



Human Support in Veterinary Settings*

Human support professionals can help a practice with the sometimes difficult situations that arise when clients are faced with emotional and/or psychological aspects of life with their pet. Veterinary practices generally handle these well on a daily basis. However, there are times when additional expertise could help to share the time burden of these issues. Three different levels of support are described and resources to accomplish these levels are provided.

Human Social Support Recommendations Summary

Level of Human Support	What Services	Who Provides
Minimum	Local and national resources	Anyone in the practice
Medium	Pet loss support Referral and counseling Appropriate employee assistance program (EAP) services	Contracted human support professional serving a practice, groups of practices, or a local association
Maximum	Pet loss support/euthanasia support and decision making Communication coaching Referral and short-term counseling	Onsite human support professional

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Appendix A

Building Community Partnership with Animal-Friendly Human Support Professionals

This document explains training and certification that a human support professional should have for independent practice.

- A good partnership balances skills and personal traits. First the veterinarian and staff must think about what services the human support professional will provide. Will this professional facilitate a pet loss support group, help clients make decisions about their pet, or offer stress management care for staff? That decision will guide you to an appropriate provider.
- Comfort level is a personal decision. If the veterinary team finds it easy to talk with this person about human-animal relationships, the pain caused by their loss, and the strong feelings about other issues that may be triggered by recent events, chances are clients will too. Sometimes the hardest part is knowing where to look for the right person. There are many terms for a master's level human support professional for veterinary practices. A good partner might be called a pet loss counselor, human-animal bond expert, veterinary social worker, or any federally recognized term for mental health providers, such as psychologist or marriage and family therapist.
- Along with the experience of pet loss, veterinary consumers sometimes bring personal issues or problems that are outside the scope of veterinary training. While veterinary teams often provide social support to their clientele, social support is not the same as the professional guidance, such as counseling and crisis intervention, that is sometimes necessary when life becomes overwhelming. It is important that veterinary teams know how to locate and recommend appropriately trained and licensed human support professionals when clients require additional help.
- Human support professionals specialize in working with individuals and families to enhance cognitive and emotional well-being, as well as diagnosing and treating conditions that impair that well-being. Many human support professionals choose to specialize in particular issues, such as "grief and loss," "crisis intervention," "family issues," or "general practice."
- While each human support profession has its own credentials, states regulate the practice of those professions. Generally human support professionals are licensed to practice in their state of residence and are bound by a Code of Ethics. This Code ensures that care will be skilled and that clients' rights will be protected.
- The table on the following page explains the similarities and differences between the many types of human support professionals.

Similarities and Differences Between Types of Human Support Professionals*

	Required Education	Expertise	National Organization
Psychology	Master's or doctorate degrees	Psychological testing; mental health assessment and treatment	American Psychological Association locator.apa.org
Social Work	Bachelor's, master's or doctorate degrees; license to practice will reflect clinical or generalist specialty	With advanced degree/clinical licensure: Mental health assessment, treatment, case management; systems perspective	National Association of Social Workers naswdc.org helpstartshere.org
Marriage and Family Therapy	Master's or doctorate degree	Mental health assessment and treatment; family systems perspective	American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy aamft.org therapistlocator.net
Psychiatry	MD degree and 4+ years of advanced clinical training	Medical and psychiatric evaluations, treatment of psychiatric disorders, prescribing medication	American Psychiatric Association healthyminds.org
Psychiatric Nursing	Bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degrees; license to practice that reflects specialty	Assess/treat psychiatric disorders, case management, psychotherapy; in some states, they are also able to prescribe and monitor medications.	American Psychiatric Nurses Association apna.org
Counseling	Master's degree plus 2 years of clinical experience	With licensure: Mental health assessment and treatment	National Board for Certified Counselors nbcc.org
Employee Assistance Professional	EAP professionals must meet minimum standards of mental health training and pass a national certification exam	APs help staff work through personal issues that may affect professional performance and personal well being; these professionals are usually retained by the employer to provide staff with confidential assessment, short-term counseling, and referral	Employee Assistance Professionals Association eapassn.org

*Information derived from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) and The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

The Federal government has designated psychiatry, psychology, social work, marriage and family therapy, and psychiatric nursing as core mental health professions.

To locate human support professionals in your community who are both animal-friendly and available to support veterinary consumers' needs, consider the following steps:

- Ask other veterinarians if they know of useful community resources. You may also wish to contact your state's veterinary organization, which may know of human support professionals who have been involved in veterinary education, training, and/or outreach.
- Check with national organizations that organize and represent each of the human support professionals named above. Many of these organizations provide online search engines to locate professionals by state, city, and specialty.
- Ask your neighbors, friends, or long-time clients if they know of counselors and community resources that are "animal friendly."
- Check the local Yellow Pages listings or online. The most successful search comes from knowing exactly what kind of service you are looking for, such as "crisis hotline," "domestic violence services," or "social services."
- The United Way maintains a social services/mental health referral database that is available in 80% of communities nationwide. This service, called 2-1-1, can be used by anyone who enters those digits into their phone. This is a good number to have handy for all clients.

