

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF A PET

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THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

Your bond with your companion animal is special. Your companion animal may have many roles in your life. Your pet may be like a child, a parent or a best friend. Because your pet takes on these identities, it is natural for you to relate to him or her as you would to a person. You may talk to and believe that your pet understands and empathizes with our emotions. Over time, you may become very attached to your companion animal, and the strength of that attachment can, at times, equal or exceed the caring feelings you have for another person. Because you develop such a deep emotional bond to your pet and derive so much pleasure from the companionship provided, you will invariably experience feelings of loss and grief upon illness or death of your special friend.

GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A PET

Whenever a relationship with a loved one changes, whether due to illness, death or another kind of loss, we experience feeling of grief. Grieving is a necessary, unavoidable, and health response to the anticipation or actual experience of loss. Each of us experiences grief in a different way.

Grieving takes time. It is a process, not an event. There is no specific time frame for this process. In fact, grief may last for weeks, months or even years. Healthy grief, however, gradually lessens in intensity over time.

Many people do not understand the overwhelming feelings of grief prompted by the illness or death of a companion animal. During the grieving process, you may experience sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, helplessness, shock or depression. Physical sensation may include crying, hollowness in the stomach, tightness in the chest and throat, weak muscles, a dry mouth, appetite and sleep disturbances, and fatigue.

After the loss of your companion animal, it is common to be preoccupied with memories and thoughts of your pet and to even imagine that he or she is still alive. All of these reaction are common, healthy parts of the normal grief process. Some of us experience many of these responses; others experience a few. Just remember there is no right way or wrong way to grieve—only your way.

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is one of the most normal and natural emotions that we can feel; yet it is one of the most misunderstood. Grief is a normal, and unavoidable reaction to the loss of a treasured loved one. Because grief often involves very painful and difficult feelings, most of us think that grief is wrong or crazy in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. Grief is a very healthy psychological response that requires expression and acknowledgement. Attempts to suppress feelings of grief can sometimes actually prolong the healing process.

Our discomfort with grief comes from a variety of sources, but can often be traced back to how our own families have dealt with loss, and how society in general responds to a bereaved person. Unfortunately, many of the responses we hear reinforce the notion that grief is unnatural and perpetuate the myths that grief should be avoided and expressed only behind closed doors. Society tends to reward the more unhealthy responses (stoicism and avoidance) while punishing the more healthy ones (expression and acceptance). Some common responses we hear when a death occurs are as follows:

Try to stay busy	Big boys don't cry.
No sense dwelling in the past.	You must be strong right now.
Support groups are for weaklings.	Out of sight, out of mind.
He had a good life.	Think of all your good memories.
Your still have other pets.	Count your blessings.
God needs him more than you do.	He was just a pet, it wasn't like losing a person.
If you look around you can always find someone who is worse off than yourself.	

These responses suggest to us that we should not feel badly about our losses. They encourage us to avoid our feelings and put pressure on us to get over the loss as soon as possible. Grief just doesn't work that way and cannot be put onto a time schedule. Everyone grieves in their own time and in their own way, and creating artificial deadlines or expecting grief to disappear overnight only creates more stress for the bereaved person.

These responses also minimize the griever's pain and do not acknowledge the loss that the griever feels. They also suggest to us that we have no right to be upset or distressed about the loss. These kind of responses can make a griever feel guilty or ashamed about being upset and reinforce the notion that grieving is wrong.

Other common responses like....life goes on, you'll find new pets to love or just go out and get yourself another pet suggest that loved ones are easily and readily replaced. They tell the griever to handle the pain by replacing the loss and forgetting the past. The notion of replacing a loss as a way of handling the grief comes to many of us from a very early age. Many of us can probably recall from childhood losing a favorite toy or beloved object and being told "don't feel bad, we'll buy you a new one tomorrow." Responses like these minimize and complicate the griever's pain by insinuating that the loss was relatively unimportant and should be fixed by replacement.

Given that our society promotes many of these myths about grief, it is important to remember that a grieving person needs acknowledgement, validation, and support. One of the best ways to deal with our grief is to understand that it is normal and to not make any judgments about our emotions. There are times when we can handle these feelings with the support of family and friends, and there are other times where professional assistance may be very helpful. There are many professional counselors, therapists, and members of the clergy trained in the areas of loss and grief who can provide assistance through the grieving process. There are also many books, articles and other resources about grief process available in most public libraries and local bookstores. [See the handout on Pet Loss Resources and Recommended Reading for Pet Loss for more information]

MANIFESTATIONS OF GRIEF

Although grief responses, in general, differ from one person to another, there are many

predictable manifestations of grief. These manifestations occur on physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual levels. Before, during and after loss, grief may appear in several of the following forms.

