



A family's guide to
**Grieving the Loss
of a Pet**



*“Tis better to have loved
and lost, than never to have
loved at all.”* - Alfred Lord Tennyson



When a member of our pet family dies we experience a range of many emotions over a period of time; this is known as bereavement or the grieving process.

During this bereavement or grieving process, there is one thing all experts agree upon and that is to “acknowledge the death.” Acknowledging the death is an extremely vital step to healthy bereavement. In many cases this acknowledgment involves viewing of the deceased, having a funeral/memorial service and/or being present for a burial or scattering of ashes.

In today’s society, a pet is often an integral part of a family. Statistics show us that 84% of pet owners consider their pet to be a member of their family. Losing a pet is one of the hardest parts about having one. Psychologists recognize that the grief suffered by pet owners after their pet dies is the same as they experienced after the death of a person. After all, they are a loyal family member who brings us years of immeasurable happiness, love and joy. When they pass on, the loss is significant and real. These feelings can be particularly intense for the elderly, single people and childless couples. The bond between you and your pet is as valuable as any of your human relationships.

However, many people do not appreciate the importance of this special connection. This discounting by others of your pain makes pet loss bereavement more complicated. Don’t be discouraged by those people. Your pain is real and it’s okay to grieve the loss of your beloved companion.

If the loss of a pet brings the same level of grief as that of a human loss, then would it not make sense to “acknowledge the death” as a vital step to a healthy bereavement process? The experts answer this question with a resounding, yes! But why don’t we? Here are two thoughts for that question. First, the segment of the population who has not experienced the bond of a companion pet generally tends to down play the significance of the relationship and thus the loss. I think we’ve all heard the comments “it’s only a dog” or “you can get another one.” Don’t ever feel that your loss is diminished because it was an animal. Comments like these are from misinformed individuals. Second, because of this down play, society as a whole has tended to overlook the significance of this type of loss and the reality that it hurts. You are justified in your feelings. Remember, you should never feel as if your grief should be less than it is.

When a beloved pet passes, many pet owners are seeking the same level of service and care for their pet as they do for their human family members. Fortunately, there’s Pet Passages®. At Pet Passages®, we’re able to care for your entire family and your pet with the same level of dignity and respect we would give to humans. We provide you and your family a variety of loving and caring services including a viewing of your deceased pet, assistance with creating a proper memorial/tribute and a variety of burial and/or cremation options.

Grieving the Loss of a Pet

Grief is the normal response to any important loss in life. It occurs regardless of whether death followed a prolonged illness or a sudden accident. Grieving can impact a person physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Don't be afraid of your grief symptoms.

These symptoms are merely a testimony to the importance of the relationship that you have lost. As previously mentioned, the stages of grief with the loss of a pet are much the same as with the loss of a human family member. You may move from one stage to another and back again. Some may move through all phases quickly and others may tend to get stuck in a particular phase for a bit. Be gentle with yourself as you go through these phases, as grief is nature's way of healing a broken heart. The process of grief is not a cut and dry process. Rather, the grief process is a continuum, with each person experiencing it in a different way.

Dividing the grief process into "stages" helps the grief stricken person to understand that their experiences and emotions are normal. Remember, grief is like a finger print or snow flake, it is different for all. The stages of grief are as follows:

1. Shock & Denial

You will probably react to learning of the loss with numbed disbelief. You may deny the reality of the loss at some level in order to avoid the pain. Shock provides emotional protection from being overwhelmed all at once. This may last for weeks.

2. Pain & Guilt

As the shock wears off, it is replaced with the suffering of unbelievable pain. It may be excruciating and almost unbearable but it is important that you experience the pain fully. Do not hide it, avoid it or escape from it with alcohol or drugs. You may have guilty feelings or remorse over things you did or didn't do with your pet. Life feels chaotic and scary during this phase.

3. Anger & Bargaining

As frustration gives way to anger, you may lash out and lay unwarranted blame for the death of your pet on someone else. Please try to control this as permanent damage to your relationships may result. This is a time for the release of bottled up emotion. You may try to bargain in vain with the powers that be for a way out of your despair ("I will never drink again if you just bring him back").

4. "Depression", Reflection, Loneliness

Just when your friends may think you should be getting on with your life, a period of sad reflection may overtake you. This is a normal stage of grief so do not be "talked out of it" by well-meaning outsiders. Encouragement from others is not helpful to you during this stage of grieving. During this time, you finally realize the true magnitude of your loss and it may depress you. You may isolate yourself on purpose, reflect on things you did with your pet and focus on memories of the past. You may sense feelings of emptiness or despair.

5. The Upward Turn

As you start to adjust to life without your pet, your life becomes a little calmer and more organized. Your physical symptoms lessen and your "depression" begins to lift slightly.