If your goal is to have a short list of community resources available for clients, making a brief phone call to ensure service availability and fees (some pet loss groups are free and others charge) may be all that is required. If, however, you are looking to retain the services of a human support professional onsite and/or on call, conduct a brief interview with a potential partner to make sure you feel comfortable referring your clients to her/him. The following questions will be helpful to ensure compatibility:

- How long have you been in practice?
- What are your credentials?
- What populations do you work with? (For example, families, children, couples, people with disabilities, the elderly)
- What issues have you worked with? (Look for grief and loss, stress, depression, anxiety)
- What special training have you received? (Training in grief and loss, stress, compassion fatigue, trauma, and treatment of animal abusers may be helpful)
- How do you feel about animals personally? (Find someone who has a view about the human-animal bond that matches or complements you and your practice)
- What are your thoughts, opinions, and feelings about euthanasia in the veterinary setting?
- What are your thoughts, opinions, and feelings about animal hospice in the veterinary setting?

Appendix B

How to Make a Referral for Counseling

People who may benefit by talking with a human support professional outside of the veterinary practice do not always express themselves in ways that indicate such a referral is warranted and/or appropriate. In some cases, people are extremely upset about a beloved pet's medical circumstances and they choose not to accompany the pet to the veterinary practice for this very reason, so a proxy is recruited (another family member, friend, etc.) for this part of their pet's care. Knowing this dynamic occurs reinforces the value of giving printed information that clients can take home that can be shared with others that veterinary staff never meet.

When

It is appropriate for a member of the veterinary team to make a compassionate, personal suggestion when:

- Client shows intense emotional reaction (sobbing, screaming, shaking, rocking, rage, talk of suicide) to diagnosis, changes, or death.
- Client has prolonged difficulty making decisions or will not make a decision, appears highly anxious, and/or asks that the same medical information be reviewed repeatedly.
- Client's life situation puts her/him at risk, for example, other recent loss(es), lives alone, and/or indicates that he/she has little social/emotional support aside from that provided by his/her animal(s).

How

- Suggest counseling to client in low-key way:
- “Mr. Green, this is a hard decision to make. Sometimes it helps to bounce ideas off someone you feel understands what you're going through. We have referrals to counselors who really love animals and who other clients of ours have appreciated talking with. I'll give you this information to take home.”
- “Ms. Jones, I know that Max's death has hit you pretty hard. That's natural, and it's a common reaction for people when they lose a pet that was as important as Max was—and always will be—to you in your life. You were together a long time, and he was a member of your family/your child—as you always called him (use descriptions/terms the client uses). There is a pet loss support group, where people who are in the same situation get together and talk. The basic information about the group is in our brochure and on our website. (Emphasize that it is free if this is the case.) Let me find out when the next meeting is.”
- Give the client printed information.
- Put referral information in a condolence card signed by the veterinary team.

Appendix C

Minimum Human Support Resources Worksheet

Complete the following worksheet questions to meet minimum standards for human social support:

1. My local Police Department number is: _____
For emergencies call 911
2. My local Animal Control number is: _____
3. My local Public Health Department number is: _____
4. Counselors available for support:

Name _____
Professional Credentials _____
Address _____
Phone _____
Session Fee _____
Insurance _____

Name _____
Professional Credentials _____
Address _____
Phone _____
Session Fee _____
Insurance _____

Name _____
Professional Credentials _____
Address _____
Phone _____
Session Fee _____
Insurance _____

5. Religious leaders available to perform ceremonies for animal-related issues:

Note: It is important to clarify that the religious leader is sensitive to the human-animal bond. Having leaders from several faith traditions represented in your area is a good idea. Additionally pastoral counseling that a client may need is a very personal relationship the client has with the client's own religious leader.

Name _____
Faith Tradition _____
Address _____
Phone _____

Name _____
Faith Tradition _____
Address _____
Phone _____

Name _____
Faith Tradition _____
Address _____
Phone _____

6. My state Child Protective Services hotline is: _____

7. My state Adult Protective Services hotline is: _____

8. My local domestic violence shelter number is: _____
National DV Hotline number is 1-800-799-SAFE

9. My local mobile crisis hotline number is: _____
National Suicide Hotline number is: 1-800-SUICIDE

10. My local sexual assault center is: _____
National Sexual Assault hotline number is 1-800-656-HOPE

11. The United Way Social Services/Mental Health Referral database is: 2-1-1.
These national numbers are a good resource for finding out what is in your area.

Appendix D

Medium Human Support Resources Worksheet

ADD to the Minimum Human Social Support Resources Worksheet:

The Employee Assistance Program number available for our employees is: _____

Our Employee Assistance Program benefits include: _____

Appendix E

Human Support Professional-Client Relationship Clarification Worksheet

When retaining the services of a human support professional, clarify and come to an agreement about answers to the following questions before services are commenced.

Note: Sometimes the interests of the groups identified below are in opposition to each other. If the human support professional is offering services to more than one group he/she needs to clearly describe to the satisfaction of the veterinarian how the human support professional will handle and resolve opposing interests. The veterinarian and the human support professional should then come to an agreement about this process and/or approach before services are offered.

1. Who will be the clients of the human support professional? More than one may apply.

Veterinary Services Consumers _____

Veterinary Technologists, Technicians, and Assistants _____

Veterinary Staff _____

Veterinarians _____

2. What services are to be offered to the identified client groups?

Veterinary Services Consumers _____

Veterinary Technologists, Technicians, and Assistants _____

Veterinary Staff _____

Veterinarians _____

3. Ask the human support professional to explain in detail:

- What their professional Code of Ethics states about conflicts of interest and dual (multiple) relationships.
- How they plan to ensure adherence to their ethical code in offering the stated services to the client group(s) above.