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Loss of a Pet – Grief and Bereavement

What is grief and bereavement?

Grief is the normal and natural response to the loss of someone or something. As loss is universal, we cannot go through life without being touched by grief. When grieving, one is said to be in a state of bereavement.

The loss of a loved one is one of the greatest sorrows that can occur in life. When someone we love – such as a beloved pet – dies, the loss can cause intense grief and sorrow. Given that so many people consider their pets as companions, best friends, and even members of the family, this grief is normal and understandable.



"Grief is the normal, natural process of adjusting to the loss of a loved one. It is not something we 'get over', but something we move through."

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.

What is grief like?

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.

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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. Although the expression of grief can differ from one person to another, there are many predictable manifestations. You may experience physical symptoms such as aches, pains, and pressure (including chest tightness and headaches); exhaustion; nausea; loss of hunger; and sleeplessness, as well as crying. You may experience a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, fear, despair, overwhelm, loneliness, yearning, relief, and gratitude. There may be intellectual symptoms, such as rumination (especially on your pet's illness and death), preoccupation with the dying process, inability to concentrate, rigidity/lack of flexibility, confusion, and even hallucinations (such as hearing your pet in the middle of the night).

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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.

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A healthy grief journey comes from taking your time to work through your feelings rather than trying to push them away or ignore them. It is only by moving toward the experience of loss, that you can learn to live with it. Here are some ways to help you manage your grief.

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.

Find comfort in routines and play. All creatures, whether human or animal, find comfort in the daily routines that give our days form and focus. Maintaining the normal daily schedule for meals, bedtime, and playtime is an important part of coping with a life-changing loss. Some people find that changes in routine, or to their living environment, to be helpful, to avoid pet-related 'moments.' This may mean putting away pet-related items or rearranging the furniture.

Keep moving. Keep active. Engage in activities that keep you busy, are creative, or social, such as cooking, carpentry, gardening, sports, yoga, dance, walks, and exercise classes, as these can lift your spirits. This is not necessarily easy to do when you are feeling sad, so if needed, enlist the help of your friends and relatives to keep you up and moving. If you feel ready, volunteer your time and energy into an animal welfare organization. Caring for animals in need of your comfort can be, in itself, comforting. And remember to care for and love the other pets in your home.

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.

Continue your relationship through memories. Your memories allow your pet to live on in you. Embracing these memories can be a slow, and at times, painful process that takes time, but it can help you work through your pain, sorrow and grief as well as hold onto the happy, fun, loving moments you had with your pet. Be creative in memory making and keeping. Recall the times shared, and write an anecdotal story, a poem, or a tribute, or even a letter to your pet. Journal to understand your thoughts and feelings with greater clarity. Look at past photos and craft an album or scrapbook. Draw or paint a work of art. Write a song. Such creations can transform your grief into a meaningful expression of the love you feel for your pet and provide great comfort months, and even years, later.

Memorialize your pet. Have a funeral or memorial service to honor your pet's life. Should you choose to bury your pet in a cemetery or a memorial garden, decorate your pet's headstone. Should you choose to cremate your pet, you can place your pet's ashes on a mantelpiece, or bury or scatter them in a meaningful place. There are other things that you can do as well to memorialize your pet. Plant flowers that bloom every year for your pet (tulips, daffodils, forget-me-nots). Light a candle in your pet's memory. Keep a lock of hair in a locket or Christmas ornament. Keep your pet's tags on your key chain. Ask your vet to make a clay paw-print of your pet. Make a memorial contribution to a local rescue group, Humane Society, or SPCA.



Search for meaning. Find meaning in your relationship with your pet: What does your pet mean to you? Why? What lessons have you learned from your time together? It is natural to question the meaning and purpose of your pet in your life. You may also question your beliefs regarding pets and the afterlife. Many people around you will have their own beliefs. It will be important during this time for you to find the answers right for you and your distinct and personal beliefs.

Bring a new pet into your life. As you move through your grief, you will shift from focusing on the emptiness, loss and sadness to the happier memories of your pet. When the time is right, you may consider bringing a new pet into your life. This is not a 'replacement pet,' but rather a new and unique relationship on its own!

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.

Would talking with someone help?

Sometimes grief can seriously affect your sleep, eating habits, and ability to cope with life. If this is the case, then you might benefit from supportive counseling with someone who will understand and value the loving bond you have with your pet. Counseling may also be of benefit if you are significantly preoccupied with questions about your pet's illness or death, if you witnessed the acute injury or traumatic death of your pet, or if you are feeling 'stuck' in any aspect of your grief. Such support can provide guidance in your journey. No matter how large or small a loss may be, it is only by looking at your feelings honestly can you begin the process of working through them and come out whole and happy on the other side.

Remember...

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.

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