



## ALL ABOUT PET LOSS



It is so hard to say goodbye to our faithful animal companions. Grief over the loss of a pet is very real, and coping with the loss of a pet can be a challenge.

### **Here are some of the reasons why the loss of a pet can be especially heartbreaking:**

- Our relationships with our pets are unique and special bonds; they are like no other relationship we have in our lives. Our pets offer us unconditional love and support. They are always there for us, no matter what kind of mood we are in.
- Our pets see us through the many different transitions of our lives: childhood, graduation from high school or college, a serious illness, a move or job change, loss of friends and family, or even the death of a parent or significant other. Pets are often the one constant, comforting and dependable relationship through difficult and changing times.
- Sometimes we spend more time with our pets than with anyone else. Or we might share more with our pet than with anyone else – our true feelings and moods, crying and talking. This intimacy intensifies the relationship and leaves a big gap when the pet is gone.
- Our animal companions bring out the best in us, so when we lose them, we often feel we have lost part of ourselves.
- They teach us how to become better at giving out love and acceptance. They make it safe for us to love them with all of our hearts, so our capacity to give of ourselves expands. So naturally the loss feels larger, too.

- We feel a unique sense of self with our pets. They touch our very souls, so we feel that loss, that emptiness, from our deepest essence.
- Our pets become part of our identity: I was Blackie's mom, Winston's buddy. We like who we are and who we become with them.
- Our pets give us a sense of purpose and meaning because they depend on us to take care of their basic needs. We feel good about ourselves when we are involved in all the demands of caregiving for a seriously ill pet.
- Pets fill our basic need for physical touch and affection. Our arms feel empty when we can no longer hold, cuddle and snuggle with our beloved pets.
- A pet loss can be extra difficult because some of our friends, family, and co-workers may not understand. They might say something like "Get over it ... it's only an animal."

The bond between humans and animals has inspired myth, philosophy, and magic across cultures for centuries. It can be surprising how deeply we are affected by the loss of a pet partner. And as many people know, losing a pet is a distinctly different experience than losing any other relationship, human or otherwise.

There are many models professional counselors use to make sense of the grieving process, and these models or "stages" of grief can be quite helpful. More important, though, is the realization that grief is highly individual, variable, and illogical. No two people will grieve a loss exactly alike, and many times grief defies both explanation and expectation. Knowing this can be oddly comforting—that you are grieving as you need to, and that somehow, some way, you will find a way through to the other side.

There are many forms of grief that are completely normal. The most distressing are hallucination-type experiences that leave an impression that you are hearing familiar sounds of your pet walking or calling. Some people even think that they see their pet out of the corner of their eye, especially after just waking up. Often, it is the most responsible owners who feel guilty and confused about the choices they made regarding the end of their pet's life. Occasionally, a person may feel temporarily angry with their veterinarian or others involved in end-of-life issues. These feelings of anger may be our attempts to distract from the ultimate encounter with the sadness of the loss.

With that said, there are **some things to remember if you are stumbling through the loss of a beloved pet:**

**Grief is a whole-body experience.**

It involves all parts of the human system and often shows itself on physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual levels. People who are grieving often have bodies that are exhausted and uncooperative, hearts that are broken, and brains that alternate between confusion, numbness, and too much time spent on the "what ifs." Learning to sit with the many faces of grief is a requirement of working through the loss.



**Grief is misunderstood.**

Humans fear and avoid death because it is simply too big to wrap our brains around. Many people may offer well-meaning, but ill-timed and off-putting advice to those who have lost a pet. If this happens to you, thank them kindly for their thoughts and then find support from others who resist the temptation to offer a "quick fix." Pets are not appliances to be replaced, but loved ones to be mourned and honored.

### **Grief is isolating.**

Many bereaved people feel alone in their grief. It is not unusual to feel isolated by the indifference of people who clearly don't get it. The antidote to this is found in connecting with people who will listen to you without judgment. Whether you find those people within the pet community, within your family, or through a more formal route (such as a support group or a grief counselor) does not matter. What matters, instead, is the power that comes from telling your story to others who can understand your experience.

### **Grief has no timetable.**

Many mourners frequently note that others expect them to get over their loss in a matter of weeks or months. But there is no timetable for grief. People who are lucky enough to enjoy the trust of a pet have invested tremendous time and energy in building that relationship. As such, they must also spend considerable time and energy adjusting when that pet dies. Do not expect yourself to "get over it." Loss is not something you get over, but something to which you must adapt.

### **Grief feels rotten.**

Grief is a process that often hits us surprisingly hard. Even for people who have survived many previous experiences with death, it is not uncommon to describe the loss of a deeply bonded pet as significantly more distressing. You may find that you have lost the capacity for finding comfort—your usual calming, self-soothing activities may not work. When all else fails, go back to the basics: hydration, nourishment, rest, and exercise. Support your body so your body can support your grief.

