



## INTENSE GRIEF OVER THE LOSS OF A PET IS NORMAL

An inevitable aspect of bringing a companion animal into your home — a part many people rarely discuss — is the loss of a pet. When you lose your best friend, the one you could always count on when you were down, the one who warmed you, played with you and made you laugh no matter how bad you felt — it can be a devastating experience. It's important to grieve this loss and work through the emotions.<sup>1</sup>

People grieve the loss of a pet in different ways. Most people will experience the seven stages of grief (shock, denial, bargaining, anger, guilt, sorrow and acceptance), but the amount of time spent in each stage may vary greatly.<sup>1</sup>

**The loss of a pet is often just as difficult, if not more so, than losing a human family member.** Our relationships with animals are remarkably intimate and mutually supportive, as they love us 'no strings attached,' hold our secrets, and accept us 'just as we are.' When our daily routines include pets, the loss can be profoundly disruptive to our sense of home, sense of safety, sense of purpose, and sense of identity.<sup>2</sup>



*“Our relationships with animals are remarkably intimate and mutually supportive”*

## WHAT IS GRIEF LIKE?<sup>2</sup>

Many are surprised by the intensity of grief anticipating and following the loss of a pet. Each person experiences grief in a different way. Children grieve just as intensely as adults do, but often have different ways of expressing their grief.

Contrary to popular belief, grief does not unfold in clean, linear stages, nor does it have a timeline. There is no absolute pattern for grief. Your experience of grief will depend on a variety of factors including your personality, your upbringing, the type of relationship you had with your pet, your personal situation at the time of your pet's death, the circumstances of the death, and your cultural and religious beliefs. Your reactions may be different from those of another pet owner, or even from those of other members of your household.

*“Grief is a full body experience that includes physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual responses”*

### **Socially,**

you may want to withdraw from others, isolating yourself from your friends, loved ones, and social circles; or oppositely, you may want to reach out to others, seeking support. You may feel like you no longer fit in with your pet-loving friends and may avoid situations where people might ask about your pet.

You may use social events or work to avoid going home. There are even spiritual manifestations of grief, which include anger at, or bargaining with, a higher power; questioning of faith; searching for meaning; and wondering what happens after death (“Is my pet okay?”, “Where is my pet now?”, “Do animals have souls?”) All of these responses are a normal part of grief, the predictable reactions to the loss of a loved one.

These reactions are normal, healthy parts of the grief process, but can be difficult to describe to others. This can be especially true when sharing with people who do not have pets. It may be difficult for them to understand your feelings of loss. Remember, it is as perfectly normal to grieve over the loss of a beloved pet as it is over the loss of a beloved person.

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO MANAGE MY GRIEF?**

The best way to manage your grief is to be reassured that these reactions are normal and to let them run their natural course. Be kind to yourself as you prepare for the 'new normal' of a life without your beloved pet. Just as it took time to build the relationship with your pet, it will take time to get used to your pet not being there.

*“A healthy grief journey comes from taking your time to work through your feelings”*

### **Receive support from others.**

Spend time with supportive family, friends, and co-workers who understand, who will listen to your stories and feelings without judgment. Talking with others can help you come to terms with your loss. Consider joining a pet loss support group, in your locale or on-line, to help you work through your loss. Read books on pet loss. These are published regularly and include stories of others' experiences.

### **Allow yourself a small break from the sadness every day.**

Find a source of light within the dark. Laughter serves as a healing salve for the heart, and music can soothe the soul, enabling you to cope with, and work through, your grief.

## **WHEN WILL I GET OVER THIS?**

It is common for people to want to feel better and 'be done with the pain.' Keep in mind that grief is not something we get over, but something we move through. When we lose someone, whose presence changed us (often for the better), we cannot help but be changed by that loss. The process of coming to terms with a loss can take a long time, but you will eventually find your way to a place where the pain of absence is less of a focus than the happy, loving memories that come to mind when you remember your pet

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

*“Grieving takes time. It is a process, not an event”*





## REMEMBER<sup>2</sup>

Remember, the experience of loss is different for everyone. It is only by moving toward the loss that one can learn to live with it. And when it comes to grief, there is no such thing as 'closure.' Although you will get through the grief, and return to a usual way of life, there may always be moments, among the happy memories, of sadness and longing. This is just a reflection of the enduring love for your pet. Although your time together ended, the love will never end.<sup>2</sup>

## TEN TIPS ON COPING WITH PET LOSS<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Am I crazy to hurt so much?<sup>4</sup>

Intense grief over the loss of a pet is normal and natural. Don't let anyone tell you that it's silly, crazy, or overly sentimental to grieve! During the years you spent with your pet (even if they were few), it became a significant and constant part of your life. It was a source of comfort and companionship, of unconditional love and acceptance, of fun and joy. So don't be surprised if you feel devastated by the loss of such a relationship. People who don't understand the pet/owner bond may not understand your pain.