6. Reconstruction & Working Through

As you become more functional, your mind will start working again and you will find yourself seeking realistic solutions to problems posed by life without your beloved companion. You will start to focus on reconstructing your life without your pet.

7. Acceptance & Hope

During the last of the seven stages in this grief model, you learn to accept and deal with the reality of your situation. Given the pain and turmoil you have experienced, acceptance does not necessarily mean instant happiness. You will find a way to move forward and begin planning for the future. Eventually, the wrenching pain will be gone and you will return to the carefree, untroubled YOU that existed before the passing of your pet. You can anticipate good times to come and even find joy again in the experience of living.

Grieving the Loss of a Pet (continued)

Use the following as a gentle guide to help you through this important and legitimate process.

- Recognize that you are not going crazy because the loss IS significant
- Talk or write about the loss of your companion pet
- Cry
- Seek out people who share your love for animals and understand your loss
- Postpone change for a few weeks
- Make fewer commitments
- Lighten your load
- Go slow. Do not rush to put away your companion's things
- Listen to music
- Treat your body well (good nutrition, exercise, adequate sleep)
- Pray if it comforts you
- Keep routines. Predictability soothes during times of loss and chaos
- Take deep breaths. Emotional pain causes us to hold our breath

Your pet is gone, but the love you shared has not ended. In time, you will begin to smile through the tears. Your pet, a wonderful source of joy, enriched your life. You do not have to give that up.

When The Hurting Doesn't Stop

If you find that your grief doesn't resolve within a reasonable amount of time, give serious thought to getting help from a competent therapist. It is unnecessary to struggle for long periods of time without improvement. Consulting a licensed therapist can quicken the grief process and lessen the pain. Support groups can be very helpful. This type of setting is a nice way to meet people and share your common experiences. If your pet's death has been a catalyst for triggering grief for other unresolved losses, it may be necessary to contact a therapist. If you feel stuck in sorrow, overwhelmingly fatigued, severely depressed or are tending to isolate yourself, seek help as soon as possible. Therapy can unlock the tears and support you as you heal.



“You know goodbyes aren’t forever.”

- from “All Dogs go to Heaven”



Children’s Grief

Too often, adults trivialize or give inadequate attention to bereavement in children. Caught up in our own world of complexities and learned associations, we lose sight and some perspective on how and why children grieve for a pet loss.

Often we presume and shelter our children from this “grown up experience,” which we ourselves find very upsetting. In nearly all circumstances, this is not the advisable approach to take. If our children are old enough to reason, then they are old enough to sense when they’re left out of important discussions concerning them. The death of a beloved pet matters a great deal to a child. How adults choose to handle this traumatic event remains with the child for the rest of their life.

Handling Pet Loss

Often times, the death of a family pet is the first death experienced by a child. Children naturally develop strong attachments to companion animals, relating to them as siblings, playmates, confidants, etc. Children do not respond to death the same as adults do. While children experience grief differently than adults, they do grieve. They need support and guidance to understand and mourn their loss. Children look to us for guidance in words as well as actions. The death of a beloved pet presents an emotional stress even for a well adjusted adult. Thus, it is important for adults to access bereavement support for themselves as this will give parents an opportunity to deal with their emotions so they can be more effective with their children.

A child’s reactions to death are natural, curious and varied until the adult world changes that view. We need to avoid projecting our own concerns on a child as this may create problems that would not have existed otherwise. How a child responds to the death depends on a number of factors, including the strength of the bond they have with the pet, the child’s age and their developmental stage. In fact, you may be surprised by how much your child actually knows. They watch movies and cartoons on television and often hear about death from their schoolmates and friends. That being said, it is important to always keep in mind that the parent is a role model for almost everything.

Through seeing your tears and grief, children will learn what bereavement means. Don’t try and protect them from this reality. Let them share your feelings to a reasonable degree according to their maturity and ability to understand. This helps them know that grief is normal and acceptable and that life involves change and growth. This is a very hard lesson to learn but a necessary one. They need to understand that tears in a loving and understanding environment help people heal.

Children's Grief (continued)

Memorializing Pets

Giving children the opportunity to remember and memorialize their pet is a very important part of the grieving process. They not only need support and guidance to understand and mourn their loss, they also need healthy tools to remember and memorialize their pet.

