



Media Contact: Allison Burk
The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine
614-292-0581
Burk.113@osu.edu

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*** Video and photos available for download: <http://bit.ly/33ADhAk> ***

OHIO STATE PROGRAM HELPS PET OWNERS COPE DURING GRIEF PROCESS

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Making end-of-life decisions for your pet or coping with the loss of an animal is something that no pet owner wants to think about. A program at [The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center](#) recognizes the importance of human-animal bonds and provides grief support for pet owners facing tough decisions for their animal.

“Grief is a very real and life-impacting feeling – whether that loss of a loved one is a human or animal,” said Joelle Nielsen, a licensed social worker and Honoring the Bond program coordinator at Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center. “We believe every veterinary medical center should have a social worker available to support pet owners navigating this loss.”

The [Honoring the Bond](#) program at Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center is one of only about 30 programs in the U.S. that provides a full time social worker to support pet owners faced with the loss of their beloved pet.

“If you go to a human hospital, you’re guaranteed to have the support of either a social worker or a chaplain. That’s rare in a veterinary hospital setting,” Nielsen said.

Ohio State’s Veterinary Medical Center treats more than 40,000 pets each year with a variety of specialty services ranging from emergency medicine to oncology. Nielsen works as a liaison between the veterinary team and the client to help sort through confusing medical terminology, offer support for those coming in on an unexpected emergency basis, assist with processing difficult end-of-life decisions, facilitate family discussions with children and provide assessment and referral for additional resources.

Nielsen acknowledges that – as with any type of grief – the process is different for everyone and stresses that one of the most important things she does with pet owners is to normalize their experience.

“It’s common for people to face conflicting feelings generated from a societal stigma surrounding grieving the loss of an animal,” said Nielsen. “I want people to know that it’s completely normal to grieve the loss of their pet.”

Nielsen suggests the following to help people through the loss of a beloved pet:

- Try not to compare your experience to others. We all grieve differently.
- Remember there is no standard timeline for the grief process. The goal is to begin to feel better as the days go by but there may be ups and downs.
- Find an outlet for your emotions. If talking about your feelings is difficult, you can also memorialize your pet by making a scrapbook, creating a memory box or journaling.
- Find a pet loss support group, book, website or therapist who specializes in pet loss for ongoing support.
- If the sadness doesn’t ease with time, don’t be afraid to seek help from a professional counselor.

Nielsen developed and coordinates the Hospital-Based Veterinary Social Work Group, which provides support and collaborative opportunities for the small niche of social workers employed by veterinary medical centers

across the U.S. and Canada.

“We hope this group can serve as a model for veterinary medical centers and ultimately expand support services to more pet owners,” Nielsen said.

To learn more about the Honoring the Bond Program, visit vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond

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