Physical: Crying, sobbing, wailing, shock and numbness, dry mouth, a lump in the throat, shortness of breath, stomach ache or nausea, tightness in the chest, restlessness, fatigue, exhaustion, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance, body aches, stiffness of joints or muscles, dizziness or fainting.

Intellectual: Denial, sense of unreality, confusion, inability to concentrate, feeling preoccupied by the loss, experiencing hallucinations concerning loss (visual, auditory and olfactory), a need to reminisce about the loved one and to talk about the circumstances of the loss, a sense that time is passing very slowly, a desire to rationalize or intellectualize feelings about the loss, thought or fantasies about suicide (not accompanied by concrete plans or behaviors).

Emotional: sadness, anger, depression, guilt, anxiety, relief, loneliness, irritability, a desire to blame others for the loss, resentment, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feeling of being overwhelmed or out of control, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, feelings of victimization, giddiness, affect that is inappropriate for the situation (nervous smiles and laughter).

Social: Feelings of withdrawal, isolation and alienation, a greater dependency on others, a rejection of others, rejection by others, a reluctance to ask others for help, change in friend or in living arrangements, a desire to re-locate or move, a need to find distractions from the intensity of grief (to stay busy or to over-commit to activities).

Spiritual: Bargaining with God in an attempt to prevent loss, feeling angry at God when loss occurs, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, feelings of being either blessed or punished, searching for a meaningful interpretation of a loved one's death, paranormal vision or dreams concerning a dead loved one, questioning whether or not souls exist and wondering what happens to loved ones after death, the need to "finish business" with a purposeful ending or closure to the relationship (a funeral, memorial service, last rites ceremony, good-bye ritual).

- No previous experience with significant loss, death, grief
- Other recent losses
- A personal history involving multiple losses
- Little or no support from friends and family
- Societal norms that trivialize and negate the loss
- Insensitive comments from others about the loss
- Generally poor coping skills
- Feelings of guilt or responsibility for a death
- Untimely deaths like those of children, young adults, or young companion animals
- Deaths that happen suddenly, without warning
- Deaths that occur after a long lingering illness
- Deaths that have no known cause or that could have been prevented
- An unexplained disappearance
- Not being present at death
- Not viewing the body after death
- Witnessing a painful or traumatic death
- Deaths that occur in conjunction with other significant life events like birthdays, holidays or

divorces

- After death anniversary dates and holidays
- Stories in the media that misrepresent or cast doubts on veterinary treatment procedures
- Advice based on others negative experiences with death or inaccurate information about normal grief.

GROWTH FROM GRIEF

Recovery from the Death of a Pet

Different people experience the death of a companion animal in unique ways. This model is a guide; some people progress through grief in this order and others move back and forth from phase to phase. Remember that each person grieves in his own unique way and there is no right way or wrong way.

The Initial Awareness of Loss Phase

This early phase of the grief process is also called anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief means exactly what it says. People realize that their present circumstances hold the potential for the loss of their pet and, even before their pet dies, they begin to display symptoms of grief. This is often a confusing time for veterinary professionals because they are confused about when to offer hope to their clients for their pets' recovery and how to honestly tell that it is time to help their pet die. This is the phase in which most diagnoses are made and in which animals with acute illnesses and injuries are presented for emergency treatment.

The Coping with Loss Phase

In this phase, pets die. There may have been difficult decisions made about euthanasia, being present at euthanasia, viewing the body, and appropriate dispositions of the pets' bodies.

The Saying Good-bye Phase

In this phase, people say good-bye to their pets in a variety of ways. Some choose to say good-bye before, during and/or after euthanasia, some prefer to not be present at euthanasia but to view the body afterwards. Pet owners often get stuck in this phase of grief. Many believe that once they say good-bye, they will "forget" their pets and lose the special feelings they had for them. This is also the phase of burials, cremations, commemorative rituals and memorial ceremonies.

The Painful Awareness of Loss Phase

In this phase, pet owners may experience the full extent of grief-depression, loneliness, guilt, self-neglect. The adjustments they must make in your daily routines due to their pets' death trigger feelings of grief over and over again. This is the time that reality sets in and pet owners accept the fact that their pet is dead. Many people need extra support from their friends, family, veterinary professionals, or human service professionals at this time.

The Recovering from Loss Phase

Grief can make you feel as if you are moving in slow motion. As you adapt to the changes, you may notice your pace increasing. You are healing, one day at a time. Remember, just because your grief eases does not mean that the pet you've lost is any less important or less loved. You will always love and remember this special animal. You are giving yourself permission to go on with your life and may even discover personal growth from the grief you've experienced.