



GRIEF AND THE LOSS OF A PET



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Grief upon the loss of a pet is a normal response, and a very individual one. For some, mourning a pet who has passed may be a more difficult process than grieving for a human loved one. One reason is that the support network of understanding and caring people may be smaller. If a person has lost a loved one, friends, family and co-workers will all be supportive and understanding. They may send cards, flowers, and offer food and companionship. This is often not the case when a pet dies. A funeral or memorial service for the deceased will bring people together to provide mutual support and a sense of closure. Again, in most cases, this does not occur upon the death of a pet. Hurtful comments such as “Don’t be so upset,” “It was only a cat,” and “You can get another pet,” may add to the grief and feeling of isolation and loneliness.



FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

Grieving is a complex process which includes many stages. These stages include: denial, bargaining, anger, sadness, and resolution. The stages may come in a recognized sequence or they may appear as a complex series of emotions and feelings. The length of each stage varies with each person, and often among cultures. Some people may return to a particular stage, such as anger, time and again. Others may reach resolution quite quickly. It does not mean they loved their pet any less, it is just their individual reaction to their loss. In most instances, the grieving process may continue for a few months to almost a year.

DENIAL: When we hear bad news, we have a tendency to deny it. We think it really is not true, that we did not “hear it right,” or “it can’t be as bad as that.” This defensive mechanism is an attempt to insulate ourselves from the emotional trauma we are, or are going to, experience.

BARGAINING: When a human loved one is dying, we want to “bargain” with God. If you let my loved one live, then I will... Although this is not as common when a pet dies, many people still experience this stage of grief. Owners of a dying pet may also experience a different type of bargaining such as telling their pet, “If you recover, I will never scold you again.”

ANGER: Anger is a common stage of grief that follows denial. Anger may be towards others such as the veterinarian or another family member. It may also be directed towards oneself in the form of guilt. We may say, “If I had only brought her to the veterinarian sooner, she would be okay.” Some owners may feel angry at the pet for leaving them alone.

SORROW AND SADNESS: Sadness is the stage we most often think of as grief. Losing a pet may be one of the saddest experiences we will ever have. We mourn our loss, and may find it difficult to eat, sleep, or concentrate. We may not want to be around other people, but in reality, this is when we need understanding people the most. Talking to someone who understands our grief helps the healing process begin. Caring friends can listen and help. If you have no one to confide in, you may want to contact a pet loss hotline or read self-help books on pet loss.

RESOLUTION: Resolution is the final stage of grief. At this point, we are able to accept that our wonderful friend has passed. We start focusing on the wonderful memories we have and the times we enjoyed together. At this point, we may consider adopting a new pet, (not to replace our lost friend), but to have someone to enjoy life with. There may be times when we experience deep sadness, anger, or guilt at our loss, but we can recover and look forward rather than backward.

In addition to these stages, other emotional reactions may be seen. Some can experience shock if the death of their pet was sudden and unanticipated, and may experience an emotional numbness. If a pet is missing, the uncertainty of what may have happened to the pet can produce worry and anxiety. When a pet disappears, children may be especially fearful of becoming lost or separated from their family.

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

In an ambiguous loss, the whereabouts or cause of death of the pet is unknown. The pet may have run away or been stolen, or the owner may have needed to surrender the pet to an animal shelter. In these situations, there is seldom any “closure.” The owner does not know when or if the pet has died, or if lost, whether the pet will ever come back. As a result, when to stop searching and when to start the grieving process are unsure. There may also be additional guilt associated with this type of loss.



EXPRESSIONS OF GRIEF

In the book, *The Human-Animal Bond and Grief*, the authors describe five manifestations of grief.

Physical: Crying, nausea and loss of appetite, inability to sleep, fatigue, restlessness, and body aches and stiffness are typical manifestations of grief.

Intellectual: When grieving, people often experience an inability to concentrate, confusion, and a sense that time is passing very slowly.

