers- shared values-based connection are safe. Sharing with others about the death helped by having others acknowledge the experience. Others witnessing grief experience. More open to discussing her experiences with her husband in greater depth. People who have pets are more likely to relate to her experience and are therefore more inclined to share it, even if only superficially. Gratitude around being able to talk about her experience in the interview. Place with no judgement. Supports were mostly from her husband and internally drawn from system of beliefs . Supports are ongoing vs one time (prayer, speaking to husband).	"On reflection, maybe I do need to talk about it a little bit more, because maybe I've been shutting the door on it." (p. 81, line 182) "I don't think it's impacting me negatively, but it's interesting that I thanked you, and after this call, I'll feel a bit emotionally drained, but I'm really glad I've had the experience, and it has been helpful." (p. 82, line 183) "I think I connected with other close friends that, or like family that I know are animal lovers, 'cause they also knew she wasn't well, and I'd maybe send a little, oh, just so you know." (p. 82, line 184) "One, I wanted to share it with them but, two, you know, whether subconsciously or consciously, you know, you were also going to get that, oh... acknowledgement of what you've experienced and a bit of sympathy, right?" (p. 82, line 185) "I can't say I have, other than my husband and I talking to each other about it and then the other time telling the Coles notes version to friends, but like I say, I like to talk, so it's probably too long, but it's nice to know people with pets get it." (p. 83, line 188) "Um, yeah. But this has been beneficial, especially 'cause it was only a couple months ago... being able to talk the whole thing out. So, I appreciate that." (p. 84, line 189) "Yeah, but other than that, no, I didn't. I didn't seek out a minister or a therapist specific to that. I probably relied on, yeah, you know, what's in
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	Willing to openly share her experience of losing the CA without any sense of shame. Telling about the death is different than sharing about the grief experience and memorialization practices the these are what are more screened to people with similar beliefs. Has a community of others who she shared with that are non-judgemental. Sharing her rituals and memorialization practices felt safe – in a community of people who share similar beliefs/ values. Willing to share the experience but also selective of who she shares with. Screening who is safe to share (other pet owners). Needing to screen who will be non-judgmental in order to feel safe to share. Sharing the experience is not only about the death but about her life being	my immediate realm of bag of tricks anyway. Spoke to my husband. We still do.” (p. 84, line 190) “Oh, anyone I told about the dog, if it came up, if they said, How was it, I told them. I'm not embarrassed or ashamed or uncomfortable with any of it. Of course, not everyone, but quite a few of my friends are know you, yoga-type people, so the idea of doing a smudge and opening all the things with the windows and just trying to clear energy, you know, no one was...it would make sense to them not be an odd thing to do.” (p. 85, line 192) “But yeah, I share it. The friends I have that are family that have pets, if they were to bring it up or it somehow came up in a conversation I would feel comfortable saying, Oh yeah I talk to... 'cause we've got a bunch of friends and family coming over Boxing Day and now the dogs photo will be on that shelf that everyone will be in that space. I'm sure at some point it might come up, and someone might say something, and if it were fitting, I'd feel free to say, Oh yeah, I still talk to them and, I think for most of them, they still would....they would acknowledge it as something that isn't, you know, completely alien. Like, they loved their pets in the same ways.” (p. 87, line 194) “I think the only communal part would be that you know, just telling the few close people that I knew would empathize with it, and they'll probably talk about it a bit, and we might, but no. Not with a more communal.” (p. 89, line 200) “Yeah, probably because it's like this reiteration of acknowledgement of
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	acknowledged and their experience being acknowledged.	how lovely and kind and good she was. They would want to know because they, you know, they love animals, and so, they cared about her and would ask how she was doing, and so letting them know felt like that acknowledgement of not only the experience for us, but that she was good.” (p. 89, line 204)
Theme 4: Transforming Grief into Meaning	Being close at death and telling her how much she was loved was an extremely meaningful way to be with her in death. - Gratitude- very connected with her belief system. A litany of love and gratitude. Clarity in belief system that informs aftercare choice- essence is not in the remains. Engaging in a ritual cleansing and prayer of gratitude tied to belief system- there is also a physical cleaning. Self-reflection taking place through the interview process. Personal grief process of this experience is tied to larger belief system. (line 107) Though reflection/metacognition during the interview process, response to grief was closely aligned with personal philosophy/values/worldview and not a religious ideology. This experience and how she has made meaning of it is reassuring, as it may inform her approach to processing grief associated with the inevitable losses of loved ones in the future.	“So I just leaned over, and I had her head, and I'm all around just so she can smell me, and I'm just with....<i>(Long pause and deep breath)</i> sorry.... I'm just whispering in her ear, I love you, I love you, I love you, thank you, thank you, thank you. Just over and over...sorry.” (p. 39, line 64) “I didn't want to know where it was. I don't wanna go to it again. For me, just in my beliefs, that's not where she is.” (p. 42, line 71) “Then I opened every window, every door, even the cupboards, and I smudged the whole house from top to bottom. I would say, in between, I was probably praying or did make a point of saying a prayer or was repeating in my head either to the dog or just in gratefulness.” (p. 50, lines 89, 90) “I started reflecting on it a bit, and it made me realize that my reaction, or my husband's.... our reaction, very much fit with my own beliefs without me consciously thinking of that, if that makes sense.” (p. 56, line 107) “I didn't [clue?] to some belief system, not poo-pooing that, but like I think this way, therefore, I have to do this, this, and this. But on reflection, how I behaved when I looked back at it does fit with how I think about these things.” (p. 57, line 108)

