

Pet Loss Counseling: Finding the Right Counselor to Guide You

A Special Interview With Ann Beyke

By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Dr. Karen Becker:

I'm Dr. Karen Becker. And I'm so thankful that Ann Beyke is here joining me for our Pet [Grief] Awareness Week. She is the Pet Loss Counselor. And she's joining me to cover some really important questions. So thank you, Ann, so much for taking time for this interview. And I appreciate you joining me to share your expertise.

Ann Beyke:

You're welcome. I appreciate the opportunity to be here.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So Ann, tell our listeners and readers a little bit about how you became the Pet Loss Counselor. And that is actually the name of your website, PetLossCounselor.com. But undoubtedly, there's a backstory to how and why you decided to, to take on this line of work and really make it your passion.

Ann Beyke:

There is, Dr. Becker, I have a Master's in Counseling, and I have had animal companions most of my life. And early in the 2000s, it was about 2006 or so, I had a Golden Retriever who had been rehomed with me from the time – she was about 2 and a half when she came to me. And she was at the end of her life, I was in the bereavement stage, I was grieving the loss of her, I knew she was going to, soon, pass. And I looked at her one day.

Ann Beyke:

And I realized that I was well, of course, very overcome by the thought of losing her, but also the fact that I was going to be in this deep grief and sorrow. And I knew that I was surrounded by a lot of people who could help support me in that. But I asked myself, “What about all of those folks who are grieving, who don't have anywhere to turn?” And at that moment, she gave me this incredible gift of knowing that I should help others as they're going through their loss.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Yeah. Beautiful, beautiful, and what a wonderful way to really honor her life and legacy going forward. It's wonderful. So I have to assume that as you started talking to people about this is kind of the direction that you would like your career to at least be enhanced by, you started getting phone calls and emails with people saying, "Hey, I'm struggling." And what I have found is that a lot of my clients feel that their grief is unjustified compared to, let's say, a human and so they don't even really want to talk to me about it. And yet, we know that isn't true, we know that the loss of anything that we love can be as monumental and that you know, putting, calibrating what species we feel most intense about is impossible, irrelevant and really doesn't hold up. And yet so many people have concerns about facing their grief, but also then getting appropriate help for their grief. And can you just speak to that for a minute about like, do you have people contact you with apprehensions? They're reaching out because they know they need it, but maybe they don't feel comfortable?

Ann Beyke:

Absolutely. And one of the reasons for that is that our society still tells us that we should just get over it. And we should just go adopt another dog or another cat. And we should be through it fast. And the fact of the matter is, is that we're not. Our feelings are deep. They're real. They're genuine, they oftentimes overcome us. And so what I hear is that people will say, "Well, I'm not even-" it's almost embarrassing, sometimes, for people to call me and say, "I think I need help."

Ann Beyke:

You know, people tell me, "I should be over this." And that's a big stumbling block for a lot of folks is to get to that point where they say, "It's okay to contact a counselor," and maybe I won't have sessions with them. Maybe I'll spend a little bit of time, maybe I'll give them other resources on what they can do. But just having that moment to talk to someone to know that it is okay. That what you're feeling is real, and you've reached out, and that's sometimes the first step in that healing process.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And so when you – I have been through a lot. In fact, I have grief counselors on speed dial because my job is intensely painful, emotionally, very hard. You know, we were the only people in the world that literally have a license to euthanize and it's a tremendous burden that our profession bears.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So I am very cognizant of my emotional well-being and my health and I do everything I can to keep myself in a place of feeling good. For people that maybe have never sought out counseling, or have never talked to a counselor, or maybe in my situation, my dear friend just went through loss, and he happens to be a male. And he was raised being told that, you know, men are strong, and that women may need counseling, which is a little bit was – he said that to me, and I was, to be honest, I was offended initially.

Dr. Karen Becker:

But I do think that, generally speaking, women tend to be more open to talking about their emotions, and men may not be. When would you say, as a professional, do humans, all of us kids, male, female, all of us, when do we realize that our pain is enough for us that we don't want to feel this way? And with people that may have never gone through the counseling process, if you were going to speak to a person who has lost an animal at any point, I was going to say recently, but oftentimes, I have had people that have lost an animal 10 years ago, and they're still in overwhelming pain. When do we need to start thinking about the fact that talking to someone isn't a sign of weakness; it's a sign of healing. When should that process begin?

