

Grieving and Pet Loss : Coping With The Death Of A Loved Dog Or Cat

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I am a veterinarian and I think a lot about pet loss.

Over my 50 years as a veterinarian, I have learned that when we lose a pet we truly lose a family member.

Most of us grieve greatly when this occurs. For some of us, this is a very private thing. And some of us question if it is the right thing to do. It is.

It doesn't matter if the pet was a mouse or a mastiff – grief is independent of size. Some animals are lost due to accidents when they are young and in good health while others die after a prolonged illness. Whatever the case, grief and sadness are normal responses to loss.

It is unfortunate that our pets live so much shorter lives than we do. That means that if we choose to own them, we are faced with pet loss and the grief that brings, many times in our lives. In our modern society, pets have taken on remarkable, miraculous roles. Some substitute willingly for a spouse, others for children gone from the home or never born, or for siblings or a departed parent.

Our pets' ability to love unconditionally endear them to our hearts as little else in this World can. A pet's presence can lower your blood pressure, change your heart rate and remove feelings of loneliness. They are truly our "best friends". A single pet can fulfill multiple roles for different human family members. When a pet dies, bonds and roles within the family must be rearranged. Often, the trauma of the loss will be unappreciated by your extended family and friends. That is because everyone else's pet is an animal - except their own.

Mourning or grief occurs in stages that are experienced similarly by people in all walks of life and from a wide variety of cultures. It is not a strictly predictable process and each of us experiences grief in different ways. Some of us will get stuck in one of the stages for a long period of time or never reach closure. It takes different people differing lengths of time to pass through the stages of grief and they do not necessarily occur in the same order or intensity in different people.

The Five Stages of Grief and Mourning:

1) It is common for our first reaction to learning of the death or terminal illness of a pet to be in denial and unable to grasp the fact. We feel stunned, bewildered and dazed. This is a normal reaction, which is often called shock. Shock is temporary but it gets us through the initial weeks.

2) **Anger** and looking for objects to be angry at, often occurs subsequent to the initial shock of pet loss. We may lash out at friends and family or, more frequently, at ourselves. It is common for us to feel guilty and sometimes, the veterinarian who tended to our pet becomes the object of this anger. Other times it is self-directed or directed at other members of the family. The best way to get over this anger phase is through talk and conversation.

3) **Denial** or bargaining is another method we use for coping with pet loss. We may search for miracle cures to incurable diseases or seek out second opinions from a different veterinarian. We think of all the things we would do or not do if only the pet would get better.

4) **Depression** is the longest portion of grief and mourning. We are sad, hopeless and helpless and we are regretful. We think about our lost pet constantly and we wish we had done things differently.

5) If we are fortunate, we eventually reach the stage of **acceptance and healing**. We treasure the time we had with our pet and lapse into a period of calm and tranquility– if not happiness. We develop a new lifestyle in which other things substitute for the relationship we had with our pet. This is the time we might look for another furry friend.

Here Are Some Things You Can Do To Hasten Acceptance And Healing:

Give yourself permission to grieve. Accept that you were very close to your pet and recognize how much the pet meant to you. Place a memorial plaque to your pet in a favorite spot. This allows you to pay tribute to the pet that meant so much to you. Try to get plenty of rest, eat well and exercise. Surround yourself with positive friends who understand your loss and let them share your burden. Treat yourself to pleasurable activities. Be patient. Recognize that you will have relapses of grief and sadness. Remember that grief will pass and life will be pleasant again. Don't be afraid to lean on friends and pet loss support groups.

The degree and depth of your mourning process depends on your own personality as well as outside factors. Your age, how the pet died and the closeness of your relationship all play a part in the feeling you experience. Children are more resilient than adults and usually recover first. Older people have the most difficult time accepting the loss of a pet.

How To Explain The Loss Of A Pet To Your Children:

As a parents you may feel uncomfortable talking about death to your kids. You may think that silence will spare your children some of the pain and sadness. But, this is wrong. The whole family needs to talk freely together, even if through tears. Kids develop deep bonds to their pets. Once their best friend is gone they need to

be allowed personal grief and closure.

The loss of a pet is often your child's first need to confront the reality of death. We often do not realize how traumatic death is to a child because children do not express their emotions well. It is human nature to attempt to shield our children from grief. But this is rarely necessary because children, from an early age, begin to understand the concept of irretrievable loss and death.

Children should be taught from an early age the impermanence of life. A healthy understanding of death allows a child to experience the pain of loss and to express his or her feelings. A great deal of patience, hugs and kisses are required when explaining death to a small child. We need to give our children permission to express themselves and work through their grief - not burry it. Do not leave your children with the impression that anything they did was responsible for the loss of your pet.