	This experience informs future experiences of death. Experiences a felt sense of the deceased presence- spiritual presence of the deceased as part of her belief system. Ongoing experience of sensed presence. Gestalt the whole is bigger than the sum of its parts. The way she is experiencing and reacting to events is informed in context to a larger system of beliefs. Larger belief system places little value on material possessions. Actions in alignment with belief system. While reflecting through the interview process, grief actions were somewhat subconscious. Making meaning of the grief experience following the loss of the CA transcends to bigger belief system. Spiritual but not religious. Sense of comfort in an unshakable belief that there is more after death.	“It kind of organically, naturally came, which in hindsight, is kind of reassuring because (touches head), touch wood, I have had people pass in my life, but no one immediately close (knocks on table). Like my parents are still alive, my husband’s parents are still alive.” (p. 57, line 109) “I feel her presence. Not weird things happening, but that’s just me manifesting a sense of it or just acknowledging that in myself, and I’m fine with that.” (p. 58, line 111) “But sometimes I’ll be sat alone, in those quiet moments, and she’d just walk up to me and nudge me. I find myself occasionally just putting my hands down, like, as if to pet her and go, hey, luc, hey.” (p. 59, line 112) “I think the actions you take are reflective of maybe your greater personality and how you react to just things more generally anyway.” (p. 66, line 135) “The comfort to me is not in things. But that’s also how I think about life. I don’t have a lot of attachment to things.” (p. 70, line 148) “So yeah, I think, again, being able to, on reflection, react in a way that fits with my beliefs.” (p. 70, line 149) “Yeah, I think that, not to keep repeating it, and I know you know, but I think again, because it’s only been a couple months, not to seem self-absorbed, but it’s interesting reflecting on, for as much as I know I feel or believe a certain thing, I do believe it ‘cause I just did it without thinking about it.” (p. 76, line 165) “I think it just reaffirmed for me how I feel about life and spirituality. For me,
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	Being able to sense her presence affirms her beliefs about what happens when we die.	I don't believe this is it. I'm very firm in that belief, and it doesn't come from religion." (p. 77, line 168) "I don't believe when you die, you die. I just believe that there's so much...I have peace with it and for myself, and others, not that I wish it upon them. And I find comfort in that, I guess. It's something I consider somewhat unshakable." (p. 78, line 170) "So, I feel like she is still there, so for me, I guess it's an affirmation of that. And even if it isn't, so what? You know, if I pass and that was it, so what? Right now, that's how I think, that's how I function. It's authentic. It's not performative." (p. 78, line 172)
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APPENDIX B: TABLE OF GROUP EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (GETS)

Group Experiential Theme 1: Holding the Past in the Present

Group Experiential Theme 1: Holding the Past in the Present

1a. Motivations for Bond Maintenance

Participant 1 (Catherine):

Quotes:

"I just knew that I, I wanted her with me, so it wasn't even a question of whether or not I would." (p. 36, line 74)

"I definitely knew that I would get her cremated and bring her home." (p. 37, line 75)

"That she was loved, and just important for her to be around still, and just always know that she's here in some way, right?" (p. 24, line 51)

Participant 2 (Rowan):

Quotes:

"Having some of him there forever, I mean, that will always bring me back to good times with him, and I think to have that in different places makes it such a wider-reaching thing and not just here." (p. 64, line 283)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

"I desperately wish that the stuff smelled like them still. So, I often times try and smell some of that stuff. Didn't want to wash things for a really long time after they went 'cause I just didn't want.... I try and smell their hair to see if it still smells like them. But I do, I do seek comfort." (p. 50, line 132)

"I wish I had a bit more, like I wish I could just breathe it in and just be like ohhhhh just what a memory, right? Because I do think that smells of such an important way of bringing you right back to a place that that's not there anymore, so I really wish that...try to smell their collars. It's a lot about smell." (p. 50, line 133)

"Just thinking that they know how much we love them if we talked about them, kept the pictures, all of that stuff. Just, they'd know how much they meant to us and how deeply we loved them." (p. 33, line 94)