Ann Beyke:

Well, perhaps for some folks, it's when they realize that they're overcome with grief. And maybe they can't function anymore. They're spending a lot of time just crying and being depressed and not being able to function on a regular basis than not being able to go through the regular routine. And that's pretty normal when we have a loss. We do strange things, I always talk about it, it being the putting the orange juice in the cabinet, instead of the refrigerator, because you just aren't in the same place that you normally are if you don't have a loss.

Ann Beyke:

So reaching out, if you have that gut feeling that you need to see someone, then listen to that gut feeling and reach out whether it's maybe you've already talked to friends, maybe you haven't talked to friends, maybe you've had experience in the counseling setting. And you know what that's like, then it may be time to reach out to someone. And there are a lot of resources out there. So I really encourage people to tap into those.

Ann Beyke:

But also, just know that that is the first step in your healing process. If it's nagging at you, “Oh, I really should see a counselor,” then see a counselor, talk to a counselor, maybe you don't have a lot of sessions, maybe it's just one or two to get you through that initial period of being on the right track. And when I say being on the right track, grief is not linear. It's a wave. It really is a

wave. We all know that we have two days forward. And one day back. Two steps forward, we're feeling good today. And then we wake up and we're back a step or two.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. And for people who wake up and are feeling pretty good. A common thing I hear, Ann, is they have guilt about feeling good even. And so one of the questions I have for you, as a professional, is that I just recently listened to a podcast and I heard someone say, "You'll know that you have made progress with your grief if you can talk about your trauma without crying, without a without an emotional response that prevents you from moving forward."

Dr. Karen Becker:

And I thought, you know, if that's the definition, I still cry a lot about past situations. So that definition doesn't hold for me. But I do totally understand the premise that if we think a thought about our loved one that has transitioned and if we're stuck then in pain, or if we can't move forward, or if every day we wake up feeling okay, and then we have a thought about our loved one and we go back into our dark hole. That's a cue for me, as a layperson, that you're not at a place that is conducive to living your life in a way that your animal would even want you to and that's a sign right there.

Ann Beyke:

It is and everyone's different, for sure. And what you talk about is still having that grief and still crying, I do, too have all of my animal companions, I still have those moments. But it's not that deep, overwhelming, consuming grief that we might have had when we first lost our pet. So definitions might differ. And my definition is that every person is different in their grief. But if you get to that point where you absolutely are unable to function anymore, and it's affecting every aspect of your life, then it really is time to think about going into counseling and calling a counselor at least.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, yeah. And what are your thoughts about being matched to the right counselor? I asked that because my next question is going to be, how can a counselor help us grieving humans with the loss of an animal companion? But before we get to how counselors can help, how do we go about finding a counselor that resonates with us? And I ask that because when I very first recognized that I was stuck, I was opening my animal hospital, and I had just put Gemini to sleep and it was 30 days apart, and I was stuck, literally incapacitated, and I knew I needed help.

But the first two counselors I called to try and explain my situation, “I'm a veterinarian, I do this for a living, but I just euthanize my soulmate. It's not going well,” they did not support me in a way that was for me good. They're like, “Oh, my goodness, you're a professional with this.” It was almost like my grief was minimized. Because I was supposed to have better coping skills, which I clearly didn't have, because I was like, incapacitated. That response was really upsetting, in fact, Ann, that was almost enough for me to say, “You know what? I'm not sure. I'm going to find a counselor that can help me.” If you are mismatched with the person that you've talked to, that has to be a common sequela for people thinking, “Oh, my gosh, all counselors are ineffective.” That has to be why “I can't be the only person thinking maybe this isn't for me.”

Ann Beyke:

You're not the only person thinking that because certainly not every counselor is skilled to do everything out there I do exclusively pet loss and bereavement counseling, although I'm working with clients who have other kinds of needs that we can work through on a short-term basis. And if I'm not capable of doing that, then I refer them out.

Ann Beyke:

But not every counselor is skilled in this, not every counselor is going to have an animal companion and will have experienced that. So one of the things that I suggest people do is counselors have to be licensed in each of the states. So one of the things that people can do is go to the go to Psychology Today, which has a listing of counselors in states, not every counselor is listed on that. But that might be a good place to start.

