

When Best Friends Leave: Adolescents' Grief Experiences and their Coping Mechanisms in Facing Pet Loss

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explores the emotional responses and coping mechanisms of adolescents who have experienced pet loss. The purposes of this study are to explore adolescents' grief experiences in responding to pets loss, to identify the impacts of pets loss on adolescents, and to understand coping mechanisms that adolescents applied to manage the emotions while grieving over pets loss. This study adopted qualitative methodology. The data was collected by interviewing two participants and reviewing their reflective journals. Using thematic analysis, the findings indicated that adolescents viewed their pets as part of the family; they experienced both physical and mental impacts following the loss; the loss was often unvalidated by others; and adolescents coped by maintaining a continuing bond with their pets after death. In conclusion, pet loss is emotionally significant for adolescents and must be validated and supported to facilitate their recovery.

Keyword: Adolescents, Disenfranchised Grief, Pets Loss, Coping Mechanisms, Bereavement

Introduction

Grief is a complex and significant phenomenon related to the loss of beloved people and valuable things; it is a natural and spontaneous response (Podrazik et al., 2000). It can affect individuals differently, for instance, when the loss involves beloved people, pets and wealth. According to Mahoney (2024) grief is categorized into; acute grief, defined as an intense emotional and physical response immediately following a significant loss, and integrated grief refers to a natural and enduring response to loss that enables individuals to function normally even after encountering the loss. In addition, complicated grief is characterized as a severe response to loss and is included in the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11), as well as the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). It is considered a disorder that significantly impacts bereaved individuals, including affecting family relationships, impairing social interaction, causing a loss of meaning in life, and

resulting in a continuous struggle to accept the loss for a year or more (Shear & Gribbin Bloom, 2017)

In light of this study, given its focus on pets loss, attention will be directed to a specific type of grief namely disenfranchised grief**, defined as** losses that are not socially validated by the community (Attig, 2004; Cordaro, 2012). Companion animals serve as children, best friends, and secret caretakers where their existence enhance and stabilizes their owners' lives (Butler & DeGraff, 1996). They accept their owners regardless of appearances, behaviors, or attitudes, a quality that makes pets significant to individuals. The strong emotional relationship between humans and their pets has been demonstrated in recent literatures (Applebaum et al., 2020; Montgomery et al., 2024). Because of this bond is so strong, the death of a pet may constitute one of the significant loses in an individual's life. According to Butler & DeGraff (1996), a study showed that the feelings pets' owners experienced were intense and their responses to pets loss often paralleled those of losing a human relationship. In addition, the disenfranchised grief experienced by owners might cause them to take time off from work, study, or daily routines due to their feelings of grief.

According to Human Animal Bond Research Institute (2022) in their international research on dog and cat owners, they found that individuals emphasized the companionship they had with their pets. The findings indicated that 95% of respondents considered pets to be family, while 92% reported not considering relinquishing their pets as an option under any circumstances, and 90% described the relationship with their pets as an important bond. Viewing these findings, it can be concluded that pets are considered close companions for humans. Furthermore, the American Veterinary Medical Association (2023), describe the human-animal bond as a mutually beneficial relationship between people and animals, accompanied by interactions and behaviors that contribute to the physical, psychological and social well-being of humans and animals. A study by Rekant et al. (2026) indicated that a range of health benefits for people who have developed strong relationships with their companion pets, such as decreased level of anxiety, depression and marginalization. In addition, Allen et al. (2002) found that such relationship may help improve cardiovascular health. Based on this evidence in the literature, it is clear that pets play an important role in the development of healthy sense well-being of a human, as a result, the loss of a pet may cause significant stress for owners, who may be triggered into emotional distress, grief, and difficulties adjusting psychologically (Blazina et al., 2011; Cordaro, 2012).

Pet death is an unavoidable part of pet ownership, as domestic animals generally outlive their owners (Bose, 2025). This situation means that, because companion animals generally have shorter lifespans, owners are often able to anticipate the loss, experiencing what is known as anticipatory grief. Pets may die for multiple reasons, including chronic conditions such as viral infections, accidents, old age, or euthanasia when illnesses are untreatable (de Freitas et al., 2021). Given these factors, owners present during euthanasia often experience immediate grief as they participate in bidding farewell to a cherished animal. The procedure typically involves the administration of a drug that leads to death or induces sedation before death (Leary, 2020; Sharp, 2019), prompting strong emotional responses from those involved. This is supported in the writing of Applebaum et al. (2020) that stated when people feel overwhelmed, they turn to their pets to seek comfort and remove the distress.

Although research has documented the emotional effects of losing pets among adults, adolescents' experiences remain less well understood. Adolescence is a formative phase marked by increased emotional reactivity and identity development (Jaworska & MacQueen, 2015). Because pets frequently act as companions, confidants, and emotional supports, their death can carry significant psychological consequences for young people. Yet few studies have investigated how adolescents perceive grief or manage bereavement after a pet's death (Crawford et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2020). This study is significant in uncovering the experiences of adolescents encountering such bereavement, and their ways of dealing with a such significant tragedy in their lives. The findings of this study may be beneficial for counsellors who commonly interact with this group, as they may provide insight into how these adolescents think when facing bereavement, thereby enhancing strategies to help them in counselling sessions. Therefore, this study aims to explore adolescents' grief experiences of pet loss, understand how such loss affects their daily lives and development, and identify the coping strategies they employ to process and adapt to the loss.

Literature Review

To address these gaps, this literature review examines the theoretical and conceptual foundations of pets bereavement, the human-animal bond, and existing research on pet loss, while critically evaluating how adolescent developmental characteristics intersect with bereavement experiences to explain why this population requires focused scholarly attention.