All that matters, however, is how you feel. Don't let others dictate your feelings: They are valid, and may be extremely painful. But remember, you are not alone: Thousands of pet owners have gone through the same feelings

### 2. What Can I Expect to Feel?<sup>4</sup>

Different people experience grief in different ways. Besides your sorrow and loss, you may also experience the following emotions:

- Denial makes it difficult to accept that your pet is really gone. It's hard to imagine that your pet won't greet you when you come home, or that it doesn't need its evening meal. Some pet owners carry this to extremes, and fear their pet is still alive and suffering somewhere. Others find it hard to get a new pet for fear of being "disloyal" to the old.
- Anger may be directed at the illness that killed your pet, the driver of the speeding car, the veterinarian who "failed" to save its life. Sometimes it is justified, but when carried to extremes, it distracts you from the important task of resolving your grief.
- Depression is a natural consequence of grief but can leave you powerless to cope with your feelings. Extreme depression robs you of motivation and energy, causing you to dwell upon your sorrow.

**The death of a beloved pet is excruciating. With their shorter lifespans, it's also, unfortunately, an inevitability.<sup>3</sup>**

"There's hardly a week that goes by where someone doesn't say, 'I was close to my family. When my parents died, it was terrible.

But I've never felt a loss like this,'" she said. Therapist Susan Anschuetz, LMFT, co-founder of the Denver-based nonprofit Human Animal Bond Trust, has led free weekly pet loss support groups for more than 30 years.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. What can I do about my feelings?<sup>4</sup>

- The most important step you can take is to be honest about your feelings. Don't deny your pain, or your feelings of anger and guilt. Only by examining and coming to terms with your feelings can you begin to work through them.
- You have a right to feel pain and grief! Someone you loved has died, and you feel alone and bereaved. You have a right to feel anger and guilt, as well. Acknowledge your feelings first, then ask yourself whether the circumstances actually justify them.
- Locking away grief doesn't make it go away. Express it. Cry, scream, pound the floor, talk it out. Do what helps you the most. Don't try to avoid grief by not thinking about your pet; instead, reminisce about the good times. This will help you understand what your pet's loss actually means to you.
- Some find it helpful to express their feelings and memories in poems, stories, or letters to the pet. Other strategies including rearranging your schedule to fill in the times you would have spent with your pet; preparing a memorial such as a photo collage; and talking to others about your loss.



#### **4. Who can I talk to?<sup>4</sup>**

If your family or friends love pets, they'll understand what you're going through. Don't hide your feelings in a misguided effort to appear strong and calm! Working through your feelings with another person is one of the best ways to put them in perspective and find ways to handle them. Find someone you can talk to about how much the pet meant to you and how much you miss it-someone you feel comfortable crying and grieving with. If you don't have family or friends who understand, or if you need more help, ask your veterinarian or humane association to recommend a pet loss counselor or support group. Check with your church or hospital for grief counseling. Remember, your grief is genuine and deserving of support.

#### **5. When is the right time to euthanize a pet?<sup>4</sup>**

Your veterinarian is the best judge of your pet's physical condition; however, you are the best judge of the quality of your pet's daily life. If a pet has a good appetite, responds to attention, seeks its owner's company, and participates in play or family life, many owners feel that this is not the time. However, if a pet is in constant pain, undergoing difficult and stressful treatments that aren't helping greatly, unresponsive to affection, unaware of its surroundings, and uninterested in life, a caring pet owner will probably choose to end the beloved companion's suffering. Evaluate your pet's health honestly and unselfishly with your veterinarian. Prolonging a pet's suffering in order to prevent your own ultimately helps neither of you. Nothing can make this decision an easy or painless one, but it is truly the final act of love that you can make for your pet.

#### **6. Should I stay during euthanasia?<sup>4</sup>**

Many feel this is the ultimate gesture of love and comfort you can offer your pet. Some feel relief and comfort themselves by staying: They were able to see that their pet passed peacefully and without pain, and that it was truly gone. For many, not witnessing the death (and not seeing the body) makes it more difficult to accept that the pet is really gone. However, this can be traumatic, and you must ask yourself honestly whether you will be able to handle it.

Uncontrolled emotions and tears-though natural-are likely to upset your pet. Some clinics are more open than others to allowing the owner to stay during euthanasia. Some veterinarians are also willing to euthanize a pet at home. Others have come to an owner's car to administer the injection. Again, consider what will be least traumatic for you and your pet, and discuss your desires and concerns with your veterinarian. If your clinic is not able to accommodate your wishes, request a referral.

