

Coping with the Loss of a Pet

When someone we love – such as a beloved pet – dies, the loss often causes grief and intense sorrow. By physically showing your grief, you actively mourn the death of your beloved pet. This active mourning will move you on a journey toward reconciling with the loss of your pet.

What Should I Do?

Your journey of grief will not take on a prescribed pattern or look like stages. During the period when you are actively mourning your loss, it may help to consider the following:

Acknowledge the reality of the death

Acknowledging the full reality of your loss may take weeks or months, but will be done in a time that is right for you. 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 him or her not being there.

Move toward the pain of the loss

Experiencing these emotional thoughts and feelings about the death of a pet is a difficult, but important, need. A healthier grief journey may come from taking your time to work through your feelings rather than trying to push them away or ignore it.

Continue your relationship through memories

Your memories allow your pets to live on in you. Embracing these memories, both happy and sad, can be a very slow and, at times, painful process that occurs in small steps. For example, take some time to look at past photos, write a tribute to your pet, or write your pet a letter recalling your time together.

Adjust your self-identity

Part of your self-identity might come from being a pet owner. Others may also think of you in relation to your pet. You may be “the guy who always walked the big black dog around the neighborhood” or “the friend whose cat always jumped on laps.” Adjusting to this change is a central need of mourning.

Search for meaning

When a pet dies, it’s natural to question the meaning and purpose of pets in your life. Coming to terms with these questions is another need you must meet during your grief journey. Know that it is the asking, not the finding of concrete answers, that is important.

Receive support from others

You need the love and support of others because you never “get over” grief. Talking or being with other pet owners who have experienced the death of a pet can be one important way to meet this need.



Things to Remember

The experience of loss is different for everyone and can present unique challenges.

The deafening silence - the silence in your home after the death of a pet may seem excruciatingly loud. While your animal companion occupies physical space in your life and your home, many times their presence is felt more with your senses. When that pet is no longer there, the lack of their presence – the silence - becomes piercing. It becomes the reality of the “presence of the absence.” Merely being aware of this stark reality will assist in preparing you for the flood of emotions.

The special bond with your pet—the relationship shared with your pet is a special and unique bond, a tie that some might find difficult to understand. There will be well-meaning friends and family members who will think that you should not mourn for your pet or who will tell you that you should not be grieving as hard as you are because “it’s just a cat” or “just a dog.” Your grief is normal and the relationship you shared with your special friend needs to be mourned.

Grief can’t be ranked—sometimes our heads get in the way of our heart’s desire to mourn by trying to justify the depth of our emotion. Some people will then want to “rank” their grief, pitting their grief emotions with others who may be “worse.” While this is normal, your grief is your grief and deserves the care and attention of anyone who is experiencing a loss.

Questions of spirituality—during this time in your grief journey, you may find yourself questioning your beliefs regarding pets and the after-life. Many people around you will also have their own opinions. It will be important during this time for you to find the answers right for you and your individual and personal beliefs.



'There is a bridge called the Rainbow Bridge because of its many colors. Just this side of the Rainbow Bridge there is a land of meadows, hills and valleys with lush green grass.

When a beloved pet dies, the pet goes to this place. There is always food and water and warm spring weather. All the animals who have 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. Her bright eyes are intent; her eager body begins to quiver. Suddenly she begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, her legs carrying her faster and faster. You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion. 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 the Rainbow Bridge together, never again to be separated.'

[ASPCA National Pet Loss Helpline](#) is available 24/7, 1-877-474-3310

Helping Pets Who Have Lost Their Best Buddy

Losing a housemate can be hard on the entire family— including your other pets. Here's what you can do to help.

Sometimes when highly attached pets are separated, we see what is called a “distress reaction.” Signs of a pet’s distress can sometimes look like human grief, often characterized by changes in sleeping and eating habits, disinterest in usual activities, and a reluctance to be alone or away from human family members. Some pets will “search” for their buddy, wandering around the house. And sometimes, pet parents and veterinarians will allow surviving pets to be present during euthanasia or to see and sniff their buddy’s body after death. While some who’ve followed this plan believe it helps, others report no reactions at all from their surviving pets.

What you can do

So what can you do if your pet seems to be grieving? Your veterinarian will be able to recommend the best course of action, but consider the following:

- **Keep routines as consistent as possible.**
- **Keep your pet’s diet and mealtimes the same.**
If your pet hasn’t been interested in eating for several days following the death of his or her buddy, it’s tempting to offer table scraps and treats. However, if pets learn that not eating results in treats, they may become less likely to eat their regular meals!
- **Although it’s human nature to want to comfort your pets, try to spend time with them when they are behaving in desirable ways.**

If pets receive more attention from you when they are depressed and inactive, these behaviors may become a way for them to get more attention from you. You can create opportunities to provide positive reinforcement by keeping your surviving pets active. Exercising together may help you feel a bit better while you’re grieving, too.

- **Allow your surviving pets to work out their own relationships.**

When several animals live together, they often form very specific relationships. When a member of the group dies, the group can become temporarily unstable. This might result in conflicts involving growling, hissing, barking and even mild attacks. If this happens in your household, talk to your veterinarian about what you can do.



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Grief is not always well understood—in pets or in people. Keep close attention to your surviving pet for signs of distress, and don’t feel pressure to “replace” the pet you’ve lost. You can always reach out to your veterinary healthcare team to discuss your concerns. For now, take a deep breath, keep your furry friend close and remember the good times with their best buddy.