"Everything now is just kind of displayed on a shelf in my living room, together, of course, with their collars, and just little tiny candles with their initials and stuff on it. So, they will just be close to us forever." (p. 24, line 72)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

"Yeah, the honouring for me is more, in story, again, not to sound pretentious, but that's where I find value." (p. 72, line 156)

"So, it's talking about her. Do you remember her? Thinking about the good experience, even in the missing now, it's a testament to how much she meant and how much she did do." (p. 72, line 157)

"I feel her presence in the sense that it was something to me, and I find a lot of comfort in that. The comfort to me is not in things. But that's also how I think about life. I don't have a lot of attachment to things. I don't place value in them." (p. 46, lines 145-148)

1b. The Essence Continues

Participant 1 (Catherine)

Quotes:

"It just feels like she's still here, in some way, you know, having the necklace, and she's just here with me, and just seeing her ashes and just knowing that, yeah, she's not, she's not gone" (p. 26, line 53)

Participant 2 (Rowan)

Quotes:

"He's here. He's here with us." (p. 36, line 170)

"Him and I keep Eddie's (*pause*) "ness" with us." (p. 51, line 229)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

"Sure, sure, we just always want them to be included, still, even though they're not with us physically. But.. yeah, I think that there's just always a little, we wouldn't maybe take them physically, well, for one, like where there's lots of talk about spreading their ashes over their favourite spots and stuff, I have this weird thing about separating their bodies. Like, I just, I want it to be whole." (p. 45, line 123)

"Which I don't know where that comes from because, you know, whatever it's ashes and but I just want them to be whole and feel like we're taking a piece of them if I, if I, we do spread some of those ashes." (p. 46, line 124)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

"I don't want the ashes in my house. That's not her to me. That's a jar of ash." (p. 41, line 69)

"I didn't want to know where it was. I don't wanna go to it again. For me, just in my beliefs, that's not where she is." (p. 42, line 71)

"Like she's in my heart. She's in my memory." (p. 42, line 72)

"But sometimes I'll be sat alone, in those quiet moments, and she'd just walk up to me and nudge me. I find myself occasionally just putting my hands down, like, as if to pet her and go, hey, luc, hey." (p. 59, line 112)

1c. Embedding Ongoing Bonds Through Ritual, Memorialization, and Daily Practices

Participant 1 (Catherine):

Quotes:

"It was just nice to have something with her, like of her with me whenever I wanted to wear it." (p. 22, line 44)

Participant 2 (Rowan):

Quotes:

"His leash being by the door makes me think of my own health." (p. 38, line 178)

"I got a print of his paw just above my ankle so he could be with me as we walk forever now." (p. 36, line 143)

"Through him, living and also gone, it made us aware that we should get outside and look after ourselves as much as we looked after him." (p. 39, line 183)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

"Touch their urns every night and told them goodnight, and, just so that, you know, they knew." (p. 24, line 75)

“So yeah, the decision was intentional where we were going to leave them because we wanted them to still watch TV with us on Friday nights and things like that, right?” (pp. 43, 44, line 119)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

“I feel her presence. Not weird things happening, but that’s just me manifesting a sense of it or just acknowledging that in myself, and I’m fine with that.” (p. 58, line 111)

“I don’t do it because I’m sad. In that moment, I’m not thinking I’m sad, go find the photo or pretend she’s there. I think it’s just those quiet moments when she and I would connect that I remember. And whether I’m doing it for my own peace of mind, I really think, what if she is there? What if there’s dog spirits in my house? It makes me feel good.” (p. 80, line 173)

Group Experiential Theme 2: Grief in Social Contexts

1a. Seeking and Receiving Support

Participant 1 (Catherine):

Quotes:

“I have friends that have animals, though, and they’ve all been through, you know, having to put their animals down, so yeah, everybody was pretty supportive.” (p.15, line 30)

“I read a lot online with different forums on stuff like Reddit and stuff with people that have also posted that their pets have passed away, and it’s, yeah, I mean, I guess you just sort of feel like you’re not alone, right?” (pp. 44,45, line 95)

“I never really posted anything about her. I just never felt like I was ready, but just reading other comments, right?” (pp. 45,46, lines 97, 98)

Participant 2 (Rowan):

Quotes:

“I’m a very internal person. I’m the helper like my mom. She helped everyone else but never got help for her and I think I’m the same way.” (p. 22, lines 103-105)

“Like I said, I’m the one that usually is the giver and haven’t asked for that help even though I probably need it at some point.” (p. 24, line 112)

“To have that, and I guess, that flow of love come through my phone was a huge help for sure.” (line 260, p. 58)

“I wasn’t looking for sympathy, but I eventually did accept it as it poured in.” (p. 60, line 267)

“I know that, people said that like are you ok? Are you ok? And I was like, yeah, I’m fine.” (pp. 16, 17, lines 77, 78)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