#### **7. What do I do next?<sup>4</sup>**

When a pet dies, you must choose how to handle its remains. Sometimes, in the midst of grief, it may seem easiest to leave the pet at the clinic for disposal. Check with your clinic to find out whether there is a fee for such disposal. Some shelters also accept such remains, though many charge a fee for disposal. If you prefer a more formal option, several are available. Home burial is a popular choice, if you have sufficient property for it. It is economical and enables you to design your own funeral ceremony at little cost.

However, city regulations usually prohibit pet burials, and this is not a good choice for renters or people who move frequently. To many, a pet cemetery provides a sense of dignity, security, and permanence. Owners appreciate the serene surroundings and care of the gravesite. Cemetery costs vary depending on the services you select, as well as upon the type of pet you have. Cremation is a less expensive option that allows you to handle your pet's remains in a variety of ways: bury them (even in the city), scatter them in a favorite location, place them in a columbarium, or even keep them with you in a decorative urn (of which a wide variety are available).

Check with your veterinarian, pet shop, or phone directory for options available in your area. Consider your living situation, personal and religious values, finances, and future plans when making your decision. It's also wise to make such plans in advance, rather than hurriedly in the midst of grief.

#### **8. What should I tell my children?<sup>4</sup>**

You are the best judge of how much information your children can handle about death and the loss of their pet. Don't underestimate them, however. You may find that, by being honest with them about your pet's loss, you may be able to address some fears and misperceptions they have about death. Honesty is important. If you say the pet was "put to sleep," make sure your children understand the difference between death and ordinary sleep. Never say the pet "went away," or your child may wonder what he or she did to make it leave and wait in anguish for its return.

That also makes it harder for a child to accept a new pet. Make it clear that the pet will not come back, but that it is happy and free of pain. Never assume a child is too young or too old to grieve. Never criticize a child for tears or tell them to "be strong" or not to feel sad. Be honest about your own sorrow; don't try to hide it, or children may feel required to hide their grief as well. Discuss the issue with the entire family and give everyone a chance to work through their grief at their own pace.

## 9. Will my other pets grieve?<sup>4</sup>

Pets observe every change in a household and are bound to notice the absence of a companion. Pets often form strong attachments to one another, and the survivor of such a pair may seem to grieve for its companion. Cats grieve for dogs, and dogs for cats. You may need to give your surviving pets a lot of extra attention and love to help them through this period. Remember that, if you are going to introduce a new pet, your surviving pets may not accept the newcomer right away, but new bonds will grow in time.

Meanwhile, the love of your surviving pets can be wonderfully healing for your own grief.

## 10. Should I get a new pet right away?<sup>4</sup>

Generally, the answer is no. One needs time to work through grief and loss before attempting to build a relationship with a new pet. If your emotions are still in turmoil, you may resent a new pet for trying to “take the place” of the old-for what you really want is your old pet back. Children in particular may feel that loving a new pet is “disloyal” to the previous pet. When you do get a new pet, avoid getting a “lookalike” pet, which makes comparisons even more likely. Don’t expect your new pet to be “just like” the one you lost but allow it to develop its own personality. Never give a new pet the same name or nickname as the old.

Avoid the temptation to compare the new pet to the old one: It can be hard to remember that your beloved companion also caused a few problems when it was young! A new pet should be acquired because you are ready to move forward and build a new relationship—rather than looking backward and mourning your loss. When you are ready, select an animal with whom you can build another long, loving relationship—because this is what having a pet is all about.

**Losing a pet hurts—really, really hurts. And it can be hard to share that pain with others, because we humans often aren’t as comfortable talking about grieving a pet as we are discussing grief for the other important friends and family in our lives. So how do you grieve a pet who’s passed away? The answer, says E.B. Bartels, author of “Good Grief: On Loving Pets Here and Hereafter,” is as unique and personal as your relationship with the pet who’s gone.<sup>5</sup>**

That can leave some pet parents feeling lost and confused when their pet is gone—but it also gives pet parents the freedom to choose the most fitting way to honor their beloved friend.<sup>5</sup>

## TRY TO LET YOURSELF FEEL<sup>6</sup>

- You’ve experienced a loss, and it’s OK to let yourself feel all the feelings surrounding it.
- “Cry whenever you feel like crying,” says Geipert. However, she recommends using your judgment on when and where that’s appropriate.
- “Tears release stress hormones.” She adds that if you’re not a heavy crier, that’s OK too. “Everybody’s way is different.”

## TRY TO PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION<sup>6</sup>

- Be good to yourself. Try to engage in some self-care activities as you’re going through the grieving process. You can do this by making some extra space for your regular self-care activities or trying something new that you think could feel restorative.
- Take some time off from work if you need to.