The Continuing Bonds Theory

According to Klass et al. (1996), the Continuing Bonds Theory refers to the ongoing relationship that bereaved individuals maintain with a deceased loved one after their passing through emotional, psychological and symbolic connections. It views the continuation of this relationship as a meaningful existential matter and a natural part of the grieving process (Valentine, 2008). According to Hewson et al. (2024), this theory acknowledges the intention of grieving individuals to sustain such bonds through honouring and remembering with their loved ones. Furthermore, Mahoney (2024) stated that this theory demonstrates how bereaved individuals find hidden meanings after losing their loved ones and continue to derive value from the loss. In this light, the coping mechanisms of a grieving person may be enhanced and supported throughout the bereavement process.. Lastly, the theory proposes that, an individual can sustain the connection with the deceased through both tangible actions such as keeping personal belongings and engaging in symbolic representations; and rituals such as building a memorial (Neimeyer et al., 2006).

These factors explain the nature of the continuing bond between the living and the deceased, which may carry both benefits and adverse effects for the bereaved person. For example, the manner in which individuals perceive their continuing bond with the deceased may influence their coping mechanisms in response to the loss. When the bond is viewed positively, it may provide comfort, emotional acceptance, and a sense of ongoing connection, which can facilitate the grieving process. Conversely, when the bond is associated with sustained longing, guilt, and sadness, it may hinder adaptation and complicate the grieving process.

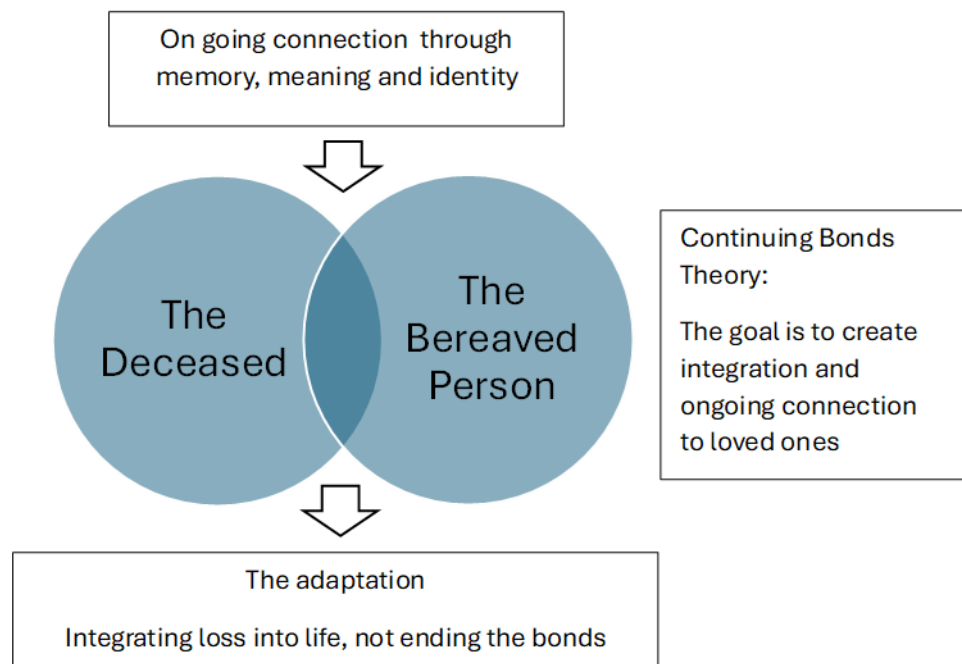


Diagram 2.1 The Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass et al., 1996)

The diagram 2.1 illustrates the integration between the living (bereaved person) and the deceased (their loved one) in which the integration is composed of memories of the deceased, meaning derived after their loss, and identity that is sustained even after death, this process constitutes adaptation once the bereavement process has been undergone by the living person through the integration of these elements. Klass et al. (1996) mentioned that, these elements of continuing bonds can be applied in accessible ways such as rituals such as lighting a candle on meaningful days, visiting a special place that marks meaningful thoughts, or cooking their favourite meals. Next is personal expression, where the living may write a letter addressed to the deceased. Following this is sharing about the deceased through storytelling, and creating albums, memory boxes, or song playlists. Through all these attempts to integrate the grief into continuing bonds, the adaptation is developed assisting the living person in achieving the goal of this theory; creating integration and an ongoing connections with their loved one.

The Two-Track model

The Two-Track Model, developed by Rubin (1999), proposed a bi-focused perspectives on reacting to interpersonal loss. This model integrates the effects of grief on biopsychosocial functioning with the continuing bond between the living and the deceased across the lifespan. This model attempts to illuminate how grief can affect an individual, and the nature of their continuing connection with the deceased. As the name suggests, there are two tracks proposed by Rubin (1999) in this model which are; track one (biopsychosocial functioning) and track two (relational bonds between the bereaved person and the deceased).

Track One (Track I)

According to Mahoney (2024), track one (Track I) refers to bereavement's biopsychosocial impacts. The primary goal of track one is that to support the bereaved individual's functioning

and help them manage the new life reality without their deceased loved ones (Rubin, 1999). It explores the effects of death on the biological, cognitive, behavioural, emotional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal aspects of the bereaved individuals' lives. This track examines the benefits and consequences of loss, such as the levels of anxiety and depression, the ability to enhance meaning in life, and the quality of surrounding support.

Track Two (Track II)

The Track Two (Track II) of this model concerns the distinctive emotional bond that sustained between the bereaved person and the deceased (Malkinson et al., 2006). It investigates how the bereaved perceives the evolution of the relationship after losing their loved one, and how they sustain the bonds with the deceased. Furthermore, the model considers how memories, connections, and internal representations of the deceased contribute to the bereaved person's adjustment and adaptation to loss. Rather than viewing detachment from the deceased as a necessary outcome of grieving, track two acknowledges that maintaining an enduring bond can be a normal and potentially adaptive aspect of the bereavement process (Malkinson et al., 2006; Rubin, 1999).