Ann Beyke:

I always say to people, “Well, look for counselors that might have a picture of themselves with their, with their pet, with their animal companion.” So you know, right there, that they probably get that and they probably understand loss. So that's a good place to go. And I am really sorry that those experiences that you have had that first couple of folks who you talked to who were counselors had no knowledge of what to do, of where to go, that “You're a professional and you should be able to work through this, right?” But no, not every counselor is skilled to be able to do that.

Ann Beyke:

So just like everything else, we don't find a match for a doctor right away. We don't find a match for a dentist or any other professional in our life. They don't always click with us. We don't always click with them.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yep.

Ann Beyke:

So keep looking and ask for folks ask for referrals go to your local humane society or ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) and ask if they have a listing of counselors. There's an Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement, APLB.org. And that will be up on your screen later. As a resource, a great resource and they have counselors listed throughout the states. And that's the best place to start keep looking, if you've never had experience working with the counselor before and your first call to someone about your pet loss doesn't go so well. Don't stop there.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yep. I think that's really important advice. And you're right, just as it takes us time for us to figure out other health care professionals for our physical bodies, it takes the same type of discernment in sorting and evaluation and kind of working through the process of finding someone to care for our emotional and psychological well-being to partner with that person that you feel comfortable partnering with.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So I do think it's really important that you find someone that you resonate with, just in terms of a working dynamic, but also that they have experience specifically dealing with pet loss. And that was something that – my first experience, what I realized is the people that I went to were incredibly qualified for maybe like other types of pain and PTSD and issues, and they're amazing at divorce or relationship stress. They're amazing in other ways, but pet loss, not their forte. And as you mentioned, we can't be good at everything.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So my best advice, Healthy Pets listeners, readers, subscribers, is to definitely seek out someone who states on their website, or that when you go to do a review of them, that they specifically have experience or a passion for pet grief loss and bereavement, because it's very different from other types of loss and bereavement, in my opinion, and you need someone that has kind of honed those skills for this particular overwhelming trauma.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So I love the fact that you've basically dedicated your career, pivoting, after you had loss and recognizing what a really important job you're serving in doing. So let's talk a little bit, Ann, about how can a counselor help guide hurting people through their pain? Like, what happens if people are listening to this and think, "Well, I never thought about that." But you're talking about some points that are hitting home. How does this work?

Ann Beyke:

Sometimes it's a matter of listening. So I listened to what has happened. I might ask some questions. And those might be some things that people have never really thought about before during their loss. "What happens when? How have you thought about going about your day after your loss? What changes have you made? What's your routine like?"

Ann Beyke:

We talk about a lot of things, we talk about self-care, too, which is incredibly important for folks, as they're going through their loss. Are they making sure that they're taking care of themselves? Are they eating right? Are they drinking lots of water? Exercise is a really big one that I talked to folks about. If they have a regular exercise routine, don't abandon that now, because that is really important to help our bodies feel better. And then consequently, our mental health too.

Ann Beyke:

So we talk about all of those things. Sleep patterns, really, really an issue. We talk about just depression, have they had a history of depression? I talk about those initially. And if you had a history of depression, this may really spiral you into a deeper depression. Are you taking medications? Are you making sure that you take your medications? Is it time for a medication change? Just those basic kinds of things that might really affect us as we're going through this loss.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Yep. And Ann, have you had the experience, when people contact you, do they ask you questions like, "How many sessions are appropriate?" Because I think a lot of people assume that there should be some defining period that you'll grieve and then you'll get over it. Or like people, I think, oftentimes assume, "Okay, is this a one-month or three-month or six-month-" Can you talk a little bit about how everyone's situation is very different and timeframes for counseling?

Ann Beyke:

It is true, everybody is different. And as I said, everyone I talk to might not necessarily end up working with me in a therapeutic situation. A lot of times clients will come to me and we'll have a session or two, and that gets them on the right track of just giving them some tools to know what they need to do and taking care of themselves.

Ann Beyke:

They may contact me again later and say, "You know what, I'm still having a little bit of an issue here. Can you help me get through this rough patch?" It's an anniversary. It's the one-year anniversary, or it's that just whatever it might be that they feel like might trigger a deeper sense of loss. So everybody is different. I sometimes work with folks who, after a session or two, we uncover some other kinds of things. So that loss of their animal companion triggers other losses that were maybe unresolved.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yup.