Children younger than five years of age typically have no understanding of death. They think of it as extended sleep from which a pet will awake. Explain to these young children that the natural state of the World is such that pets die and do not return. Reassure them that nothing that was their fault caused the pets death.

Six and seven year old children have a limited understanding of death. They too may consider the pet to be sleeping or living somewhere in an underground home. They may expect the pet to eventually return and for death to be a temporary state of affairs. They may worry about their own mortality and need reassurance from you that they will not also die soon. They may temporarily loose their toilet training, bladder control, eating and sleeping patterns. Talking thing out with them is the best cure for these problems. A child needs to express his or her feelings and concerns. This process may take a month or two. Many short discussions are generally more productive than one or two prolonged sessions.

Your child may wish to have a funeral for the pet. Such a ceremony is a fitting way to say goodbye. Don't rush out and purchase a new pet to ease the grief. Allow your children a reasonable time to accept the loss.

Children eight and older generally understand the permanence of death. Sometime the loss of a pet triggers a concern about the possible death of their parents. They may become curious about death and its implications and you should be ready to engage them in frank and honest discussions about the subject. These children will experience many of the stages of grief that you experience. They may have transient problems concentrating in school and relapse to more juvenile behaviors. Many enter a period of clinginess that lasts a few weeks.

Teenage children react similarly to adults. Denial is more common in this age group as are stoicness, numbness and lack of emotional display. It is often years after the loss before these adolescents feel good about discussing their

attachments to their lost pet.

My Pet Has Inoperable Cancer Or Another Grave Disease. My Vet Referred Me To A Specialist Who Says There Are Still Things That Can Be Done. What Should I Do ?

Our pets do not fear the future or dwell on their illnesses. Unlike us, they do not worry about the passage of time or where they will spend eternity. So if they even consider it, they face death with considerable peace. Veterinary medicine has made tremendous strides in delaying the death of pets. But would your pet want you to do those things? Will you be doing those things for the pet's happiness or for your happiness? Your pet will remain happy if it has something good to eat, a loving home and the pleasure of your company. Pets react to their owners' emotions. So if you are sad, they will be sad - if you are at peace, they will be too.

Euthanasia:

There comes a time for many of us when euthanasia becomes the loving thing to do. This is because veterinary medicine, like human medicine, has succeeded in extending life beyond the point where quality of life is satisfactory.

No matter how long a pet lives with us, the time will never be enough and we will never realize the strength of our attachment to a pet until it is gone. Quality of life issues bring most clients to me for euthanasia. Usually they rely on me to reinforce and affirm their decision to put the pet to sleep. I have found that loving pet owners usually recognize when their pet is suffering seriously. If there is a sin, it is delaying this moment of decision beyond its proper time. Guilt often weighs heavily on the person who must make this decision and it is rare for there to be unanimity within the family.

Is The Time Now?

In leading my clients to a decision regarding euthanasia I guide them through important questions. First, what is the current quality of their pet's life? Is the pet still happy and playful? Does it show joy and affection? Is it eating well and is it aware of its surroundings? Is the pet in pain? Have we exhausted nursing and veterinary care? How is the pet's illness affecting the family?

Euthanasia

Once the decision has been made to put the pet to sleep you must decide if you want to be present while it is done. Veterinarians euthanize pets by administering an overdose of barbiturate anesthetics intravenously. The process is painless. You can cradle your pet while this is done or you can wait in the reception area until the process is complete. About seventy-five percent of my clients decide to be present. Most of my clients elect to have the pet cremated although some of the more traditional owners still bury the pet in their back yards. You can also bury

the ashes of your pet in a treasured spot. Alternatives include every option offered in human funerals and interment.

After Your Pet Is Gone:

Our other family pets also feel the loss. Family pets that survive also go through a grieving process. Even pets that seem to dislike one another are profoundly affected by the loss of one of the group. In fact, pets show many of the signs that their human owners exhibit. They may become restless, anxious and depressed. Grieving pets often eat less. They search for their missing playmate and crave affection from their owners.

Here are some things you can do to ease the transition for a grieving pet. Try to maintain normalcy and routine. Pets thrive on routine and normalcy so try to maintain this as best you can. With the loss of a pet in a multi-pet household, new peck orders and dominance will have to be established. Try to avoid pet fights by separating the pets and their feeding locations as this process works itself out. Wait a month or two before obtaining new pets.

Cherish the memories of your pet as the present it left especially for you. Remember its destructive clown-like puppy or kittenhood with fondness. Remember the wonderful times you two had together – how your pet made you laugh, comforted you when you were sad and showed you unrestricted love and devotion. These memories will always be there to savor – they are the immortal legacy of a true friend.