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## Practice Report

### The Winding Valley of Grief: When a Dog Guide Retires or Dies

*Katherine Standish Schneider*

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Two organizations that may be helpful to grieving dog guide owners are Service Dog Committee of Association for Pet Loss Bereavement, <[www.aplb.org](http://www.aplb.org)>, and Empathizers Committee of Guide Dog Users International, <[www.gdui.org](http://www.gdui.org)>.

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C. S. Lewis (1976, p. 5) described grief as a "winding valley"  
--time passes, the grief changes, but it is not a straightforward working through of the stages. Lewis was describing his own grief at the death of his wife, but the analogy holds well for the grief experienced by dog guide users at the retirement or deaths of their dogs.

Schools that train dog guides work hard to help their

clients bond with their new partners, but during the initial training, little is said about the other end of the process, for example, when it is time to say good-bye. When people return for subsequent dogs, a grief group or individual counseling may be offered, but the focus remains on moving forward. There are helpful books, (Nieburg & Fischer, 1982; Sife, 1998), articles, hotlines, and even an association of counselors (the Association for Pet Loss Bereavement) that can be of help when one loses a beloved pet. However, the situation is different for people who are visually impaired because the dog guide is so much more than a pet, the owner is at an emotional low, and the owner's sensitivities can distort the most well-meaning comments or consolations. A thorough review of the professional literature revealed only one article (Nicholson, Kemp-Wheeler, & Griffiths, 1995) and one master's degree thesis (Contreres, 2003) about the retirement and death of dog guides. When one considers that there are about 7,000 working dog guide teams in the United States (Lighthouse International, 2003), there is an obvious gap in the literature. These thoughts are offered to guide practitioners in the field of visual impairment in their interactions with owners of dog guides. They are based on my 30 years of experience working with six dog guides and the experiences of friends; this is not a research study, and healing grief is certainly a personal matter.

### **Three good-byes**

There are three different good-byes in the loss of a dog guide. They are the decision-making good-bye, the working relationship good-bye, and the good-bye of death.

As a dog guide ages, his or her work changes. The teamwork is honed to the point where the owner may swear that the dog and the human read each other's minds. This wonderful smooth partnership can last for years, but, unfortunately, it does not last forever. The owner begins to notice changes in work; for example, the dog's walking pace slows down, and the dog needs more encouragement to do tasks and may indicate that he or she does not want to leap over the next snowdrift or do another difficult job. The owner consults the veterinarian for a thorough physical, but a fixable reason for the slowing down may not be found.

Sometimes the owner notices the problem six months before the veterinarian does in a physical examination or a laboratory test. Then the owner may begin to second-guess himself or herself: How bad is it? Do two good days in a row mean that the dog guide does not really need to retire? When the teamwork is going well, it seems extra sweet. It is a sweetness tinged with sadness, like a late summer day when one knows that fall and winter are coming.

Eventually, there is a sign, for example a close crossing or a reluctance to do something formerly enjoyed, that moves the owner into the "when" and "how" questions. At this point, the focus needs to be on what is best for

the dog guide. Most of the dog's life has been focused on the owner's needs. If the dog retires in the owner's home, would it bother him or her to see the owner go off with some new young thing? What kind of alternate home might the dog like--one with just adults, with children, or with other animals? Can such a home be found in the owner's circle of acquaintances, rescue groups, or the training school, or do the local media need to be contacted to increase the pool of potential adopters? When can the owner get away from home for three weeks to train with a new dog, and when can the training school fit in the owner and the new dog guide? In addition to all the necessary arrangements, the emotional work of grieving also needs to be done.

When I decided to retire my first Seeing Eye dog, I stuttered for the eight months between the decision and the retirement day. I have never stuttered before or since. Some owners mark the occasion with a retirement party. At first, such a party may seem morbid, but it can be a grand celebration of a working relationship. It can allow people who are important parts of the owner's life, and have a bond with the dog, to say good-bye to the dog and to offer social support to the owner.

Another part of getting ready for the working-relationship good-bye may be to visit the dog's future home several times and let the new owners feed the dog, take walks with the dog, and ask all the questions they need to. Written notes about the dog's habits,

health care needs, and quirks--similar to the puppy profile given at the training school when a new dog is assigned to an owner--can be helpful. Then it is time to pack a bag with the dog's favorite toys and get a ride with the beloved dog guide to his or her new home. For some people, a clean break and not knowing how the dog is doing may be best, but others may want to keep in touch with the dog's new family.

The days or weeks between dogs may seem unreal, with feelings that part of one is missing. The transition can be draining. For professionals who work with dog guide owners who are going through the retirement of their dog guides, here are a few tips:

- Be honest. If you see problems in the dog's work, be as honest and as specific as you can about your concern. Say "I notice that..." rather than "Don't you think your dog is getting too old to work?"
- Do not avoid the subject. "How are you doing with the transition?" or "How can I help?" are welcome offers. You do not have to know what to say. Just letting the person know that you are open to hearing about his or her grief and concerns will allow him or her to reminisce and cry.
- When the person comes home with their new dog guide, a simple "Welcome back; anything I can do to help?" is a good greeting. It is better than questions like "How's it going?" or "Which dog do you like better?" particularly when the person

is trying to work with the new dog. Remind others that this is a new and young dog, and we were once all new and young.

When the retired dog guide dies or needs to be euthanized, the owner may grieve again and may make a memorial contribution to the school that trained the dog in the dog's honor or help pay the final veterinary bill. If a dog guide dies or has to retire before many years of work, normal grief reactions may be complicated by guilt, shock, and anger.

When the owner is between dog guides, his or her self-esteem, sense of safety, comfort in moving around, and joy in facing a new day may be decreased markedly. Spending time with friends during this period helps, but people should not ask the "Where's your dog? What happened?" kind of questions if they are only casual acquaintances. If a person is in the kind of relationship with the dog guide owner in which he or she would discuss divorce or the death of a family member, then he or she may be close enough for the owner to discuss the dog's retirement or death.

## **Healing**

After walking down the winding valley of grief five times so far in 30 years of dog guide ownership, I have learned some lessons. First, good healing grief is possible. The more actively one lets oneself grieve, the less likely one is to take it out on the next dog in some

second-dog-syndrome comparison. The human heart is big, and there is room for each dog to have his or her place in it. Each dog is a favorite in his or her own way.

Second, other people can help by accompanying the dog guide owner through the grieving process. They may be friends, relatives, members of a service dog electronic discussion group, classmates or staff at the training school, a veterinarian, or a caring counselor. It is not what they say but that they show up and care that matters.

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***Katherine Standish Schneider, Ph.D., a retired clinical psychologist, is currently working with her sixth Seeing Eye dog, Garlyn. She can be reached by e-mail: <[schneiks@uwec.edu](mailto:schneiks@uwec.edu)>.***

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