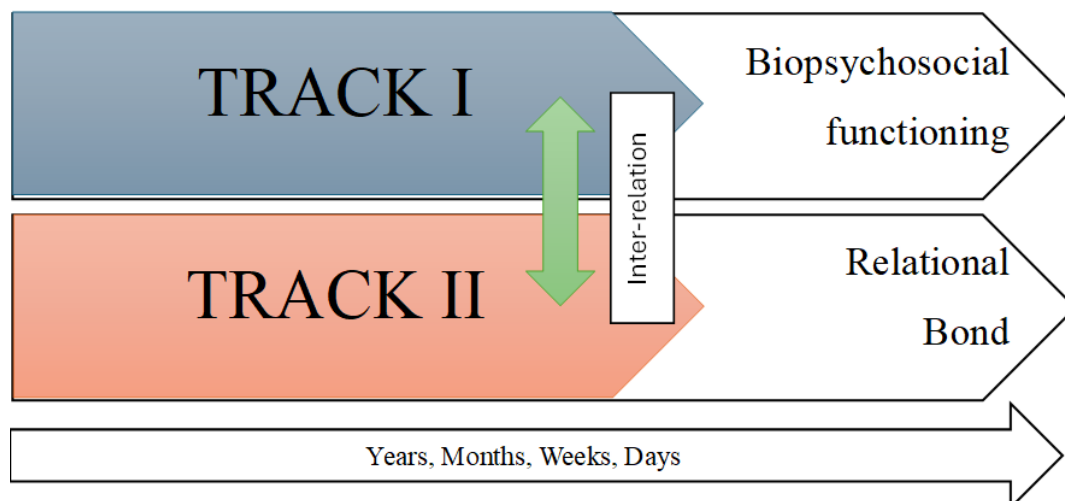


Diagram 2.2 The Two Track Model (Rubin, 1999)

As indicated in diagram 2.2 the Two-Track Model by Rubin (1999) is a bi-focal model in which two focuses are being highlighted simultaneously. Track One (Track I), consist of the effects of bereavement on the biopsychosocial functioning of the bereaved person. It includes biological, behavioural, cognitive and emotional aspects. Meanwile, Track Two (Track II), emphasises on the relational bond between the bereaved person and the deceased after loss. This model progresses over time, and illustrating the development of the bereaved person's responses to interpersonal loss.

Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief is described by Attig (2004), as losses that are not widely recognized by society. According to Humphrey (2009), there are three reasons for disenfranchised grief. First, the relationship between the bereaved person and the deceased is not recognized. For instance, in the case of pet-related grief, society has not acknowledged it, hence rendering it, unacceptable. Next, the capacity of the bereaved person, such as a child, is questioned, it is because those around them view a child as incapable of grieving. Lastly, the death itself not

acknowledged as genuine loss. In the case of pet bereavement, society expects the pet owners to swiftly overcome the grief emotions by replacing the deceased pet. Consequently, this norm implies that the bond between an owner and a pet is not equivalent as bonds between people, or in other words, the grief of losing a pet, should not be as intense as that of losing a person. Kaufman & Kaufman (2006) concluded this in their article 'And Then the Dog Died', noting that when a society does not acknowledge such grief, the owner tends to experience a complicated and unresolved grieving process.

Worden (2008) expanded the discussion by proposing, socially unspeakable loss as an extension of the disenfranchised grief. This, socially unspeakable loss, is defined as the difficulty of speaking about a loss due to surrounding stigma (Leidl et al., 2023). This concept can help in better understanding the experiences of pet bereavers. Furthermore, He et al. (2026) noted that, the factors preventing owners from speaking about their bereavement may include; limited social support, and reluctance to access available social support, even it is available. Thus, Worden (2008) suggested that through the concept of socially unspeakable loss, the grief experienced by pet bereavers does not qualify for social empathy. Nevertheless, literatures suggest that societal support in managing grief is important as it can offer warmth and aid for the bereavers to recover (Piper et al., 2009; Schut, 1999).

In addition, Neimeyer (2006), elaborated on this issue using the term; empathic failure. This term enhances the explanation of disenfranchised grief. It is described as the failure of one person to comprehend the essence of other person's experiences. Doka (2002) added a point to this, by stating that the empathic failure is a form of social element that hinders the growth of empathy during the bereavement process. Such failure should not exist as it can cause adverse effects on both bereaved person and society as a whole. Packman et al. (2014) and Attig (2004) conceptualized empathic failure as occurring across four systemic levels which are, firstly, self with self, this level involves the bereaved person with themselves, where they believe it is necessary to minimize their feelings. Next, self with family, where in which family members disregard the grief because it deviates from the traditional understanding of grief as being applicable only to human. This might may cause the bereaved person to feel marginalized as those closest to them fail to provide adequate support during the bereavement process. The third is, self with larger communities, which can be said as a broader extension of the previous level; self with family, whereby the bereavement is minimized by the community. This can be illustrated by an example in which a bereaved person applies for leave, but the permission was not granted due to lack of empathy from their employer since such type of grief is not recognized by the company. Lastly, self with transcendent reality, this level provides the explanation where the religious belief of the bereavers not coincides with the grief. In such case, spirituality fails to provide comfort, support and worse, actively marginalises the loss. In view of the levels, it can be said that empathic failure is an element that can hinder the bereaved from grieving in their own pace, as they are compelled to adapt in order to deserve empathy.

The discussion surrounding the concept of disenfranchised grief is extensive and has been examined by numerous scholars from different disciplines especially, counselling. Although researchers have provided various perspectives and definitions, the central idea remains consistent; this form of bereavement often receives little recognition from society. Unlike more openly acknowledged losses, disenfranchised grief is frequently overlooked or

minimized because the relationship, the loss itself, or the grieving individual may not be considered socially legitimate. As a result, individuals experiencing this type of grief may struggle to express their emotions and obtain the understanding and support typically available to those facing more widely recognized forms of bereavement.

Adolescents Grief Experiences

Researchers have found that adolescents experience grief in ways that are quite different from how adults or children respond to loss (Chen et al., 2025; Lundorff et al., 2017). During adolescence, young people are dealing with navigating two major things at the same time; the development of identity, and understanding their self-state, alongside dealing with the pain of losing someone important (Mannarino & Cohen, 2011). Studies show that adolescents often express their grief through changes in their behaviour, mood, and relationships rather than through direct conversation about their feelings (Balk, 1996; Layne et al., 2018a). Some teens might withdraw from friends, while others may act out or take risks. Adolescents' grief is unique because teenagers think about what loss means for their future in ways younger children do not (Layne et al., 2018b). They begin to understand that death is permanent and that life will be different going forward, which can be deeply challenging during a time when they are already experiencing numerous changes.