### **Grief is transformative.**

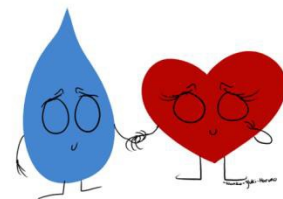
Sometimes, one of the most healing things we can do is to honor grief as the teacher it is. By entering into relationships with pets, we open ourselves up to partnership, challenge, and transformation. When we lose our pets, reflecting on their gifts can enable us to live their legacies. It is not just in loving them, but in losing them, that we are afforded the opportunity to become better humans.

Those who have experienced a deeply satisfying relationship with a pet know the intense pain that comes from having to bid them goodbye. If you are working through a loss yourself, treat yourself kindly and find others who can do the same. If you know of a friend or colleague who is grieving a pet, reach out, even in small ways, to let them know you are available to listen.

## **COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A PET**

Having very strong and profound feelings of grief after the loss of a pet is normal. Here are some of the common reactions you may have when your pet dies and some strategies to help you get through these painful emotions:

**Intense sadness.** You feel devastated and broken-hearted. You might cry a lot. You say, "My buddy should be here. I just can't accept that he is gone." Time will help you heal. Allow yourself to feel the feelings, but if that becomes too painful, take a break and distract yourself by doing something altogether different.



**Guilt.** Guilty feelings keep us from having to accept the reality of the loss. We think, "If only..." This is a normal feeling, but we need to remember the good life we gave to our furry friends and that we did the best we could.

**Anger.** This emotion can be directed at ourselves or maybe at a vet. We might feel resentment toward our other pets or people who do not seem to understand. Try to remember that anger comes from hurt; you are angry because you must face the painful fact that your beloved companion is no longer with you. When you remind yourself that lashing out or blaming others, or even yourself, will not bring your friend back, your anger will start to dissipate. To let go of the angry feelings and begin to find peace, focus on the feelings of love and acceptance shared in your special bond or reminisce about an especially joyful time together.

**Anxiety.** You may wonder, "Can I get through this?" The answer is "yes." Give yourself some time and space. Be gentle with yourself. Take it a day at a time. Give yourself what you need: comfort food, naps, quiet time, a day off, time with friends. Talk with people who understand. Talking about your feelings with others who have gone through the same loss can help. There are people who understand! Let others know you are going through a difficult time. Consider joining a support group or calling a pet loss hotline. There are many books, articles, poems, and Internet resources, such as chat rooms and pet loss websites, that can help you cope with your loss.

**Waves of grief.** Don't be surprised if just when you thought you were feeling better, you feel yourself crash again. This is normal. With pet loss grief, these ups and downs are more common than moving through predictable stages. Allow yourself to go through the grief in your own way and at your own pace. You won't forget your pet, but there will come a time where you will be able to remember your loved one with more smiles and joy rather than tears and sadness.

## **WHAT DOES GRIEF FEEL LIKE? WHAT MIGHT I EXPERIENCE?**

### **Physical Effects of Grief:**

Hollowness in the stomach, stomach ache, nausea

Sleep disturbance, restlessness

Crying, sobbing, wailing

Appetite disturbance

Dry mouth, lump in the throat

Generalized aches and pains, stiffness

Tightness in the chest, shortness of breath

Over-sensitivity to noise

Fatigue, exhaustion

Dizziness, fainting

### **Mental Thoughts of Grief:**

Confusion, denial, sense of unreality, a sense that time is passing very slowly

Hallucinations, thinking you see or smell the pet: this is very common and normal

Inability to concentrate

Thoughts or fantasies about suicide, not accompanied by concrete plans or behaviors (National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-8255)

Preoccupation with the pet, a need to reminisce about the pet & talk about the circumstances of the loss

Desire to rationalize or intellectualize feelings about the loss

### **Emotional Feelings of Grief:**

Sadness

Anxiety, giddiness, affect that is inappropriate for the situation (nervous smiles, laughter)

Anger

Relief

Depression

Loneliness, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness

Yearning

Irritability, embarrassment

Guilt, self-doubt, lower self-esteem, feelings of victimization

Desire to blame others for the loss, resentment

Overwhelmed, out of control

### **Social Manifestations of Grief:**

Feeling withdrawn, isolated or alienated

Need to find distractions from the intensity of grief (stay busy, over-commit to activities)

Difficulty functioning at work

Reluctance to ask others for help, rejection of others, rejection by others

### **Spiritual Aspects of Grief:**

(search for an animal chaplain or human hospice chaplain to help you with spiritual questions)

Bargaining with God in an attempt to prevent loss, feeling angry at God

Wondering what happens to loved ones after death

Searching for a meaningful interpretation of the loved one's death

A need to "finish business" with a purposeful ending or closure to the relationship (funeral, memorial service, good-bye ritual)

Questioning whether the soul of a pet exists

### **TOOLS TO COPE**

The most important thing is to recognize that the loss of a beloved pet is a serious event that society does not always respect. Your first task is to take care of yourself. Make sure you get the rest and nutrition you need, even when you feel distracted. Your concentration may be impaired, too, so that you need to take extra care with driving and crossing the street. Grief is a normal process, and time really does heal.



