



## Research

# The death and owning of the companion dog: Association between resource loss and stress in healthy Israeli women



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## ABSTRACT

Dog owners often regard their dogs as family members that provide companionship and feelings of security and of being loved. The loss of a dog may be experienced as a stressful life event and lead to bereavement. The aim of this study was to explore the contribution of a Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to the understanding of the effects pet dogs might have on their healthy adult owners' stress. We performed a cross-sectional study of 110 current dog owners and 103 bereaved owners, all females. Veterinarians from 48 private clinics from central Israel referred the researchers to owners who euthanized their pet dogs in 1-month period. The control group included owners who had lived with the dogs for more than 2 years. Based on the COR theory, 2 new instruments to measure resource losses and gains of owners were assembled. The level of stress was assessed by the Perceived Stress and the Somatic Complaints scales. Stress was stronger for bereaved owners (statistically significant). In multivariate regression, for current owners, the factors correlated with stress were: number of cigarettes, performing or not performing sports activity in previous 2 weeks, and dog-related losses. For bereaved owners, the factors that correlated with stress were number of cigarettes and losses owing to a dog's death. The findings of the study supported the hypothesis that stress among bereaved owners is higher than that among the current owners. It seems that the death of a dog is a stressful life event.

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## Introduction

Pet owners are highly attached to their animals (Lewis et al., 2009). Dogs seem to be especially valued, and their owners have a qualitatively different relationship with their dogs than do owners of other pets (Siegel, 1990). Dogs have a lifespan of about 15 years, much shorter than their owners. This means that their owners frequently face loss. The loss of a pet may be very stressful to the owner (Adams et al., 2000; Barker, 1989; Rosenberg, 1981), whether these deaths were caused by euthanasia, accident, or by the progress of illness (Fogle and Abrahamson, 1990). The longer one has a pet, the greater the attachment can become (Hancock and Yates, 1989; Kurdek, 2008), and this strong attachment may provoke a distress reaction on a pet's death. Many people grieve for their pets

in much the same way as they do for the deaths of their friends (Shirley and Mercier, 1983). Families are known to experience a range of emotions in response on the loss of animal, such as a deep sense of sadness, grieving, crying, and even depression (Adrian et al., 2009; Kolodny, 1991; Nieburg and Fischer, 1982). In extreme cases, the mourning resulted in hospitalization for psychiatric treatment (Keddie, 1977), although the percentage of people expressing major pathological reactions is relatively low—5%–12% (Adrian et al., 2009). The attachment to pets and the strong reactions to their death suggest that a pet can be viewed as an important resource for its owner and that the pet's death signifies resource loss. Resource loss is the main precursor of stress, according to the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1988; 1989; 2001).

This study explores for the first time the contribution of a COR stress etiology theory (Hobfoll, 1988; 1989; 2001) to the understanding of the effects pet dogs might have on their healthy adult owners' stress. The COR is a comprehensive theory of stress based on the central tenet that people strive to obtain, build, and protect that they value (resources). Resources are divided into

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4 categories, although some resources may be depicted in more than 1 category. The basic categories of resources are objects—material things; conditions—social structures and circumstances, which apply to an individual group or community; personal characteristics—divided into 2 subgroups, namely personal traits and skills; and energies—resources that are useful only in that they may be exchanged or used to obtain or protect resources. The advantage of the COR theory is that it highlights the objective attributes of events and circumstances, rather than their perceptions. The COR theory posits that the objective effect on resources underlies the process of stress, and that the people's perception of these resources further influences their reactions. According to Hobfoll's theory, stress levels can be affected not only by resource losses associated with the stressful event but also by the level and kind of resource gained in this process. Resource gain in the case of the death of a loved one, including pets, has not been investigated yet. It could be argued that when a dog dies, the owner may shed some of the physical burdens associated with caring for a pet and gain more time for leisure activities, save money previously spent on dog food and veterinarian services, and have fewer problems of cleanliness at home; gains that may alleviate some of the stress experienced after the loss of a pet.

We define a pet as a significant pool of resources. Some authors have written about the need to obtain a new pet after the loss of their own to minimize the emotional distress, resolve the grief, and create happiness in the future (Hancock and Yates, 1989). This can be viewed as a suggestion to replace one lost resource with similar resources (live pets).