The way adolescents process grief is also shaped by their peer relationships and the level of support they receive. Recent research highlights that teenagers often feel isolated in their grief because their friends may not understand what they are going through, or the teens may feel pressured to "swift" the grief quickly (Herberman Mash et al., 2013). Social media and online spaces have added new layers to how young people express and manage grief today. Many studies suggest that supportive environments; whether at home, school, or through counseling, play an important role in helping adolescents cope with loss in healthy ways (Walker et al., 2012). Understanding these experiences is crucial because how teenagers navigate grief can affect their emotional development and how they handle challenges throughout their lives.

Coping Mechanisms during Bereavement

When people face the loss of someone important, they use different strategies to manage their pain and move forward with life. Research shows that coping mechanisms during bereavement can be either helpful or harmful, and there is no accurate way to grieve; the way of grieving depends on the bereavers, and the form they choose it to be (Larsen et al., 2025; Lund et al., 2010). Some people use active coping strategies, such as talking to friends and family about their feelings, joining support groups, or finding meaning through activities or memorial projects (Stroebe & Schut, 2015). Others might use emotion-focused coping, where they allow themselves to feel their sadness deeply and process their emotions at their own pace (Lundorff et al., 2019). Additionally, many bereaved individuals find comfort in spiritual practices, creative outlets such as writing or art, physical activity, or spending time in nature. The important matter is that these coping strategies help people feel supported and gradually adjust to their new reality without overwhelming them.

However, not all coping mechanisms are equally healthy, and research emphasizes the importance of recognizing unhelpful patterns early on. Some people turn to avoidance or denial, trying to push away their grief rather than working through it, which can lead to

prolonged suffering and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Boelen & Eisma, 2015; Smith et al., 2024). Similarly, substance abuse and risky behaviors are sometimes used to numb the pain, but these create additional problems rather than true healing. The most effective approach combines both accepting the loss and maintaining connections with others or researchers refer to as a balance between grief-oriented and restoration-oriented coping (Eisma & Nguyen, 2023). Having access to professional support, strong social networks, and culturally appropriate grief practices helps bereaved individuals find coping strategies that fit their unique needs and values, ultimately supporting their journey toward acceptance and a renewed sense of meaning.

Methodology

Qualitative Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology to understand the bereavement experiences of secondary school students who have faced pet loss. Qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring complex emotional and psychological phenomena, as it allows for an in-deep exploration of human experiences, meanings, and contexts (Creswell, 2014). This approach enables the researcher to capture the richness and nuance of adolescents' grief experiences through their own words and reflections, rather than reducing their experiences to numerical data (Patton, 1991).

The qualitative approach was chosen because it provides flexibility in data collection and allows participants to express their experiences in their own ways (Creswell, 1994; Othman Lebar, 2014). Through this methodology, the study aims to generate rich, detailed descriptions of how adolescents cope with pet loss, the emotional processes they undergo, and the meaning derive from this experience. This methodology is particularly valuable for understanding bereavement in adolescence, as it honours the complexity and individuality of each participant's grief journey.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was adopted to guide this study. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the essence and structure of lived experiences, focusing on how individuals make sense of phenomena within their own life-world. (Othman, 2013; Russell & Field-Springer, 2022). This design is well-suited for examining grief experiences, as it emphasizes the individual's perspective and the subjective meaning they construct around their loss. In this phenomenological approach, the researcher seeks to bracket personal assumptions and biases to fully attend to the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). The goal is to uncover common themes and patterns across participants' experiences while respecting the uniqueness of each individual's grief journey. Phenomenology allows the researcher to explore, not just the loss of the pets but also the way adolescents experience and interpret the loss, how it affects their daily lives, and how they cope with the bereavement (Hossain et al., 2024).

Research Instruments

Two primary instruments were used in this study, which are semi-structured interviews and reflective journaling. Firstly, semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility while maintaining consistency across participants. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to share their experiences of pet loss, their

emotional responses, the coping mechanisms they employed, and how the loss has impacted their daily functioning. The questions were carefully designed to be appropriate for adolescents and sensitive to the emotional nature of the topic. Meanwhile, reflective journaling (letter to pet) served as a complementary data collection tool, allowing participants to express their experiences and feelings in writing over time. Journaling provided participants with a private, non-threatening space to explore their grief at their own pace and in their own words (Gibbs, 1988). This method captured the evolving nature of grief as participants reflected on their experiences between interview sessions, offering deeper insights into their coping processes and emotional trajectories. Both instruments were validated by experts in the counselling field to ensure they were culturally appropriate, suitable, and capable of generating meaningful data.

Population

The study population consisted of secondary school students aged 13 to 17 years who had experienced the loss of a pet within the past six months to one year. Participants were required to be willing to share their experiences in a confidential and research-focused setting. This criterion ensured that participants were emotionally ready to discuss their loss and could engage meaningfully with the research process. The requirement for confidentiality emphasized the safe and secure nature of participation. For this study, two participants were selected through purposive sampling, by having a pre-interview with them before their recruitment into the study.

Table 3.1

Participant	Age	Gender	Type of Pet	Ownership duration	Time since pet loss	Cause of death
P1	15	Female	(Kopi) Cat	3 years	1 year	Accident with car
P2	17	Female	(Sofi) Cat	A week	1 year	Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) Virus

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to data collection, the researcher conducted a promotion by advertising research participants recruitment, and had pre-interviewed several potential participants, the intention behind this was to filter them according to the inclusion criteria. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with two participants and reflective journaling. Each semi-structured interview was conducted individually in a private setting to ensure open dialogue and safeguard participants' confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore emerging themes while maintaining consistency across participants through the use of a prepared interview guide.