Sometimes it helps to create a special place in your home to which you can go when you want to remember your pet. Although remembering may be painful at first, eventually that pain will turn into sweet memories. Check out the next page for some strategies to help you cope:

- Pay tribute to your pet over dinner with family and friends. Share stories and memories.
- Keep your pet close, by saving their collar or a clipping of fur. Place their tags on your keychain.
- Make time to be creative by putting a scrapbook together, write a poem, or plant a flower garden or tree.
- Develop close relationships with others who have suffered loss. Lean on them. Be there for others who have lost.
- Make a donation in your pet's name.
- Support animal kindness products and projects.
- Focus on small things: take time to enjoy a cup of coffee, pay attention to and live in the moment.
- Keep a gratitude journal or list what you are thankful for each day.
- Affirmations: repeat encouraging words.
- Take time off and give yourself time to grieve. You may not feel like doing anything in the beginning of grief.
- Meet with a counselor who specializes in pet loss grief or call a pet loss hotline to talk about your feelings.
- Grow love in your life. You can't ever fill that empty hole in your heart left behind by the loss of a special pet. What you can do is make your heart bigger than the hole. Cover that hole in your heart with love. Grow love. Make your heart bigger than the loss.
- Surround yourself with people who understand and have experienced the depth of the human-animal bond.
- When you're ready, consider how you would like to honor the memory of your beloved companion. You might want to make a scrapbook or tell or write stories. A candlelight ceremony in memory of your pet might help you to accept the loss. Some people remember their pet with a special stone in a garden, a plaque, a brick in an animal sanctuary, or a donation in their loved one's name.
- Remember that our pets thrive on bringing us joy and happiness. They do not want us to stay sad; it is their desire that we go on and be happy and love again.
- We owe it to our furry friends to carry on the legacy of love, and not just shut down and protect ourselves. Keep yourself open to caring about animals — whether they are your own, or in your foster care, the pets of others, animals you do not even know, or a homeless pet in a shelter. Keep the special connection between human and animal companions going, and keep promoting its value to others. We need to carry on our pets' mission of love.
- Finally, remember that you are blessed. After all, you were privileged to be the person who shared that special animal's life. You developed a unique bond that changed who you are for the better, and that can never be taken away. Your furry friend's spirit will live in your heart forever.

## **EMBRACING YOUR SPECIAL BOND WITH ANIMALS**

If you have other pets, spend extra time with them. If you do not have other pets, and you are not ready to get another pet, play with somebody else's pet. Consider volunteering at a shelter or fostering a pet. Don't do anything until you feel ready. You need to decide when it is right to open your heart to another loving animal companion. If you are not ready for the real thing, a stuffed animal may offer some comfort. Adopt and love another, but only when you are ready.

Talking about the pet seems to be an important part of getting through the inevitable grieving process. Remembering all the little things that made your pet an important part of your life helps to ease the pain. Animals teach us unconditional love, loyalty, kindness, and a host of other wonderful things. They make us better people. After a period of mourning and remembering the old days, think about adding a new animal to the family. You and your family will see that life goes on and that it is possible to love again.



### **How long should we wait until we get another pet for the family?**

Even though your house feels very empty, and your young children may be asking for a replacement right away, it is best to wait at least one month before bringing home a new pet. Only you will know when you're ready and willing to open your heart again.

When you're ready, you can check out the dogs and cats in your local shelter. If you feel attracted to a new pet, don't worry that it is a betrayal of the lost animal. Your ability to give a good home to a new pet is really a compliment to your previous relationship.

### **RECOMMENDED READING**



*Coping with the Loss of a Pet: A Gentle Guide for All Who Love a Pet*, Christina M. Lemieux, Ph.D.; Wallace R. Clark & Co.; 1988.

*Pet Loss: A Thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children*, Herbert A. Nieburg, Ph.D. & Arlene Fischer; Harper Perennial; 1996.

*Dog Gone*, Howard Bronson; Bestsell Publications, 6 Samba Circle, Sandwich, MA 02563; 1994.

*Legacies of Love: A Gentle Guide to Healing from the Loss of Your Animal Loved One audiobook*, Teresa Wagner, Upper Access Books.

### **RECOMMENDED READING FOR CHILDREN**

*Forever Dog*, Bill Cochran; Harper Collins; 2007.

*Desser the Best Ever Cat*, Maggie Smith; Knopf Books for young Readers; 2001.

*Goodbye Mousie*; Robie Harris; Aladdin; 2004.

*Forever Buster: What a name! What a dog, we exclaim!*, Martin Rabbett; Hula Moon Press; 2007.

*Saying Goodbye to Lulu*, Corinne Demas; Little Brown Books for Young Readers; 2009.

*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, Judith Viorst; Atheneum Books for Young Readers; 1987.

- The [Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement](#) – Online
- [Grief Support Center](#) at [Rainbowbridge.com](#)



Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge. When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor. Those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind. They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent. His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together....

Author unknown...