“I mean, I told people, of course, but not looking for any type of support or sympathy. I know everyone was sorry.” (p. 18, line 51)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

“One, I wanted to share it with them but, two, you know, whether subconsciously or consciously, you know, you were also going to get that, oh... acknowledgement of what you’ve experienced and a bit of sympathy, right?” (p. 82, line 185)

“I was worried about, as a mom, my priority was then, as soon as I got in the door, how are the kids going to feel, and I have to manage and support their reactions to it, not as much as my own, or as opposed to.” (p. 56, line 106)

"I think my husband and I were probably, again, my priority was the kids and how they felt, and my daughter had been through a lot in the past year so much how's she's going to be. So that was probably my priority more than how I felt." (p. 83, line 186)

1b. Solitude Within a Shared Experience

Participant 1 (Catherine):

Quotes:

"It's a very universal experience, right?" (p. 46, line 99)

"I had friends around, and that, and I don't know, I think I just wanted to be alone more than anything, right?" (p. 14, line 28)

"She's mine, and I don't have a lot of people that know what it's like to have an animal for 20 years, like just such a long time span." (line 29, p. 14)

"Like it's just nice to read other comments and just realize other people go through it too, right?" (pp. 46,47, line 103)

"I read a lot online with different forums on stuff like Reddit and stuff with people that have also posted that their pets have passed away, and it's, yeah, I mean, I guess you just sort of feel like you're not alone, right?" (pp. 44,45, line 95)

Participant 2 (Rowan):

Quotes:

"It's never easy. I think with Eddie, given his health issues, I knew that this was the best thing for him. I think that made it less hard. Not easy, but less hard." (p. 15, lines 69-72)

"I think losing Eddie, I definitely sort of, you know, went into myself." (p. 26, line 121)

"I actually sent my fiancée away for a couple of days and just holed up." (p. 26, line 123)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

"So just maybe hearing other stories, just to let, obviously we're not alone, but just to make sure that you know you're not alone, yeah." (line 182, p. 74)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

"I had a miscarriage, and now I really wanted to have a baby, and I would see women out with presuming, or I was presuming at the time, with their baby and I would just think, that's so unfair. How come, not that I didn't want them to have one, but how come.... what have I done wrong? What's wrong with me? Why can't I have a baby? And I had a similar thought when the dog had passed for a couple of days. I would see people with dogs and think, why couldn't my dog still be... it seems silly." (p. 61, lines 120-122)

1c. Testing the Waters: The Vulnerability of Voicing Grief

Participant 1 (Catherine):

Quotes:

"I haven't really talked about it with anybody outside of my friends." (p. 43, line 91)

"Oh, I'd say really well, they've been really supportive, and like I said, I've had lots of friends that have gone through it as well, so you know they, they know what it's like, so yeah." (pp. 43,44, line 93)

Participant 2 (Rowan):

Quotes:

"My work (*laughs*), place family, I work in a little company, and they're like a family, was after they figured out how what, when I didn't come into work, and they were like, ohh, and they're like farmers, so life on the farm is very different when it comes to animals and losing them." (p. 59, line 264)

"I don't think they quite understood that the loss of a pet was such a big thing." (p. 26, line 119)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

"They're pretty much the only ones that we've asked to kind of that could really feel the pain like we felt it." (p. 65, line 162)

"I think I feel like they didn't know how to act sometimes, right? They didn't know what to say. If it was if it was better to not talk about it or if it was better to talk about it." (p. 64, line 160)

"I think that my husband and I do a lot of that stuff kind of privately because I think that we know, we feel the same way." (p. 66, line 164)

"We just know. Maybe we think that maybe people would think we're a little bit over the top in some of the things that we feel or think or do for them, and so really, only the two of us understand." (p. 67, line 165)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

"I think I connected with other close friends that, or like family that I know are animal lovers." (p. 82, line 184)

"Because it's only really other pet people that get the pet thing and even then, you don't want to talk about it all the time with them." (p. 73, line 159)

"I think that they're personal. It's not something I hide or are ashamed of, and I tell the kids, but I probably wouldn't do it in front of them." (p. 75, line 162)

Group Experiential Theme 3: The Ebb and Flow of Grief

1a. Working Through Dynamic Emotional Shifts

Participant 1 (Catherine):

Quotes:

"Sort of everything I guess like at first it was just really hard and then like I still miss her a lot but I just find now almost kind of guilty that I'm moving on like you know that I've got a different routine and that I sort of appreciate not having to care give as much 'cause it was stressful and it was hard so um, but yeah." (p. 18, line 39)

Participant 2 (Rowan):

Quotes:

"I think I was in a little bit of shock because I didn't cry for days after that." (p.16, line 76)

"I think it took me definitely one week or two to fully feel that he was gone, and then also during that time, I was just numb about the whole situation." (p. 21, line 98)