Ann Beyke:

Maybe a loss of a previous animal companion, maybe the loss of a parent, a sibling, a dear friend. And I have to tell you that during the pandemic, it's been so huge, because people have had so many losses. And if you're at home with your pet, and say, you're the only one at home and your pet is with you all the time, you're working remotely, or you're retired or what have you, you just don't have your regular routine. You've got that loss. And it's so huge.

Ann Beyke:

So we may find that we need a little bit more than one session or two. It just all depends. Everyone is so different in their needs. And we talk about that. And we talk about leaving that open, that that there's no really, I'm not going to tell them when they call me that you'll need five sessions, and you'll be okay.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Exactly.

Ann Beyke:

Because I don't know that. And they don't either. It's a discovery.

Dr. Karen Becker:

It's a total discovery. And I also think just when I reflect on my own kind of evolution, working through grief, not only does it come in waves, but I can be good for six months, and then just usually triggered by something, I realized that I'm I am overwhelmingly sad again about a particular instance. But what has been beneficial for me is helping to identify, first of all, what triggers me, really helpful.

Dr. Karen Becker:

So I can either see it coming or no, I'm in kind of a vulnerable period, like you said, anniversaries, birthdays, those things are sensitive to me. So recognizing what your triggers are, but also letting yourself off the hook for there to be a time frame. So if you talk to a professional, and you get to a place of feeling like, "Okay, I'm doing okay," taking a month off or you know, seeing how things go is A-OK, but it's also A-OK to call your counselor back and say, "I don't know quite what I'm feeling, but I'm not feeling as good as I was." It's okay to talk about where you're at. I think the key is to be honest about what we're feeling and where we're at.

Ann Beyke:

I always hope that the counseling therapeutic situation starts off on a very open and honest note. Because moving forward, then, is I don't want to say it's easier, but you've already established those kinds of things. And I want to make certain that folks have the ability to call me back if they're in a difficult situation. A lot of times what will happen is they will just send me a quick email and say, "Is this normal?"

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Ann Beyke:

Like you said, anniversaries. What's a trigger? Sometimes we don't know what our triggers will be. For me, personally, and this happened to me this morning, I was out walking and I saw a dog who very much reminded me of a sweet dog that I had adopted from, I will say I was a failed foster. I fostered this dog from an animal welfare organization I was working with at the time.

And she was she was going to be euthanized. But I fostered her and ended up adopting her but I saw this dog this morning and it really triggered me. And I had feelings of sadness, but also feelings of happiness about how she just brought me so much joy and she was such a ray of sunshine in my life. So we just never know.

Ann Beyke:

Think of some things before you go to see your counselor on what you want, and what you need in that relationship or from that relationship, how you're going to work together. So talk about those things from the start. Get those out on the table. And again if you you're new to counseling, you may not know where to start, but be honest about that, too. And a counselor who is skilled and working with folks who have had a loss, they'll be able to meet you.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah.

Ann Beyke:

And walk with you on this journey.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, that probably, for me, is one of the best as a grieving pet parents to other grieving parents. That's one of the best pieces of reassurance that I would suggest that you make just as we have chiropractic for our own physical well-being, we have a maybe a chiropractor, or a nutritionist, and a GP and you know, we have a podiatrist and we have a dermatologist, all these people caring for our bodies, finding someone who will help care for our emotional well-being, finding a professional partner that you really trust and that you can be honest with and that you can be open with and that you resonate with the information that they're giving you, that is one of those lifelong pieces that you can move to your toolbox, your well-being toolbox that you just need to call on just as you would if you throw your back or neck out and you want to go see your acupuncturist or physical therapist, when you have something, when you're when you're emotionally thrown out of whack having someone on speed dial, in my opinion is one of the best gifts we can give ourselves. Yeah.

Ann Beyke:

If we're always thinking about that too. Just as we prepare for the loss of our animal companion, we often don't think about, "Do we want to bring that in to do a home euthanasia? Are we going

to have our animal companion cremated?” Those kinds of things. And those are other things that I talk with someone who is anticipating, was in anticipatory bereavement, they're anticipating the loss, we talk about those kinds of things because it makes our grieving process, our mourning process, it's never easy. But we have already made those arrangements.