Emotional: As described above, many emotions can be expressed in the course of the grieving process. Irritability, a lowered sense of self-worth, resentment, and embarrassment are also common feelings.

Social: Some grieving people often withdraw, may be reluctant to ask for help, and feel rejected by others. Others may show an increased dependency on other people, or an increased need to ‘keep busy’ and over-commit to activities.

Spiritual: The death of a pet may result in a person bargaining or feeling angry with God. The grieving person may try to find some meaningful interpretation of the death, and question what happens to pets after they die and whether pets have souls.

HELP AND HEALING

When grief can be expressed, the time needed for healing is shortened. Similarly, if the expression of grief is restricted or withheld, the healing process takes much longer. In addition to talking with others, studies have found that an activity often helps us work through grief. By doing something positive during this time of sadness, we celebrate the life of the pet.

Helpful Activities May Include:

- Holding a funeral or memorial service
- Planting flowers or a tree in memory of the pet
- Making a charitable donation
- Crafting a project to remind you of your pet (Do-it-yourself project or have it done by a professional)
- Placing your pet's name tag on your keyring
- Writing a poem, song, or story
- Creating a memorial photo album or scrap book
- Writing a letter to your pet
- Framing a photograph
- Volunteering your time

Those who have lost a pet need someone to talk to. Some may not understand how important your pet was to you so it's imperative to find someone who understands.

Certain circumstances can also intensify grief. If someone has recently suffered other losses, feels responsible for the death, or has never fully grieved a death, the mourning process is complex. If the pet passed of a disease similar to one which the owner or a loved one currently has, the sadness can also be multiplied. If the pet shared a significant event in the owner's life (a gift from a spouse, alerted the owner of a fire or “rescued” the owner, or if the pet has “gotten them through” a difficult period), grief can be compounded. If the pet was a significant support for the person, (the person lived alone), adjusting to the death may be extremely difficult. When the pet passes, the owner also loses a significant activity. For instance, when a working dog dies, the owner has lost not only a pet, but a co-worker, someone who has shared activities with the owner many hours of the day. Those who lose an assistance dog may lose their independence and the ability to even perform simple daily activities.

Some children/adolescents cannot remember life without their pet. For them, pet loss may be especially difficult, and professional help may be indicated.

In all of these situations, talking to a professional bereavement counselor, clergy, social worker, physician, or psychologist is often advised and can aid in the healing process. Support groups, pet loss hotlines, and self-help books are also beneficial.



WHEN A CHILD LOOSES A PET



Always be honest discussing the death of a pet. You can omit some tragic details, but children need to understand what's happening. A child will find out the truth in the end and may become less trusting of the parent, or feel betrayed if not told the truth. The child should be able to participate in the arrangements. If there is a burial, the child should always be given the option to be present. Burying the pet without the child's knowledge can make the entire grieving process more difficult and make the child less trusting of their parents at a time when they really need them. If at all possible, prepare the child ahead of time for the death. Mementos can be very important and children may want photos of them with their pet, and/or a plaster cast of the pet's paw print.

Factors such as age and maturity can contribute to a child's feelings. As with older people, the relationship between the child and pet, the circumstances of the pet's death, and other events/losses the child has experienced will influence the grieving process. Supportive parents also play an important role in helping the child work through sadness. Generalities on how children may respond to the loss of a pet, as related to age are discussed next.



Infants And Children Up To Two Years Of Age:

Infants and very young children may not understand the death of a pet, but they are very aware of the tension and change in emotional state of those around them. Reassuring them by hugging and holding them, and keeping the household routine as normal as possible will help.

Toddlers and Pre-Schoolers:

Children under 7 years of age do not understand that death is permanent and need to know that the pet is not going to wake up or come home. Don't try to hide or underplay a pet's illness/death from a child as they are often the first to sense that something is wrong. Isolating children from a pet's death may cause them to feel abandoned or betrayed and takes away their right to say good-bye. Help them to know it's okay to ask questions (they usually have many) and feel sad.



