



EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Reflections of a First-Time Pet Hospice Caregiver Through the Lens of the Human-Animal Bond

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ABSTRACT

My beloved cat Peaches received a cancer diagnosis in June 2023. I consciously decided not to pursue curative treatments since the cancer was found in an advanced state; and I subsequently became her sole hospice caregiver until her death in November 2023.

This Editorial chronicles the strength of our human-animal bond (HAB), how that bond was tested in the face of a life-limiting diagnosis, and how it shaped my decision making throughout Peaches' hospice journey.

Introduction

When a beloved companion pet is facing an earth-shattering diagnosis or prognosis, there is tremendous strain on the caregiver. The HAB is challenged, and the caregiver may compensate and cope by devoting physical, emotional, and financial resources beyond their means to their companion.

Peaches was the recipient of my “on the fly” hospice care. I do not recommend this method to any caregiver. The reality was I did not know what pet hospice was or how to provide it, but I believed it was a better pathway for Peaches than pursuing chemotherapy (which was the only “curative treatment” we were offered). I grasped at every straw of information I gathered from her oncologist and my personal research. I grew frustrated at the lack of pet hospice resources available to us. I did not have pet insurance. Our HAB was incredibly strong, and therefore, I based her care around the “her before me” mindset even though I could feel myself being depleted. My sleeping, eating, and personal care routines were drastically altered. It was as if Peaches and I had morphed into one being, and my entire non-working existence became completely devoted to her. I knew our days together in the physical sense were numbered, so every moment became more precious and worth losing sleep over.

I felt that there would be time for me to “catch up” and “refill my cup” once I reluctantly gave up my caregiving title, but “catching up” is not what happened. When I left the animal hospital on that day without Peaches, I crashed. I was moving so fast for four months and then was forced to stop short. I could not immediately comprehend that Peaches was no longer here as a physical being. Since her passing, I have taken time to reflect and reframe our relationship; and I have come to understand that the HAB transcends death.

Editorial

Peaches was diagnosed with advanced small cell Gastrointestinal Lymphoma in June 2023 following

diagnostics and emergency surgery. I became reliant on her oncologist, social media groups, and late-night internet research for information and guidance. Choosing hospice meant she would be leaving me sooner, but I hoped it was the kindest way to give her the dignified and least stressful end of life she deserved.

My HAB with Peaches was extremely strong, which is why I decided to adopt her after 1 year of fostering. Peaches and I were together for a total of about 2.5 years. Having the strong HAB is a blessing and a curse in my opinion. The symbiotic relationship is structured as such that when you accept all the benefits you also must accept the burdens. I did not know her backstory when I took her in as a foster, or how she landed in a shelter, but I promised her a soft landing in my care, and I strived so hard to keep that promise.

I found through my role as a caretaker during Peaches’ hospice journey that the “warm and fuzzy” benefits of having a strong HAB are severely challenged. There was a “push-pull” of emotions and physiological responses that I was experiencing from her time of diagnosis to her last day and continue to experience over 2 years later. Peaches relied on me as her only end-of-life caretaker – it was an overwhelming weight I had just inherited and spurred a spectrum of emotional and physical changes that I reluctantly faced alone.

My blood pressure and pulse rate would escalate on the drive to each oncologist checkup appointment, partially because Peaches did not like car rides and partially because the checkups were not as helpful as I hoped. While I did not experience judgement from Peaches’ oncologist for declining chemotherapy, I became extremely frustrated at the lack of communication regarding the end-of-life stage as it pertains to palliative/hospice care for both patient and caretaker. This frustration manifested in me preparing detailed questions before each checkup, pressing for answers, and holding back my urge to project my frustration verbally when I didn’t receive

the information I desperately needed to be prepared as her condition deteriorated. This particularly came into play when the symptom that arose on her last day was not anticipated and triggered intense emotions that influenced my decision making and my perception of her suffering.

Privately at home I struggled with the stress and anxiety of trying to understand Peaches' cancer and the palliative care path forward that aligned with my views and values on her quality-of-life. Then came lack of sleep from late night research and adjusting to Peaches' changes in sleeping cycles as her condition progressed. Our previous routines were replaced with new ones, which eventually led to no routines. I watched her intensely, noting anything new on her quality-of-life calendar. I questioned and judged every action I made (or didn't make). I played out scenarios in my head. I talked softly to Peaches as she accepted gentle pets and let her know I was doing the best I could. I cried. I wanted to scream. I wanted help and did not know where to turn. As the months went on, there was a growing sadness in acknowledging her lack of interest in playing with her toys or her finding hiding places in the apartment. We were taking it day by day. My anticipatory grief was intensifying.

And yet, I discovered unexpected joy in the sadness of our hospice journey. My mindset shifted from "she's dying of cancer" to "she's living with cancer." I was able to soak in the moments where her and I shared cuddles and time spent just "being." Those times where she would still look at me with her soft eyes and all seemed right with the world. I relished when I could update her quality-of-life calendar with positive comments. I found the strength to be grateful for the days when she was "herself" or looked at peace sitting in a sunny patch on the rug, even though she was hiding. I was accepting the reality of our situation.

My thoughts on best practices that the veterinary community could employ include the following:

1. Engaging with pet parents in compassionate end-of-life conversations at the onset of diagnosis, including non-curative care options/referrals for hospice/palliative care.
2. Recognizing how the HAB influences the pet parent's decision making regarding the companion animal's care plan, and responding in a compassionate manner.
3. Encouraging pet parents to ask questions and to be engaged in the care plan.
4. Recognizing and acknowledging the seriousness of caregiver burden, and providing referrals for caregiver support if it is not available in-house.

Conclusion

I have been reflecting since Peaches' hospice-supported euthanasia in 2023. Her passing unfortunately did not follow the path I had hoped for her, and that continues to trigger strong emotions. The preciousness of our HAB would never allow her to endure suffering, and therefore I had to find the strength to release her from her ailing body in an unplanned manner, knowing that it would be exceptionally devastating for me. It was always Peaches before me. I did not know any other way to do it, but I learned the hard way there are limits in solo caretaking. Since our HAB was so strong, I invested so much in her care, and now she was no longer in need of my caretaking. My job was done but I did not feel relieved. I held her in my lap for an extended period after her death because I desperately did not want to let her go, although I knew her spirit had already exited. I find solace in knowing that Peaches loved me unconditionally despite my stumbles along the way. I cherish our mutual love as I continue to heal and grieve for her passing.

I acknowledge Peaches' veterinary technician for recognizing my body language and inquiring at each oncology appointment how I was feeling and my quantity of sleep. I will never forget her compassion and kindness to both of us. The hospice journey with Peaches was life-changing,

and I know these lessons and her spirit will guide me as I share her story and advocate for readily accessible pet hospice resources.

Definitions:

HAB = Human-Animal Bond

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The Sole Author declares that AI was not used in the preparation of this commentary.

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The Author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethics Statement:

The Author confirms that all relevant guidelines were followed in the preparation and submission of this Editorial.