## CONSIDER TALKING WITH SOMEONE WHO CAN RELATE<sup>6</sup>

- “Talking about exactly how you feel is incredibly helpful in grief, which is why it’s helpful for people to go to therapy or find a support group,” says Geipert.
- She recommends finding a way to talk about what and how you’re feeling. You can do that with others who have lost a pet, a therapist, or supportive friends and family.
- I belonged to a disabled rabbit community and an adventure cat community online. The members were extremely supportive when I posted about losing a pet.

## TRY A MOURNING PROCESS<sup>6</sup>

- Societies and cultures throughout human history have engaged in mourning rituals to cope with emotional pain after a loss. Trying a ritual could also help you grieve after the death of a pet. You might try something familiar, such as having a memorial, or you could create your own practice.
- “Light a candle...honoring the anniversary of a loved one’s passing”
- Geipert says she did an exercise that really helped after losing her cat. She wrote to him.
- “Write a thank-you card to your deceased pet,” Geipert says. “Talk about everything you’ll miss and what you’re most grateful for. Talk about what you regret. Say everything you want to say.”



## REMOVE ITEMS AT YOUR OWN PACE<sup>6</sup>

Some people may want to get rid of their pet's things quickly after a loss, and others may need to do it more gradually.

If it feels challenging to let go of your pet's items, let yourself do it at a pace that feels good for you.

Remember that there's no right or wrong way. This is your process.

"If you've lost your [pet] and you're completely heartbroken, know that that's a sign of how mentally healthy you are," says Geipert. "You have the capacity for deep love; it's a good thing."

## OTHER WAYS PEOPLE CAN DEAL WITH THEIR EMOTIONS

And practice self-kindness while mourning the loss of a pet include<sup>7</sup>:

- Having a memorial service or funeral. Some people may choose to bury a pet or spread their ashes in their favorite place. This can help people get a better sense of closure.
- Reflecting on positive memories by making a list, writing a letter, or choosing a picture to frame and hang in the home.
- Spending some time in the pet's favorite places. This may include going to a dog park, taking a walk down a familiar route, or even just spending some time in the yard.

If your emotions are very strong and you're having a hard time dealing with them, you can consider going to individual or group therapy. Therapists can help people better identify their emotions and learn to work through them to get to a healthier place. This is especially important for people who experience symptoms of anxiety or depression following loss of a pet.<sup>7</sup>

## PET LOSS SUPPORT PHONE HOTLINES<sup>8</sup>

### National Resources

- Tufts University Pet Loss Support Hotline– 508-839-7966
- Chicago Veterinary Medical Association Support Line – 630-325-1600
- Cornell University Pet Loss Support Hotline – 607-218-7457

### Local Resources

- For local and regional phone hotlines, check with your local Veterinary Colleges and Humane Societies.

## SUPPORT GROUPS<sup>8</sup>

### Virtual Support Group

Lap of Love Pet Loss Support Group

## INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING<sup>8</sup>

You can also search the internet for grief or pet loss counselors in your area. If you find a grief counselor, reach out and ask if they are comfortable with counseling for pet loss.



## BOOKS FOR ADULTS

*When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remembering and Healing* by Alan Wolfelt<sup>8</sup>

*Pet Loss: A thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children* by Herbert Neiburg and Arlene Fischer<sup>8</sup>

*Goodbye My Friend: Grieving the Loss of a Pet* by Mary and Herb Montgomery<sup>8</sup>

*The Loss of a Pet* by Wallace Sife<sup>8</sup>

*Saying Goodbye to the Pet You Love* by Lorri Greene<sup>8</sup>

*The Grief Recovery Handbook for Pet Loss* by Russell Friedman<sup>8</sup>

*Coping With Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet* by Moira Anderson Allen<sup>8</sup>

*Coping With the Loss of Your Pet* by Christine Lemieux<sup>8</sup>

*My Personal Pet Remembrance Journal* by Enid Samuel Traisman<sup>8</sup>

*Pet Parents: A Journey Through Unconditional Love and Grief* by Coleen Ellis<sup>8</sup>

## BOOKS FOR CHILDREN<sup>8</sup>

*When a Pet Dies* by Fred Rogers

*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst

*Dog Heaven* by Cynthia Rylant

*Cat Heaven* by Cynthia Rylant

*I'll Always Love You* by Hans Wilhelm

*Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids* by Alan Wolfeldt

*Saying Goodbye to Lulu* by Corinne Demas Goodbye

*Mousie* by Robbie Harris

*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia

*Forever Friend: A children's guide and activity book for saying goodbye to a special dog* by Mary Gardner and Coleen Ellis

*Forever Friend: A children's guide and activity book for saying goodbye to a special cat* by Mary Gardner and Coleen Ellis

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