"I think lots of that was due to losing Dad not very long before too. Just everything sort of hit hard and then didn't hit at all." (p. 19, lines 88,89)

"I looked ok outwardly, I think I was just numb with Eddie this time." (line 79) p. 17

"I thought I'd be much, much more emotional and the whole ugly cry, but I don't think I've felt that up until a week or two." (p. 20, line 94)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

"I was very distracted, so honest to goodness, I cried pretty hard the day of, and I haven't been able to shed too many tears since. Which is just so unusual 'cause with Jake it was like a year of deep grieving and lots of crying and lots of like little memorials and things that will get into later, but yeah, Marvin was a bit different." (p. 20, lines 58, 59)

"To be totally honest, surprisingly super numb. Super not even really numb, just like normal. I don't know why." (p. 21, line 63)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

"We felt numb and shell-shocked, to be quite honest." (p. 37, line 59)

"It felt traumatizing to be honest, not to be catastrophizing, but it was emotional. It was, it was." (p. 44, line 80)

"I don't feel sad. I don't feel sad about it at all. Unless I'm in denial." (p. 80, lines 177-179)

1b. The Journey of Grief

Participant 1 (Catherine):

Quotes:

"I felt like I had a couple of weeks to sort of get a handle on it, and then it just sort of felt like it just happened all over again." (p. 40, line 82)

"I, you know, I'm sure I love animals, and I'm sure it won't be the end, and I think that's a good way to memorialize, is to give another animal a home and so that's, you know, probably something, I don't know, I'm at this stage I'm not ready but I think I will be. I think so because there are so many animals that need help, and I think that if you have the ability to love an animal, it's probably the best you could ever do." (pp. 51, 52, lines 113-115)

Participant 2 (Rowan):

Quotes:

"I don't think I've processed it very well yet (*laughs*). Even now. Months and months. This was in May of this year. I'm still not over it. I don't know if that's the word. I haven't processed much since that day. If that makes sense." (lines 81-87) p. 18

"I'm not good at processing. I haven't really got through that yet with him or Dad and so I like the fact that I can still have Eddie with us so many of these little plans going forward. I don't know if I'm processing or prolonging (*laughs*)." (p. 56, lines 251-253)

"I don't think I'll want to look at it as a grief process rather as a, more of a remembrance of him." (p. 55, line 247)

"So yeah, his role has...I keep saying has, but it should be had (*pause*). It's really tough to get around that." (p. 6, lines 26, 27)

"Interesting....I'm just sort of firming up that I speak less to him than about him. Interesting. This is really bringing things into my own head. So thank you." (pp. 45, lines 205, 207)

Participant 3 (Marie):

Quotes:

"I just felt I was distracted, and maybe that's why I didn't have time to grieve him, because I was so distracted with these three other dogs. Which is a good or a bad thing, right?" (p. 19, lines 54, 55)

"I haven't grieved him yet either, and so I think this is a bit of a problem. I have some guilt around how long I grieved Jake for and how little I've grieved Marvin for, so far, and I'm not sure why. So, I knew this would get me going a little bit." (p. 8, lines 28, 29)

Participant 4 (Virginia):

Quotes:

“I started reflecting on it a bit, and it made me realize that my reaction, or my husband's.... our reaction, very much fit with my own beliefs without me consciously thinking of that, if that makes sense.” (p. 56, line 107)

“It kind of organically, naturally came, which in hindsight, is kind of reassuring because (touches head), touch wood, I have had people pass in my life, but no one immediately close (knocks on table). Like my parents are still alive, my husband’s parents are still alive.” (p. 57, line 109)

“I think it just reaffirmed for me how I feel about life and spirituality. For me, I don’t believe this is it. I’m very firm in that belief, and it doesn’t come from religion.” (p. 77, line 168)

“I don’t believe when you die, you die. I just believe that there’s so much...I have peace with it and for myself, and others, not that I wish it upon them. And I find comfort in that, I guess. It’s something I consider somewhat unshakable.” (p. 78, line 170)

“Thank you for this space because it’s really nice. In my other life, I write, and that’s what I do, and that’s how I process the words and the talking, so thank you very, very much.” (p. 65, lines 130,131)

“On reflection, maybe I do need to talk about it a little bit more, because maybe I’ve been shutting the door on it. I don’t think it’s impacting me negatively, but it’s interesting that I thanked you, and after this call, I’ll feel a bit emotionally drained, but I’m really glad I’ve had the experience, and it has been helpful.” (pp. 81, 82, lines 182, 183)

APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT POSTER

Title of Study: Exploring Rituals and Memorial Practices Surrounding the Death of a Companion Animal



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR GRADUATE RESEARCH STUDY
HAS YOUR DOG OR CAT DIED WITHIN THE LAST THREE YEARS?
WE'RE LOOKING FOR PEOPLE TO SHARE HOW THEY REMEMBERED AND
HONOURED THEIR PETS.**

This study aims to understand how people remember and honour lost pets and how this relates to healing. Your story can help others and support research on grief and memorials.