Following the interviews, participants were provided with journal prompts to guide their reflective journaling. The journal prompts encouraged participants to reflect on their emotions, coping strategies, and daily experiences related to their loss, as well as any changes

in their grief over time. Participants maintained their journals independently and submitted them at agreed-upon intervals. Subsequently, a follow-up interview was conducted after the journaling period to explore any emerging themes and to allow participants to elaborate on or clarify entries from their journals. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher maintained an ethically sensitive approach, recognizing the emotional nature of the topic. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and the researcher was prepared to provide emotional support and resources, if needed.

Table 3.2

Interview Protocol

Research Objectives	Research Questions	Interview Protocol
To explore adolescents' grief experiences to pet loss,	What are the experiences of adolescents related to grief pet loss?	Tell me about your experience in losing a pet
		Can you describe your level of attachment to the pet ?
		How long have you taken care of the pet ?
To understand such loss effects on their daily lives and development	How is such loss affect their daily lives and development?	What is the most difficult part of grieving ?
		What are the challenges you faced in sharing about it with people ?
		How this loss affect you ?
To identify the coping strategies that they employed to process and adapt to that loss.	What are the coping strategies that they employed to process and adapt to that loss ?	How do you usually cope when you start to feel overwhelmed by the loss?
		What strategies or actions have helped you manage your grief?
		Who or what has been most helpful during this time?

Table 3.3

*Reflective Journal Prompt (Letter to Pet)***Letter to Pet**

Instruction: Write a letter to your deceased pet. Reflect on the special bond you shared, the memories that remain meaningful to you,

Dear,

Regards,

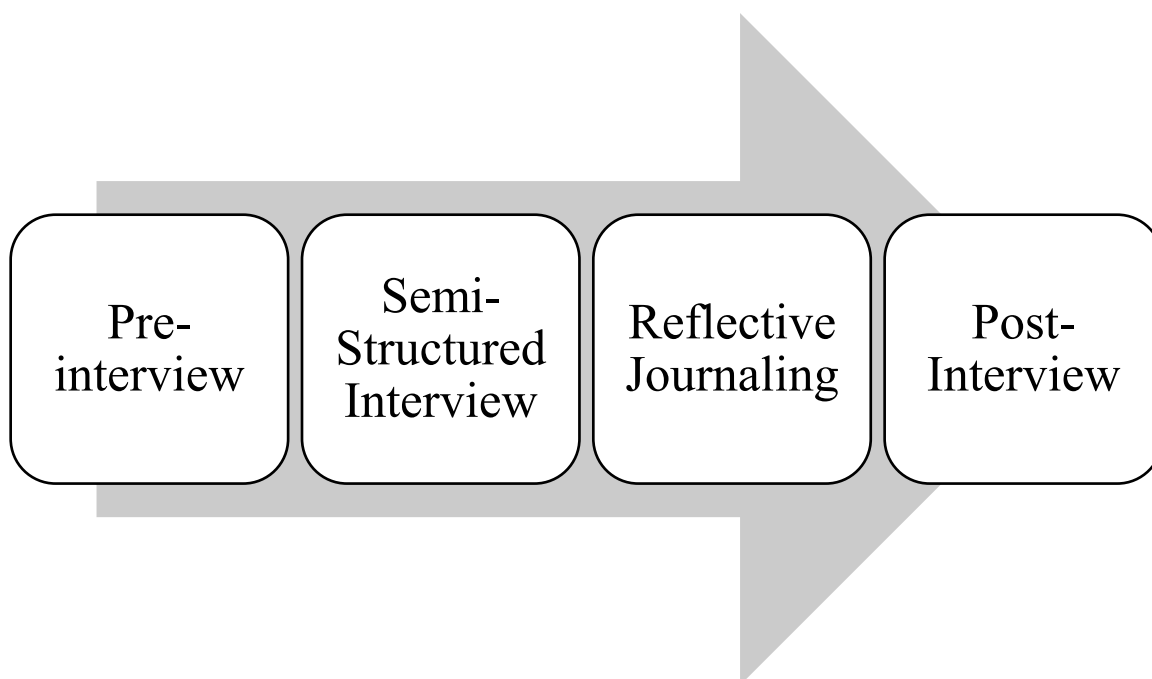


Diagram 3.1 Data Collection Procedure

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method involves a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was selected because it is flexible, accessible, and particularly well-suited for phenomenological research, while remaining rigorous and transparent. The six-phase process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) are familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally, writing the report.

The analysis process began with familiarization with the data. The researcher transcribed all audio-recorded interviews verbatim and re-read all data; including the transcripts and reflective journals, multiple times to become immersed in and familiar with the content. During this phase, initial notes were recorded regarding patterns, ideas, and themes that emerged.

In the second phase, initial codes were generated. The researcher systematically worked through the data, identifying and labeling meaningful units of text that related to the research questions. Codes were created inductively or through open-coding which derived directly from the data itself, rather than being imposed from pre-existing theories.

The third phase involved searching for themes. Initial codes were grouped together into potential themes that captured broader patterns and meanings within the data. The researcher examined how different codes related to and clustered with one another, identifying potential overarching themes that addressed the research objectives. Candidate themes were examined to ensure they represented coherent and distinct patterns within the data.

In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and refined. The researcher analyzed each candidate theme against the entire data set to ensure consistency and the themes accurately represented the data accurately. Themes that lacked sufficient data support were discarded, while themes that overlapped were combined. A thematic map was created to illustrate the relationships between themes and subthemes, providing a visual representation of the thematic structure.

The fifth phase focused on defining and naming themes. Each theme was defined and described in detail, with clear explanations of what each theme represented and how it related to the research question. Theme names were created to be concise yet descriptive of the content they represented. This phase ensured clarity and coherence in the final thematic framework.

Finally, in the sixth phase, the report was produced. The themes were illustrated with direct quotes from participant interviews and journal entries, and discussed in relation to relevant literature on adolescent bereavement and coping mechanisms. This final phase synthesized the analysis into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions and contributed to understanding how secondary school students experience and cope with pet loss.

