

Closeness at the End of Life

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The End of Life Within the Social Structure of Animals



Dying animals are virtually absent from philatelic material. Shown here is a vignette—an advertisement for a travel account by Sven Hedin (Denmark, around 1940).

almost exploratory, often repeated. Sometimes individual animals remain at the same place for hours or even days, even when no response occurs. Reports from zoos and wildlife reserves describe scenes in which elephants surround a fallen, very old member of the group, touching it, yet—unlike in earlier incidents—not attempting to help it to its feet. As if the situation possessed a different quality. Such moments resemble a pause, a suspension of usual behavior. Whether they can be interpreted as a “ritual” remains open—but they clearly testify to social bonds and attentiveness.^{32;33;34}

Observations in great apes appear similarly moving. Female Chimpanzees or Bonobos sometimes carry their dead infants with them for days or even weeks. They set the bodies down, pick them up again, and continue caregiving behaviors such as grooming or warding off



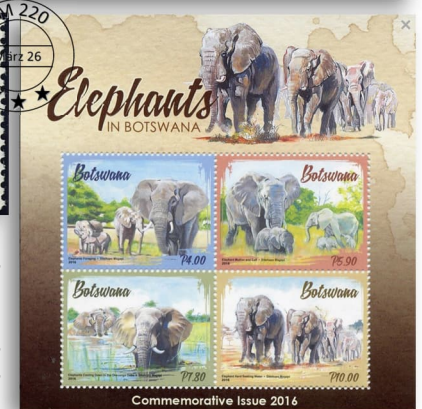
Social Behaviour in Chimpanzees (Polen 2018)

When an animal dies, death does not remain a neutral event. It alters movements, distances, and rhythms. Groups may draw closer together or remain in one place for unusually long periods. The loss of a social partner leaves traces—in behavior, in attention, and sometimes even in measurable physiological parameters. Death, even in the animal world, is a social process.

Observations of Elephants are particularly striking. It has repeatedly been described how herds gather around dying or dead conspecifics. The animals approach slowly, touching the body with their trunks—especially the head, tusks, and mouth. Their movements are gentle,



Studies conducted in zoos and in the wild have shown that Elephants have a highly developed social life (Germany – AFS 1991; Uganda – FDC 1983; East Germany – 1956; Botswana – souvenir sheet 2016).



insects, even though no response occurs. Only clear physical changes in the body eventually bring this behavior to an end. In individual documented cases, group members repeatedly sought out the dying individual, touched it gently, or remained in its vicinity. Here,

³²DOUGLAS-HAMILTON, I. et al. (2006): Behavioural reactions of elephants towards a dying and deceased matriarch. – *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 100: 87–102.

³³McCOMB, K.; BAKER, L.; MOSS, C. (2006): African elephants show high levels of interest in the skulls and ivory of their own species. – *Biology Letters* 2: 26–28

³⁴KING, B. J. (2013): *How Animals Grieve*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

too, the question arises: is this grief? Uncertainty? Or the gradual comprehension of an irreversible state? Science remains cautious. Yet the social significance of the event is unmistakable.^{35 36}



Wolves and Dolphins live in close social groups. They cooperate, communicate in differentiated ways, and show care even toward elderly or dying members of their group. This social intelligence not only makes them highly successful social animals, but also forms the basis for animal-assisted therapy with humans (Romania 2015; Israel 2009; Penrhyn 2020; Romania 2022).

In Dolphins, situations have repeatedly been observed in which several individuals support a weakened or dead conspecific at the water's surface. Some position themselves beneath the body to help lift it for breathing. This behavior can continue for hours, even when no independent movement occurs. The group reduces its speed and remains nearby. It is unclear whether a sustained rescue impulse is at work here, or a bonding response that does

not immediately "resolve" the loss. Similarly, in Wolf packs, injured animals often remain part of the group. The pace is adjusted, food is left nearby or shared, and physical contact during resting phases is intensified. Only when an individual can no longer keep up over time does the group dynamic begin to change.

Such observations invite comparisons with human end-of-life care. Proximity, touch, remaining with the weakened individual—the outward forms appear similar. And yet it would be reductive to speak of "palliative medicine" in the animal kingdom. Animal responses are based on evolutionarily embedded social patterns and are immediately situation-bound. They do not presuppose abstract knowledge of incurability, nor a conscious decision to cease curative efforts. Human palliative medicine, by contrast, is the result of a reflective shift in goals: when cure is no longer possible, the relief of suffering comes to the fore, coupled with the commitment to respect dignity and self-determination.



Auch Paviane sind hoch soziale Tiere und der Tod eines Artgenossen stresst sie biologisch ähnlich wie uns Menschen (Postkarte, Tschechien 2022)

³⁵ ANDERSON, J. R. (2011): A primatological perspective on death. – *American Journal of Primatology* 73: 410–414.

³⁶ LONSDORF, E. V. et al. (2020): Why chimpanzees carry dead infants: an empirical assessment. – *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 375.

In this contrast, however, a significant commonality becomes apparent. The loss of close social partners has demonstrable biological consequences. A widely cited study of wild Baboons in the Okavango Delta showed that females exhibited elevated glucocorticoid levels for weeks after the violent death of closely associated group members. This stress was not merely an expression of acute danger, but a response to social loss. At the same time, the affected animals increasingly sought contact with other females; intensive grooming had a stress-regulating effect. Social integration thus proved to be a protective factor, while isolation was associated with increased strain.^{37,38} This pattern is familiar from human medicine as well: in humans, social support likewise reduces physiological stress and strengthens resilience.



While, in the process of dying, proximity, remaining present, and not abandoning the individual are important both in humans and in some animals, death in humans in particular sets in motion distinct social processes. These include the writing of condolence cards—often with mourning stamps—and the organization of funerals as collective ways of coping with and coming to terms with loss (Austria 1992; Hong Kong 2014; Spain 1993; Liechtenstein personalized stamps 2020; mourning telegram East Germany 1990; postcard—painting of the funeral of a small farmer, Scotland, circulated, year unknown, publisher: GD & D).

Whether animal responses may be described as “grief” remains a matter of terminology. There is a fine line between anthropomorphism and sober behavioral biology. Emotional terms can be illuminating, but also misleading. What is scientifically established, however, is this: the death of a conspecific is not a neutral disappearance for many social animals. It triggers attention, altered interaction, and in some cases sustained physiological responses. It is socially relevant.

Perhaps this is where the true point of contact lies. Proximity, remaining present, not abandoning a weakened individual—these behaviors are not exclusively cultural achievements. They are rooted in sociality itself. Humans have developed from this fundamental structure a distinct practice: a medicine that not only cures, but accompanies; that does not regard death as a failure, but as part of life requiring care.

Between the probing trunk of an Elephant, gently stroking the body of a deceased conspecific, and the hand of a human being held at a bedside, there lies a fundamental difference—and yet also a quiet continuity. The difference consists in knowledge, reflection, and ethical decision-making. The continuity lies in remaining.

Death ends individual life. Socially, however, it sets processes in motion: bonds be-

come visible, relationships are reorganized, and closeness gains significance. Palliative medicine is the culturally shaped human response to this experience. Its origins, however, lie deeper—in that fundamental social reaction to vulnerability that we share with many other living beings.

³⁷ ENGH, A. L. et al. (2006): Behavioural and hormonal responses to predation in female chacma baboons (*Papio hamadryas ursinus*). – *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 273: 707–713.
³⁸ ARCHIE, E. A. et al. (2014): Social affiliation matters: both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships predict survival in wild female baboons. – *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* 281.