

PET LOSS

COPING WITH LOSS

The loss of any close friend can be devastating, and pets can be among our closest companions. A pet frequently provides unconditional love, emotional security, and loyalty. Routine activities with an animal companion often provide structure, fun, relaxation, and social contact in our daily lives. The death of a cherished pet can mean the loss of an entire lifestyle as well as a devoted companion. Lack of understanding and support from people around us can make this period even more difficult.

BE PREPARED

In some instances the death of a pet can be anticipated; the animal may be very old or suffering from an extended illness. Other pet owners may face a sudden loss – the result of an accident or short-term illness. Things that will need to be considered with a gravely ill or seriously injured animal include the pet's quality of life, emotional and financial cost, and when or if euthanasia should be considered. It is best to have contemplated these difficult matters beforehand.

ACCEPT AND EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS

It is important to understand that grief is a personal experience and there are no right or wrong ways to feel it. The most important part of healing is to acknowledge what you are feeling and somehow release it. Try writing your thoughts down in a journal. A good long cry can help, too. Don't be afraid to reach out and talk to your friends or a counselor.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Seek out support. Well-meaning friends who don't understand the bond between you and your pet may say, "He was only a dog." Others may encourage you to "get another one," as if your lifelong companion could be easily replaced. This can make expression of your pain even harder. It is important to realize that you are not alone. A support group can act as a wonderful resource for consolation and affirmation.

DO WHAT YOU CAN TO EASE THE PAIN

Share your thoughts and feelings with others. Talk. Write. Many people find comfort in rituals, like paying their final respects with a brief service or setting up a small memorial with photos and objects that had significance in the pet's life, such as a collar bowl, or toy. It's important to set aside time to think about the good times and remember to pay extra attention to surviving pets. They may need consolation during this difficult period too.

SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS, SPECIAL CONCERNS

The death of a long-time companion can be particularly painful for those who shared a unique relationship with their pet. This includes anyone whose pet was the sole or primary companion, or who was either physically or emotionally dependent upon their pet. Children, the elderly, and handicapped pet owners often have unique bonds with companion animals and may need special attention and support when a pet dies.

Recognizing the tasks of grief can give you landmarks on the path to resolution, and help you recognize that your feelings are normal. The term "task" is used rather than "stage" to avoid giving the impression that grief is something marked by well-defined milestones. The mourner should not feel that he or she must follow some pre-set list, each lasting a determined period of time.

Remember that the grieving process for each individual is as unique as each lost relationship. There is no set pattern or time period for recovery, but there are some general patterns.

Denial. Most people will experience a period of denial, refusing to believe the pet is dying or has died. Denial is usually strongest when there is little time for acceptance, such as with an accident or short-term illness.

Bargaining. For pets facing imminent death, many people will try to make a deal with God, themselves, or even the pet, in a desperate attempt to deter fate.

Anger. In frustration, anger may be directed at anyone involved with the pet, including friends, family, veterinarians, and even the pet owner himself.

Guilt. Guilt is probably the most common emotion resulting from the death of a companion animal. As the pet's primary caretaker, all decisions regarding care are the owner's responsibility. When a pet dies, the owner often feels guilty about actions taken or not taken, even about things that happened before the pet became ill. The most attentive caretaker may feel he or she should have somehow done more. But we all do our best with the information, knowledge, and resources available to us. It is important to try not to second-guess the decisions you made along the way, and to remember that you tried to act in your pet's best interest.

Depression. Depression can indicate the start of acceptance. It is normal to withdraw and contemplate the meaning of the relationship in solitude. Deep and lasting despondency, however, requires professional help.

Acceptance. Now is the time to remember the good times. The daily reminders become a little less painful. You find you can now start to think about the future.

WHEN IS IT TIME TO CONSIDER ANOTHER PET?

A new pet is just that - a new pet. He or she can never replace the pet you lost. If you decide to get another pet, you will be entering into an entirely new and different relationship. Be sure that you are psychologically, physically, and financially ready and willing to commit the time and energy needed to care for a new companion, without resentment or unrealistic expectations.