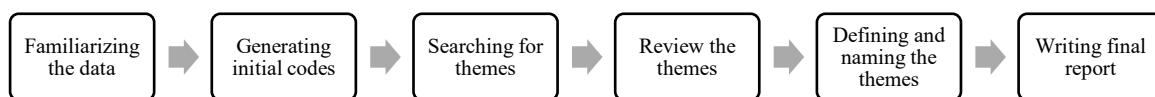


Diagram 3.2 Thematic Analysis Procedure by Braun & Clarke (2006)

Findings

The findings demonstrate that adolescents experience pet loss as a significant life event extending beyond the death of an animal companion, encompassing disruption to their identity formation and daily functioning. The analysis of interviews and journal entries from both participants (P1 and P2) revealed three core dimensions aligned with the research questions which are the significance of human-pet relationship, the physiological and psychological consequences of bereavement, and the adolescents' personal efforts to process grief through meaningful rituals despite limited social recognition.

The Significance of Human-Pet Relationship

A critical finding that challenges common assumptions is that the intensity of grief does not necessarily depend on the duration of the relationship. Although P1 cared for Kopi for three years and P2 only had a week with Sofi, both reported similar levels of devastation. For these adolescents, the pets filled a psychological space as family members or subjects that facilitates self-validation.

Pet Viewed As A Child Of Family Member

For adolescents, pets are often integrated into the family hierarchy, assuming roles similar to siblings or children. Participant 1 (P1) explicitly describes Kopi as her own child which showed the closeness between them.

"...It is like my own child..."(P1, Interview)

This familial perception is so strong that P1 rejects the societal dismissal of the loss, stating that while others say it is just a cat, P1 even notes that she raised Kopi since birth after the mother went missing, showing a strong sense of parenthood.

Deep Emotional Bond Regardless of Duration

A significant finding in this study is that the intensity of the emotional bond is not strictly dependent on the length of time the pet was owned. P1 had a long-term relationship with Kopi for three years. In contrast, Participant 2 (P2) only had Sofi for a single week before the pet died of a virus. Despite this short duration, P2 describes the loss as a very deep and very close feeling associated to the cat (Sofi)

"...We just had a short time, but I can feel the connection..."
(P2, Interview)

"...It's only been a week. I found him last Monday, and then he fell ill on Wednesday, and... in less than three days, he passed away on Friday morning around 1 a.m...."
(P2, Interview)

"...Sofi was truly a gentle cat, and I feel a strong bond between us, it is like I had only just started to get to know her yet the sense of loss runs so deep."
(P2, Interview)

P2 identifies this as a point of declaration with others who argue she did not have enough time to know the pet, yet her journal reflects a devastating sense of loss similar to a long-term companion.

"...Yes, I feel like people don't really understand They just say that sofi is new, we didn't really get to know her, but for me, even though it is only been a week, I feel very close to her."
(P2, Journal)

"...I miss you so much, every time I came home after The day you passed, you were no longer there. I used to hope to see you waiting by the door for me to return from school, but now you are gone. No more meowing, no more coming to me or stepping on me while I sleep. I miss you so much Why did you leave so soon?"
(P2, Journal)

Feeling Valued and Appreciated by the Pet

The relationship provides a unique form of unconditional emotional validation that the participants found essential. P2 expresses that Sofi made them feel appreciated and provided a sense that someone loves her.

*"...When I first met him, he was very affectionate
He would always sleep close to me and I felt
truly cherished by him..."*
(P2, Interview)

*"...With you, I feel appreciated, I feel like
someone loves me. I don't want you to leave..."*
(P2, Journal)

This emotional mutuality is also shown in P1's experience; Kopi was sensitive to P1's moods, coming close when P1 was sad and appearing to understand when P1 was happy. This suggests that the pet serves as a non-judgmental source of support and self-worth for the adolescent.

*"...When I'm sad, he comes close, even when I
smile, it's as if he knows..."*
(P1, Interview)

Daily Companionship and Routines

The significance of the relationship is most visible in the disruption of daily routines and physical presence. Both participants highlight how the pet's presence was so meaningful in their everyday lives. For example, P1 constantly expects Kopi to wait her at the door upon returning home. Similarly, P2 in her journal reveals a sense of longing to see Sofi waiting for them to return from school.

*"...When I return home, I always hope that
Kopi is waiting by the door, but now he is no
longer there..."*
(P1, Interview)

*"...I always hoped to see you
at the doorway, waiting for me to come home
from school, but now you are gone..."*
(P2, Journal)

Next, the loss is felt through the absence of specific sounds and touches. P1 misses Kopi's "voice" and the physical act of the cat coming close. Meanwhile, P2 specifically mentioned missing the sensation of Sofi when it was stepping on P2 while she slept and the habit of playing together in the afternoons.

*"...There is no sound of her meowing, she
doesn't come near me, I feel so empty..."*

(P1, Interview)

*"...No more meowing, no more coming to me
or stepping on me while I sleep, I miss you
so much..."*

(P2, Journal)

The pets provided a sense of purpose and joy. P2 notes that even in a short time, Sofi brought much happiness, while P1 feels the house is empty without Kopi's presence.

*"...Even though it was brief, it brought me so
much happiness in such a short time..."*

(P2, Journal)

"...Without him, the house feels so empty..."

(P1, Interview)

The Dimensions of Grief

The second major theme identifies the dimensions of grief, illustrating how the loss of a pet indicates as a multi-layered experience affecting the adolescent's internal world, their physical, and their social interactions.

Emotional Impacts

Both participants describe an overwhelming void left by the pet. P1 notes that without the pet, the house feels very empty, while P2 reports feeling of down and having days where they feel empty and unmotivated.

*"...It's like he is my own son, without him,
I feel so empty*

(P1, Interview)

*"...Emotionally, I feel very down. There
are days when I feel empty and lack motivation ..."*

(P2, Interview)

Next, The grief was so intense that it disrupted the participant's stability. P1 described the experience as (feeling like losing half of myself. For P2, the suddenness of the death led to a feeling of being directionless.