Ann Beyke:

And so when you talk about having a counselor on speed dial, as we have a pet who is aging, even maybe when we first get a pet, get yourself familiar with this field, and counselors who might be in it. Just a note that many years ago, and I've been doing this since 2006. So for about 15 years now, close to close to 16. I did an interview with a local magazine. And I had someone call me three years after that interview because they said they pulled that article out of the magazine and kept it. So they were thinking about that. And what she told me was, “I knew that someday I was going to need this.”

Ann Beyke:

So I would say that if you have the opportunity to start to get acquainted with counselors, and if you are in a therapeutic session now, therapeutic relationship, I should say, ask your counselor do they do that? My guess is, is that if you're working with a counselor now or therapist, that they know that you have pets, they know you have animal companions, they probably know how important they are to you because it's come up during the sessions. So ask them are they able to work with you when you have this loss?

Dr. Karen Becker:

That's a really good tip too. And my hope would be that let's say you have a great therapist that you have been in relationship with, that you've worked through a divorce or, or something else with, if they don't feel qualified, or what I would say is if you aren't getting the information or the advice or suggestions that resonate with you about that particular topic, it is A-OK to have two therapists. It's A-OK to have three therapists. Just as we have a whole health care team for the rest of our bodies, it's okay to have a designated person for to help you with pet loss specifically and that's kind of their sole relationship with you, is a professional friend for this purpose only and it's okay.

Ann Beyke:

And that is absolutely right. There are some folks I'm working with who see other counselors also because those counselors are skilled in a particular area that I am not skilled in and this is what I do.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah, it's really good and Ann, we're so thankful that you do what you do. So if people wanted to learn more about you and your services or pet loss in general, would you talk a little bit about where people can find you or some of the resources available on your website?

Ann Beyke:

Sure, www.PetLossCounselor.com. And that will give you a little bit of background about me and how I moved into this particular area and why it's important to me. And also, if you want to, again, if you want to know a little bit more about counselors, you want to find a counselor, go to Psychology Today.

Ann Beyke:

Also a really great resource is the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement, www.APLB.org, they have a wealth of information, there are so many books out there that will help you in your loss. When I first had my loss, there was a little book out there. This was in the '80s, and I didn't understand how I felt I just knew that I was overwhelmed, there was a little book that I went to, and I mean, it was a little book.

Ann Beyke:

And now there are many, many more books that you can get that will help you in your loss. And thank goodness, there's a better understanding of it. And there's more help available. Those are three good resources to go to. If someone wants to contact me they can do so, Ann@petlosscounselor.com.

Ann Beyke:

And I would say reach out also to your local organizations. If you are in a town where there's a humane society, even if you're not, just tap into those and see what they might have on their website, HSUS (Humane Society of the United States), ASPCA, go to their websites and see what they might have in terms of loss. There's a wealth of information out there.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Yeah. Thankfully, I am, I am so thankful that in the last 20 years, this topic has moved from sidelines to front and center because animals fill a space in our lives that is irreplaceable. I mean

humans know any other relationship that is magnificent and meaningful and life-changing, we're thankful for. But animals, specifically, fill a part of our souls that nothing else can. And I'm so thankful that we can have counselors dedicated and committed to helping us through our grief process when those animals transition because it's very different from other types of loss and other types of grief.

Dr. Karen Becker:

And having counselors trained to be able to help us through this most difficult time is, I think, one of the very best things that have happened in the last 20 years when it comes to pet parents moving through their grief and getting to a place where they are able to live with their grief in without the grief causing a lack of production or a shift in their life to a negative vantage point. And so I'm so thankful for the depth and breadth of professionals books, resources, websites, conferences, available to all of us who recognize how very important animals are in our life. I'm just so thankful that this is available. I'm also appreciative of you taking time today to talk with us. Ann, if people would like to get in contact with you, you can visit her website. Ann, do you do Skype or Zoom calls this way? Or telephone?

Ann Beyke:

I do phone sessions.

Dr. Karen Becker:

Okay, wonderful. And Okay, excellent. So, thank you so much for your commitment to helping people feel better. Thank you so much for everything that you do, and we appreciate your time today.

Ann Beyke:

Thank you for inviting me, Dr. Becker. And thank you for understanding the importance of this topic.