WHO CAN JOIN?

- ADULTS AGED **45-55**
- Lost a **cat or dog** between **2 weeks and 3 years ago**
- Performed a ceremony, created a keepsake, art, or special gesture in remembrance that can be considered a ritual or memorial.
- The death of their cat or dog was either **natural causes** or **vet-assisted euthanasia**
- Comfortable talking and reflecting about your experience

WHAT'S INVOLVED?

About **2-2.5 hours total**

- Includes a **short screening call** to explain the study and ensure you qualify (approx. 15 min), a **Zoom interview** (approx. 1 hour), and a **follow-up discussion** (approx. 30 min).
- The screening and interview happen over about **3 weeks**; around **2-4 months**, we plan to have a follow-up discussion with you.

Your voice matters

We want to learn how people remember and honour their companion animals after they die, and how these actions relate to the healing process.

All participation is **VOLUNTARY AND CONFIDENTIAL.**
INTERESTED OR HAVE QUESTIONS?

Contact: Bronwyn Davis (Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca)

University: University of Lethbridge

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Toupey Luft (Toupey.luft@uleth.ca)

U of A Ethics ID # Pro0015213 Version Date: Nov. 6, 2025

APPENDIX D: ONLINE RECRUITMENT POSTER

 University of Lethbridge	TITLE OF STUDY: EXPLORING RITUALS AND MEMORIAL PRACTICES SURROUNDING THE DEATH OF A COMPANION ANIMAL PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR GRADUATE RESEARCH STUDY
	WHAT IS IT ABOUT? • WE'RE LOOKING FOR PEOPLE TO SHARE HOW THEY REMEMBERED AND HONOURED THEIR PETS. • THIS STUDY AIMS TO UNDERSTAND HOW PEOPLE REMEMBER AND HONOUR LOST PETS AND HOW THIS RELATES TO HEALING. • YOUR EXPERIENCE CAN HELP OTHERS AND SUPPORT RESEARCH ON GRIEF AND MEMORIALS
WHO CAN JOIN? • ADULTS AGED 45-55 • Lost a cat or dog between 2 weeks and 3 years ago • Performed a ceremony, created a keepsake, art, or special gesture in remembrance that can be considered a ritual or memorial. • The death of their cat or dog was either natural causes or vet-assisted euthanasia • Comfortable talking and reflecting about your experience	WHAT'S INVOLVED? • About 2-2.5 hours total • Includes a short screening call to describe the study and ensure you qualify (approx. 15 min), a Zoom interview (approx. 1 hour), and a follow-up discussion (approx. 30 min). • The screening and interview happen over about 3 weeks; around 2-4 months following, we plan to have a follow-up discussion with you.
	INTERESTED? All participation is VOLUNTARY AND CONFIDENTIAL. INTERESTED OR HAVE QUESTIONS Please contact me directly at Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca University of Lethbridge Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Toupey Luft (Toupey.luft@uleth.ca) U of A Ethics ID # Pro0015213

APPENDIX E: RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO INTERESTED PARTICIPANTS

E-mail Subject Line: Interest in Research Study

(Insert Date)

Dear *(Insert Potential Research Participant's Name)*:

Thank you for showing interest in participating in the research project titled “Exploring Rituals and Memorial Practices Surrounding the Death of a Companion Animal.” My name is Bronwyn Davis, and I am a Master of Education (Counselling Psychology) student at the University of Lethbridge.

What’s the Study About?

This study explores how people remember and honour their pets after death through memorials like keepsakes with pet ashes or belongings, burial sites, keepsakes, art (tattoos, portraits, plaques), or rituals (memorial service, scattering ashes, lighting candles, planting trees).

I seek participants willing to share and reflect on their experiences during an interview.

What’s Involved?

This study will take about **2-2.5 hours** of your time overall. It includes a screening call to describe the study and ensure you qualify (about 15 minutes), an audio/video recorded interview via Zoom (around 60 minutes), and a follow-up discussion (roughly 30 minutes). The screening and interview happen over about **3 weeks**; around **2-4 months**, we plan to have a **follow-up discussion** with you.

Interested?

If you’re interested in discussing further, I would like to schedule an initial screening phone call (about 15 min.), which aims to **ensure you understand the research and meet the study’s requirements**, which include:

- Adult aged **45-55** years
- Having experienced the death of your **cat or dog** between **two weeks and three years ago**
- Death resulting from **natural causes** or **vet-assisted euthanasia**
- Used **rituals or memorial** practices afterward
- Willing to **reflect** and **discuss** your experience

If you are interested, please provide a phone number and a preferred time and date that fit your schedule.

There are a limited number of spots for this study, so if you are not selected, it may be because you do not meet the participant criteria or because the study has already reached its participant limit.