*"...Aaa... the hardest part of all is feeling like I've
lost half of myself..."*

(P1, Interview)

*"The night he died, I was still hoping he would recover
but he was already paralyzed, and I felt completely lost..."*

(P2, Interview)

Afterwards, the emotional weight is tied to the loss of a unique source of affection. P2's journal reveals that the pet provided a rare feeling of being appreciated and loved, making the emotional impact of the loss even more devastating.

"...With you I feel appreciated, I feel like someone loves me..."
(P2, Journal)

Physical and Cognitive Impacts

The grief extends beyond emotion, manifesting in physical symptoms and persistent cognitive memories. The stress of the loss affects the physical of the participants. P2 reports becoming more tired and suffering from significant sleep disturbances, stating she could not sleep soundly, always waking up at night. P1 also attempted to stay busy with house chores but found it only led to feeling of exhausted and an increased sense of emptiness.

"...I can't sleep at night, I will always wake up..."
(P2, Interview)

"...I tried to keep myself busy, doing chores but I feel more tired and increasingly empty..."
(P2, Interview)

Next, the participants' minds struggle to reconcile the absence of the pet. P2 experiences vivid sensory memories, writing when she was about to sleep, she would imagine Sofi next to her, or at her feet. Similarly, P1 admits to still expecting the pet to be waiting for her at the door upon returning home.

"...Sometimes when I'm about to sleep, I remember you beside me or at my feet, I can't live without you..."
(P2, Journal)

"...When I return home, I always hope Kopi is waiting by the door, but he is no longer there..."
(P1, Interview)

Not only that, grief leads to a change in social and cognitive behavior. P1 describes becoming more silent and spending time in quiet places to reflect on memories.

"...I mostly just stay quite, sometimes I go sit somewhere secluded and reflect on the times spent with Kopi..."
(P1, Interview)

Difficulties in the Grief Process

Both of the participants reported the difficulty in the grief process. P1's pet died suddenly after being hit by a car, while P2's pet died within days of being found. This leads to intense

regret over unfulfilled plans. P2 described it in her journal about wanting to buy a new cloth and vitamin for the pet.

"...Kopi, was in an accident with a car..."
(P1, Interview)

"...I want to take you to the cat grooming shop for a bath, buy you a Raya outfit and get you vitamins...."
(P2, Journal)

A significant barrier is the feeling that society does not validate their pain. P1 reports that people dismiss the loss by saying it (Kopi) was just a cat. P2 faced similar challenges, where their family viewed the pet as merely a cat that stopped by, leading to a sense of isolation in their mourning.

"...I feel like people won't understand just how heavy the loss a pet is. Sometimes people say, 'oh it is just a cat', but to me, Kopi was like a family..."
(P1, Interview)

"...My family regarded her as a visiting cat..."
(P2, Interview)

Furthermore, everyday objects become painful reminders that hinder the process. P1 finds it difficult to look at the litter box without being dwelled into the grief. P2 also mentions that looking at pictures makes the situation worse by triggering intense longing.

"...Sometimes I look at the sand in his litter box, because before he died, we had already bought all the supplies and everything..."
(P1, Interview)

"...Like I said, looking at photos of Sofi only makes things worse, I miss her so much..."
(P2, Interview)

Coping Mechanisms

Participants in this study navigated their grief through a combination of external support, symbolic physical rituals, and internal cognitive processes. These coping mechanisms were often used to counter the lack of social recognition for their loss and to maintain a continuing bond with their pets.

Support System

Both P1 and P2 relied exclusively on their mothers for emotional support. P1 highlighted that their mother provided moral support and validated their feelings by listening without

judgment. P1 also noted that talking to their mother was a way to overcome the intense longing for the pet.

*"...I only tell my mother, because she understands me.
When I speak she listens, and she never thinks I'm weird..."*
(P1, Interview)

*"...I only tell my mother, because she always gives me
support..."*
(P1, Interview)

*"...I often spend time alone and talk to my mother
to cope with missing you..."*
(P2, Journal)

Symbolic and Ritual Actions

Both participants utilized the backyard as a sacred space for mourning. They frequently visited the graves of their pets to feel their presence. P1 described a sense of the pet watching over them while they were at the grave.

*"...I often visit your grave at the backyard
I feel that you are always there..."*
(P1, Journal)

"...I always visit her grave, at the backyard..."
(P2, Interview)

Furthermore, in a symbolic act of ending the rescue attempt, P1 chose to bury the pet's medications alongside Kopi because the sight of the unused medicine was too painful and served as a reminder of a not worthy and fruitless effort to save Kopi.

*"...I buried your medication along with you because
I couldn't bear to look at it, I was heartbroken that my efforts
to save you were in vain. I had prayed so earnestly for your survival
but he loved you more..."*
(P1, Journal)

Writing served as a powerful coping for both adolescents to express the unspoken words. P2 used their journal to talk to the pet about unfulfilled plans, such as buying new clothes or "vitamins. P1 used the journal to promise the pet they would meet again in the afterlife".

"...There are still so many things I want to do with you..."
(P2, Journal)

*"...Thank you Kopi, for being here, I will meet
you again in the hereafter, and I hope you appear in another*

form in this world..."

(P1, Journal)

Spiritual Coping Strategies

P1 engaged in "meaning-making" by reframing the loss as a lesson to appreciate time with loved ones. P2 coped by intentionally reflecting on the happiness the pet brought, even if the duration of their time together was short.

"...Yes, I think I appreciate the present moment more before this, I always thought I'd have more time with Kopi but now I've learned to cherish the time I have with the people I love..."

(P1, Interview)

"...Whenever I feel deeply sad, I sit for a moment and reflect on all the memories I shared with Sofi even though our time together was short, she brought joy and happiness..."

(P2, Interview)

Next, they adopted spiritual coping in the mechanisms where both participants relied on spiritual beliefs for comfort. P2 used prayer as a strategy to manage sadness. Both expressed a hope for reunion, with P1 believing she would see the pet in the afterlife and P2 praying for the pet to come in her dreams so they could play together again.