## Materials and methods

### Study participants

Participants were recruited from central and southern Israel. Only female owners participated in the study. We excluded persons with disabilities, as the innovative focus of this study was healthy adults, and we therefore also excluded those who defined themselves as ill. Persons who received a psychological or medical health owing to the post-traumatic stress disorder or other psychological distresses were excluded from the study. We also excluded people who owned a dog for business purposes (with pedigrees from the Israel Dogs Association). The reason for this decision is that dogs raised for profit often live outside the owners' home, in special kennels, sometimes even tended by special staff. In such cases, the pets' effects and the effect of pets' loss on owners' stress would be different from those who live with their owners who also tend to them.

### Bereaved owners

As it is impossible to find all persons who have lost their dogs, we included only those for whom we could ascertain the date of the dogs' death. All the veterinarians in the center and south of Israel were visited personally by the researcher and asked to assist in locating owners of euthanized dogs and to obtain their consent to participate in the research. Those veterinarians who agreed to assist gave a short written explanation of the study to all owners of euthanized dogs. Veterinarians from 48 small private clinics were involved in this study. We contacted the veterinarians weekly to obtain phone numbers of the dog owners who had euthanized their dogs during the past week and had consented to participate in the study. Owners were interviewed at home not later than 4 weeks since the euthanasia. The exclusion criteria for this group were loss of communication with the owner for any reason and taking on a new dog in the period since the dog's death, before the researcher's visit.

### Current owners

For this group, we contacted healthy adult owners of live dogs who had owned their dogs for more than 2 years. We found several participants by using personal contacts; additional participants were located with the help of the veterinarians. The exclusion criterion for this group was losing a pet within the 2 years preceding contact with the researchers, even if another pet remained in the household.

According to the calculation of minimal sample size, we obtained 110 completed questionnaires of current owners, and 103 questionnaires of bereaved owners.

### Compilation of new questionnaires

Based on the COR theory and on the results of our previous qualitative study (Tzivian et al., 2014), we assembled 2 new instruments to measure resource losses and gains of current and bereaved owners. We assumed that valued objects and feelings that bereaved owners lose when the dog dies are the same or similar to the objects and feelings that current owners gain while taking care of their live dogs. Expressed in COR terms, the loss of a pet may have positive resource gains (advantages), for example, having more spare time, a cleaner environment, and reduced costs. On the other hand, caring and being responsible for a dog may entail resource losses (disadvantages) such as a restriction of spare and leisure time and increased food and health care costs. We assumed that the objects and feelings that bereaved owners gain when the dog dies are the same or similar to the objects and feelings that current owners lose while taking care of their live dogs and vice versa. For example, when a bereaved owner reports that he or she has lost companionship, a current owner is likely to report that raising a dog has gained him or her companionship. Similarly, when a current owner reports that he has lost free time and is unable to travel abroad, a bereaved owner may report that he has gained more free time and is now able to travel more.

Each measure (for current and bereaved owners) contains 28 items. In both measures, each item was rated on a 5-point scale (1—Not at all and 5—Fully accept). The items tap 3 of 4 groups of resources according to Hobfoll's theory: physical (time and space), conditional (finances) and emotional, or energies (feeling of loneliness or friendship). In the first exploratory study (Tzivian et al., 2014), we did not obtain the personal traits (e.g., positive outlook, self-esteem, or sense of mastery) or skills (skilled occupation) that were lost owing to the death of the companion dog. For that reason, we did not include personal characteristics, the fourth category of resources (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989, 2001) to the proposed measure. The analysis of the results of the measures was performed as follows: we calculated the reliability of resource gains and losses measures and after that we performed principal component factor analysis of these measures. We performed reliability analysis twice. First, we calculated reliability with a minimal sample for this kind of analysis: 120 women—60 of whom were bereaved and 60 who were current owners, and then after collecting the questionnaires from the entire study population (103 bereaved and 110 current owners). For each group of answers, we constructed the index variable that is calculated like a sum of all suitable items divided by the number of questions that were actually answered. For the current owners group, losses are the index of owners' losses and gains indicate the index of owners' gains; for bereaved owners, losses show the index of losses owing to the death of the dog and gains show the index of gains owing to the death of the dog.

### Stress measurements

Stress was assessed by 2 measures, namely the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the Somatic Complaints (SC) scale.

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