If you need more information about this study or wish to speak with the researcher, please email Bronwyn Davis at Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca. To contact the thesis supervisor, please reach out to Dr. Toupey Luft at Toupey.luft@uleth.ca.

U of A Ethics ID # Pro0015213 Version Date: Nov. 6, 2025

APPENDIX F: SCREENING QUESTIONS FOR STUDY PARTICIPATION

- You are an Adult aged 45-55 years
- Your cat or dog died between two weeks and three years ago
- You have experienced the death of your cat or dog by either natural causes or vet-assisted euthanasia
- You have used rituals or memorialization practices following the death of your cat or dog
- You are willing to reflect on and discuss your experience
- You are aware of the time commitments to this study.
- This study will take about 2-3 hours of your time overall.
- The screening call and interview will be completed over three weeks, excluding the follow-up, which will occur within six months of the interview at the latest.

APPENDIX G: INVITATIONAL LETTER/ LETTER OF CONSENT

Title of Study: Exploring Rituals and Memorial Practices Surrounding the Death of a Companion Animal

Principal Investigator:

Bronwyn Davis

Master of Education Counselling Psychology Student

Department of Education

University of Lethbridge

Lethbridge, AB

Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca

Supervisor(s): Dr. Toupey Luft

You are invited to join a research study. This form will provide information on the study, and you are free to ask any questions about anything you do not understand by contacting me at Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca. You will get a copy of this form for your records.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

You are invited to participate in this study because you have shared that you have used memorials like keepsakes with pet ashes or belongings, burial sites, keepsakes, art (tattoos, portraits, plaques), or rituals (memorial service, scattering ashes, lighting candles, planting trees) to honour your dog or cat after their death. You have also expressed your willingness to discuss and reflect on this experience through an interview.

WHAT IS THE REASON FOR DOING THE STUDY?

This study seeks to explore how people use memorials and rituals after losing a pet, helping them find meaning. Building on previous research, it emphasizes personal stories and the unique ways each individual interprets their experiences.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

This study will take about **2-2.5 hours** of your time overall. It includes an audio/video recorded interview via Zoom (around 60 minutes) and a follow-up discussion (roughly 30 minutes). The interview and opportunity to edit your transcript will happen over about **3 weeks**. At around **2-4 months**, I plan to have a follow-up discussion with you.

During this interview, you will be asked to share the nature of your relationship with your companion animal, the role it played in your life, and the forms of memorialization or rituals you used after the animal's death. The interview will be conducted on Zoom, and you have the right to have your camera off if you wish.

NOTE: One week after the interview, you will receive the transcript, and you may edit or delete responses. You will have **one week to do this**; otherwise, the transcript will be used as is, as transcribed by the researcher.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

There are some anticipated risks in participating in this study. Due to the nature of the study, conversations may bring up emotionally and psychologically distressing content. This document provides a list of resources for mental health support. In addition to being signed by the participant (you), this consent form will be sent to you prior to the interview, allowing you to review it and ask any questions or concerns you may have.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS TO ME?

Expressing grief and loss with a supportive, caring, non-judgmental interviewer may lead to a greater understanding of how you have made sense and meaning from your

experience. There may also be no direct benefit to you in participating in this study. It may help counsellors and other mental health care professionals learn more about how to help and support those who are dealing with grief after the loss of a companion animal. It is not possible to know all the risks that may occur in a study, but the researcher has taken all reasonable safeguards to minimize any known risks to study participants.

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

Participation is entirely voluntary.

However, you can change your mind and **withdraw at any time during the interview** by verbally informing the interviewer. You may also withdraw your data **up to two weeks** after receiving your transcripts from the interview. **All data collected will be destroyed if you withdraw during this time.**

You can withdraw your data by contacting the principal investigator, Bronwyn Davis (Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca), up to two weeks after the interview transcript has been sent to you. After that point, we cannot remove you from the study because we will have incorporated your data into the general analysis. During the interview, you may refuse to answer questions you prefer not to answer.

WILL MY INFORMATION BE KEPT PRIVATE?

Several steps will be taken to protect your identity in the research. Participants' identities are protected as you will be given (or may choose) a pseudonym; no identifying names or information will be written in the transcript. Your location will not be included. Interview audio/video will be recorded and transcribed by the primary researcher (me). The audio recording is the raw data being collected and will be kept for 5 years. The video recording will be destroyed immediately. **All data, recordings, and transcripts will be encrypted and stored in a locked drawer or in a password-protected file on the researcher's personal computer.** Only the researcher and the researcher's supervisor will have access to these documents.