School-Age Children:

Children 7–12 years of age can understand the permanence of death. They may ask many questions about how and why the pet died. Children over 12 years of age may have a very difficult time recovering from grief and may not be open about how much emotional pain they are experiencing. Adolescents should not be put in the position of having to take on extra responsibilities such as caring for siblings during times of crisis.



Euthanasia:

Putting a pet to sleep can be confusing for a young child. When explaining euthanasia, communicate that it is a painless injection of a powerful medication that allows the pet to pass peacefully. Generally, children under the age of eight are too young to attend a euthanasia. If a child is going to be present, it's best to have the veterinarian explain what will happen. You can deduce if the child should be present during the process or be invited into the room immediately after.



The words “put to sleep” or “went away” should not be used with young children, as they are very confusing. They may fear falling asleep themselves, because they think they may not wake up. Some children become terrified if they are told they are going to be “put to sleep” before surgery. Or they may feel abandoned and that their pet did not love them and therefore ran away. If financial considerations play a role in the decision to euthanize a pet, the child may believe their parents would not be able to take care of them if they became ill. In these situations, reassure the child that they will always be cared for. Children should also be told that the injection the pet received is not the same as what she receives at the pediatrician.

Expressing Feelings:

Young children are less able to express their feelings in words and are more likely to “act out” what they feel. They may show anger or aggression in various situations that do not seem connected to the animal's death. They may start displaying regressive behavior such as bed-wetting and thumb-sucking. They may experience separation anxiety or complain about not feeling well. Activities such as those described above may help the child work through their feelings. Young children may think it was something they did or thought that caused their pet to die, and blame themselves. Even if they do not express it, it's often helpful to reassure the child that they were not responsible for the death of the pet.

PET LOSS AND THE ELDERLY

For many seniors, their pet is their sole companion and their only reason to live. Many elderly do not have a strong support system and live alone. They may be experiencing the deaths of friends their same age. Their pet may become the sole focus of their attention and affection. Their entire daily routine may revolve around their pet and for some, their pet may be their last link to the past. The loss of their beloved animal companion can trigger grief over previous losses. Their pet may also have been a source of security, barking at strangers or accompanying them on walks.

The elderly may experience more guilt when their pet passes. If they live on fixed incomes and have few financial reserves, not being able to pay for expensive treatments also adds to a sense of failure. They may also have put off visits to the veterinarian because of transportation or financial constraints, and blame themselves for not having the pet examined sooner. Seniors may not be in a position to adopt another pet due to housing restrictions, financial considerations, transportation issues, and their own health.





SHOULD I GET ANOTHER PET?

When and if you should get another pet varies with the individual and the choice is personal. Some may want to find a new pet almost immediately. Sometimes they may have unrealistic expectations of the new pet, especially if they are getting a young, rambunctious animal after an older, mature one has died. Others need more time to work through grief before they are physically and emotionally ready for another pet. In either case, know that you are not replacing your pet, but finding another animal with whom you can share life.

Some may find it is just not possible for them to have another pet and ultimately, you need to do what is right for you. In general, you should give children adequate time before getting another member of the family. Adopting a pet too soon may cause the child to feel guilty or disloyal, and they may have difficulty bonding. The child may also think that if something happened to them, they would soon be forgotten and a substitute would be found. They need to understand that friendships cannot immediately be replaced.

DO PETS GRIEVE?



We all know of animals who have stopped eating, playing, or interacting when another pet in the household has died. They are experiencing a loss of their own, plus they often sense the owner's sorrow as well. After a pet passes, we can help the other pets in the household by keeping their routines as unchanged as possible. Increasing their activity through walks or playing with toys may be helpful. This will not only benefit your pet, but help you too.

If animals are acting depressed or are not eating, be careful not to reinforce or reward their behavior. Giving them extra attention or different food when they behave this way may actually cause them to start using those behaviors as ways to obtain more attention or get special treats. The book, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals* by Susan McCarthy and Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson discusses the many emotions of animals and you may find it an interesting and valuable resource.

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