"...I pray and if I miss him, I look at photos..."

(P1, Interview)

"...I hope you come to me in my dreams so we can play together a little longer, I always pray to God, send you back to me only for a brief moment..."

(P2, Journal)

Social Challenges

The social challenges faced by participants experiencing pet loss are characterized by a disconnection between their emotional reality and the recognition of their grief. According to the sources, these challenges manifest in three ways which are disenfranchised grief, perceived lack of empathy from others, and difficulty sharing grief beyond family.

Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief occurs when a person's loss is not socially validated or acknowledged as legitimate. In these cases, the adolescents viewed their pets as family or even as a child, yet society failed to honor that status.

"...He is like my own child..."

(P1, Interview)

"...Kopi is a family..."

(P1, Interview)

Participants reported that others often dismissed their pain with phrases like "it is just a cat"

*"...Yes, I never tell anyone, no one understand
they will tell me to be patient and 'it is just a cat' ..."*

(P1, Interview)

Meanwhile, for P2, the grief was further disenfranchised because the rest of the family viewed the pet merely as a cat that just stopped by, rather than a permanent member of the household.

This lack of acknowledgment makes the P2 feel her grief as exaggerated in the eyes of others.

"...Sofi is just visiting, they said..."

(P2, Interview)

Perceived Lack of Empathy from Others

P2 experienced a specific lack of empathy regarding the length of time she spent with the pet. She stated that people would say, she would not know Sofi (the pet) deeply, since it came in a short duration. This dismissal ignores the fact that P2 felt a very deep sense of loss despite only having the pet for a week.

*"...I feel like people don't really understand,
they said Sofi is new, there hasn't been time to get to
know her well..."*

(P2, Interview)

"...I feel sad and empty..."

(P2, Interview)

"...I got no direction..."

(P2, Interview)

In addition, both participants expressed a strong belief that people will never understand this; the weight of losing a pet. This perception creates a barrier to seeking support, as the participants feel their emotional depth is being met with social indifference.

*"...I've never really talked about it much to anyone
else. Because I feel like people wouldn't understand
how heavy the loss of a pet is..."*

(P1, Interview)

"...It is difficult to say, no one understand..."

(P2, Interview)

Difficulty sharing grief beyond family

P1 chose to stay more silent and avoided talking to others because she felt people would not understand the loss. This led to a pattern of sitting in quiet places to reflect alone rather than seeking external comfort.

*“...I spent my time alone, no one understand,
it is better to be like this...”
(P1, Interview)*

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that for adolescents, the death of a pet triggers a complex grief response that perfectly mirrors Rubin (1999) Two-Track Model of Bereavement. On Track I, we see a significant impact on the participants' biopsychosocial functioning; they aren't just sad, but they are physically and cognitively drained. For instance, P2 reported becoming more tired and suffered from sleep disturbances, where she often waking up in the middle of the night. Similarly, P1 exhibited signs of cognitive withdrawal, describing a tendency to stay silent and sit in quiet places to reflect. This shows that the loss isn't just an emotional event but a functional one that temporarily paralyzes the adolescent's ability to engage with their normal routines.

At the same time, Track II of Rubin's model which is the relationship with the deceased described where the depth of this attachment becomes clear. The grief is not defined by the length of the relationship but by the familial status assigned to the pet. P1 explicitly viewed Kopi as her own child, having raised him since birth. Even P2, who only had Sofi for one week, described a bond so deep that they felt appreciated and loved in a way that made the sudden loss feel like losing a lifelong companion. This relational track explains why the grief is so intense where the adolescent is not just losing a pet, they are losing a primary source of unconditional emotional validation.

As the relation to the Continuing Bonds Theory by Klass et al. (1996) which argues that healthy grief involves maintaining a connection rather than seeking a closure after loss. Instead of detaching, these adolescents actively created a new type of relationship with their pets. This is proven in their symbolic and ritual actions. Both participants frequently visit the graves of their pets in their backyards to feel their presence. For example, P1 even engaged in a poignant act of closure by burying Kopi's medications with him, symbolically ending the rescue effort while keeping the pet's memory physically close to home.

The continuing bond is also maintained through sensory memories and spiritual dialogues. For instance, P2's journal entries are not just reflections, those are active conversations where the participant admits to still imaging the presence of Sofi; feeling the cat's phantom presence at their feet while sleeping. Furthermore, by writing, "I miss kissing you", P2 maintains the emotional intimacy of the bond. Similarly, P1 finds peace in the hope of a spiritual reunion, promising to meet Kopi again in the afterlife. These internal cognitive strategies allow the adolescent to carry the pet with them into their future, rather than leaving the relationship in the past.

The successful navigation of these two tracks is often hindered by social invalidation, or disenfranchised grief. Society's tendency to label the loss as illegitimate because it involved a cat forces the adolescent to rely heavily on a very scarce support system. As an example, for both participants, their mother was the only one who provided the moral support and validation necessary to bridge the gap between their functional struggle (Track I) and their ongoing emotional bond (Track II) (Rubin, 1999). Without this validation, the continuing bond might have felt awkward, weird or shameful, but through their mother's support, these adolescents were able to integrate the loss into their lives as a meaningful, albeit painful, life lesson in appreciation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that for adolescents, the loss of a pet is an experience that mirrors the death of a human family member in both intensity and complexity. By viewing the narratives of Participant 1 and Participant 2, it is proven that the nature of the attachment is the primary driver of the grief response. Crucially, the findings challenge the common assumption that grief is proportional to the duration of the relationship; even a bond formed in a single week can lead to a state of being lost and emotionally devastated. This study also noted that a great barrier that hinders the process is the disenfranchised grief. The societal dismissal of their pain as being "just about a cat" forces adolescents into social isolation, leaving them with few outlets to process their trauma. Future research is recommended to explore on this issue more thoroughly by doing it in the form of quantitative research to assess to which extent the pet bereavement affects adolescents in various aspects.

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