The findings from this study may be presented in writing in academic and professional journals to potentially help others learn more about the lived experiences of ritual and memorialization following the death of a companion animal. The findings will be presented during a thesis defence to a committee and potentially at conferences. **At no time will identifying information about you be shared.** If you wish to receive a copy of this study's findings, don't hesitate to contact the researcher using the contact information below.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

After reading this, if you have any questions, concerns, or require additional explanations, **please do not hesitate to reach out to me** at Bronwyn Davis, Bronwyn.davis@uleth.ca.

To reach the thesis supervisor, please contact Dr. Toupey Luft- Toupey.luft@uleth.ca

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office at ethics@ualberta.ca or (780)492-2615 and quote Ethics ID Pro0015213. This office is independent of the researchers.

By signing below, you understand:

- That you have read the above information and have had anything that you do not understand explained to you to your satisfaction.
- That you will be taking part in a research study.

- That you may freely leave the research study at any time.
- That you do not waive your legal rights by being in the study
- That the legal and professional obligations of the researchers and involved institutions are not changed by your taking part in this study.

SIGNATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANT

Name of Participant Pseudonym

Signature of Participant Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT

Name of Person Obtaining Consent Contact Number

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

I look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your help with this project.

Sincerely,
Bronwyn Davis

APPENDIX H: MENTAL HEALTH/COUNSELLING RESOURCES

Counselling Services:

Lethbridge Family Services: (403) 327-5724 counsellingintake@lfsfamily.ca

Lethbridge Counselling Service: (403) 942-0452

Grief Healing Discussion/Support Groups and Resources:

<https://resources.bestfriends.org/article/grieving-loss-pet-resources-coping>

The Animal Love and Loss Network (on Facebook)-

<https://www.facebook.com/people/The-Animal-Love-and-Loss-Network/100057638740241/>

Ontario Pet Loss Support Group (on Facebook)-

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/90843793481/>

Petloss.com Grief Support Chat Room- <https://www.petloss.com/chat.htm>

Petloss.com Phone Support

<https://www.letterstopushkin.com>

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. I would like to hear more about your companion animal. What would you like to share with me?
 - i. I would like to know how your animal came into your life.
 - ii. Tell me about the role [*insert companion animal's name*] served in your life?
 - iii. What were your day-to-day interactions like with your companion animal?
 - iv. How would you describe the bond you had with your companion animal?
2. Please describe to me your experience of losing your pet.
 - i. What kinds of support did you seek out? - Emotional? Social? Professionals? Spiritual?
 - ii. In what ways did the loss of your companion animal affect your day-to-day life?
 - iii. How did you feel in the days, weeks, and years after losing your pet?
3. How did you choose to memorialize your companion animal after its death?
 - i. What were the decisions you made in the aftercare? (Animal cremated or buried: If so, where did this take place?)
 - ii. If cremated, what did you do with the ashes? (Scattered, Urn, other).
 - iii. If buried, where and how did this occur?
 - iv. How did these decisions help to honour their life and/or say goodbye?
 - v. What meaning did you find in making these memorials or performing these rituals?
4. I'm curious what keepsakes or mementos you have that you kept from them?
 - i. Blankets, fur, collars, bandanas, leashes
 - b. Or have mementos made of them?
 - i. Jewelry, tattoos, paintings, framed photos, altars, song
 - c. How do these items help you feel connected or continue your bond with them?
 - d. In what ways do these objects help you reflect on or make meaning of their life and death?
5. In what ways do you engage in activities that continue the bond between you and your pet? Do you ever find yourself:
 - i. Seeking comfort from their belongings?
 - ii. Speaking to them?
 - iii. Hearing them?
 - iv. Dreaming about them?
 - b. What do these continuing bonds mean to you?
6. Please describe what kinds of rituals or commemorative activities you have engaged in the past/present/plan to do in the future?
 - i. How do these practices help you process your grief?

7. Tell me about sharing your rituals or memorial practices with family, friends, and the wider community.
 - i. What was that experience like for you?
 - ii. How did the people around you respond?
 - iii. Describe for me any communal or shared rituals and whether that helped you feel connected or acknowledged?

APPENDIX G: TABLE TEMPLATES

Tables adapted from (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022)

Exploratory Notes and Experiential Statements

Experiential statement	Line #	Original transcript	Exploratory notes

Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

Theme	Page/line	Quotes
Theme 1.		
Theme 2.		
Theme 3.		
Theme 4.		

Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

Group Experiential Theme 1. High level themes 1a. Sub-themes Participant 1: Quote Participant 2: Quote Participant 3: Quote Etc. 1b. Sub theme Participant 1: Quote Participant 2: Quote Participant 3: Quote Etc.	Page/line
Group Experiential Theme 2. High level themes 2a. Sub theme Participant 1: Quote Participant 2: Quote Participant 3: Quote Etc. 2b. Sub theme Participant 1: Quote Participant 2: Quote Participant 3: Quote Etc. 2c. Sub theme Participant 1: Quote Participant 2: Quote Participant 3: Quote Etc.	Page/line