The following suggestions are also helpful for adults:

- Encourage children to express their grief by drawing pictures of their pet and sharing what these pictures mean to them. If a child would like the picture put in his/her room, then honor that wish. Often it allows the child to feel closer to their pet at bedtime until the grief has subsided.
- Make a scrapbook of photos and hand-drawn pictures of the pet with family members. Write captions that share the family's memories of their beloved pet. You may want to include other items in the scrapbook, such as a dog tag, a small toy, sympathy cards or letters, etc.
- Arrange a special place in the home for an urn if a pet is cremated. Feel free to place a few pictures and mementos of the pet near the urn. Common places are the mantle of a fire place or a special part of a bookshelf. If the pet's ashes are to be scattered, be sure to select a meaningful place such as where the pet loved to go. Allow children to participate in this decision-making process.
- Plant a living memorial such as a tree or bush in memory of a pet.
- Hold a ceremony. For example, some families have a ritual of lighting candles on anniversaries and reminiscing about their life with their pets. This offers them a special sense of comfort and respect. Let the children participate in this.
- Invite friends to talk about their own positive experiences regarding the death of a beloved pet. It is usually a bittersweet time of laughing and crying with one another, but that is part of the healing process. It is good for children to learn about the joys that pets bring into other people's lives. An exchange of memories helps to broaden their personal perspective of the human/animal bond and their role in this.

- Place a picture memorial with a written message to the pet on our website. This is yet another way of bringing peace of mind and comfort to everyone in the family. It assists with coming to some sense of resolution and in accepting the transfer of the pet to a beloved memory.

Answering Children's Questions

It's best to answer questions as honestly as possible. Young children, in particular, need only basic answers to satisfy their wonder. Base your responses on your religious or philosophical views in terms of the soul and an afterlife. By all means, share your personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Further, it's also okay to say you really don't have an answer. Let children know that it is alright to ask questions and to cry. It is most certainly okay for you to cry with them as this may help ease the pain of the pet loss for both of you.

Informing Caregivers

When a child loses a beloved pet, it is advisable for parents to inform other caregivers, including day care providers and teachers. In fact, they are often in an excellent position to observe and understand any significant changes in your child. Initially, there may be daydreaming in class or at home. Homework may not get done and class participation may drop noticeably. Appetite and sleep habits may change and the child may become quiet or even irritable. These are all signs parents need to address. Children require understanding and support and cannot cope on their own.

When to Seek Help

Parents should seek professional help for their child when severe grief is present.

Some signs of severe grief include the following:

- Withdrawing from friends and family, with little or no interest in their usual activities
- Eating considerably less than usual
- Reverting to pre-potty training behavior such as bed wetting
- Being afraid to be alone or to go to sleep
- Experiencing nightmares
- Being preoccupied with thoughts of death

"We cherish memory as the only certain immortality, never fully understanding the necessary plan." - Irving Townsend



Do Pets Grieve?

Believe it or not, animals can form very firm attachments with each other and therefore can experience a sense of loss when the other is gone. Even pets that outwardly seem to barely get along will exhibit intense stress reactions when separated.

In fact, grieving pets can show many symptoms identical to those experienced by the bereaved pet owner. Although a pet may not moan aloud for his/her loss of that special someone, they can definitely feel the sense of loneliness when he/she has to stay, play, sit or eat alone. The surviving pet(s) may become restless, anxious and even depressed. There may also be much sighing, along with sleep and eating disturbances. Grieving pets may search for their dead companions and crave more attention from their owners.

How can an owner help the grieving pet? Here are some suggestions:

- If possible, let pets see and sniff the deceased pet. (Acknowledging the death).
- Keep the surviving pet(s) routines as normal as possible.
- Try not to unintentionally reinforce the behavior changes. If the pet's appetite is picky, don't keep changing the food. All this does is create a more finicky pet.
- Increase the amount of play time or things that your pet likes to do.
- Give lots of love and affection to help ensure their world is safe.
- Allow the surviving animals to work out the new dominance hierarchy themselves. There may be scuffles and fights as the animals work out the new pecking order.
- Don't get a new pet to help the grieving pet(s) unless the owner is ready. This will backfire unless the owner is emotionally ready for a new pet; people still grieving won't have the energy for it.



When to Get a New Pet

Just as grief is a personal experience, the decision of when, if ever, to bring a new pet into your home is also a personal one.

If a family member is having difficulty accepting the pet's death, bringing a new pet into the home before that individual has resolved his or her grief may be a diminishment of the relationship they shared.

Family members should come to an agreement about the appropriate time to welcome a new pet into the family. Although the pet you lost can never be replaced, many people are eventually ready to have a new pet share their lives. When making this decision, ask yourself if you feel you are at a point in your grief that you can take on the responsibility and open your heart to a new pet.

Parents should not rush into getting another pet as a means of helping their child “get over” the pet loss and a parent should not surprise their child with a new pet too soon. One pet does not replace another. Getting a new pet too soon may only cause the child to resent (even mistreat) the new pet. It is advisable for parents to discuss a new pet when the child can openly speak about the loss of their pet and shows interest in having a new one.

Written by Michael T. Harris, Licensed Funeral Director & Certified Pet Loss Professional, Founder and President of Pet Passages®.

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