

# Grieving the Loss of a Pet

*Understanding and coping with the grief of losing a pet*

Most American pet owners consider their pets to be members of the family, and well over half spend more time taking their pets to the vet than going to the doctor for themselves. They are also more likely to know the names of their neighbors' pets than the names of their neighbors. Source: Sky Magazine.

Given the rich and intense relationships most pet owners share with their animal companions, the loss of a pet can be very painful. The loss of a beloved pet can trigger overwhelming feelings of grief and sadness. Physically, you might have trouble sleeping, lose weight, feel tired all the time or have difficulty focusing. Your feelings might surprise you, but shouldn't if you consider all of the things your animal companion brought to your life, chief among them love and affection.

Grieving might take you to your spiritual and emotional edges, so it's often tempting to try to avoid it. Yet the more you are willing to embrace your emotions, the better equipped you are to live and love fully.

## Understanding sadness

It may come as a surprise that you feel so deeply about your pet. You may have been aware, but not mindful, of the many wonderful gifts your pet brought to your life. For many, the loss of a pet is the loss of a trusted companion. As you experience sadness and grief about the death of your pet, take time to consider your pet's special place in your life. The questions below can help you understand why you are so sad and, hopefully, give you positive ways to remember your pet.

- How did my pet come into my life?
- What types of activities did we do together?
- What important life moments did my pet see me through? (births, deaths, marriage, divorce, etc.)
- How did being with my pet make me feel?

## How is the loss of a pet similar to and different from the loss of a human friend or family member?

One important difference between pet loss and human loss is that pet loss is often not appreciated. Friends and family may ask "What's the big deal? It's just a pet!" There is also the assumption by many that pet loss shouldn't hurt as much as human loss, because humans are supposedly more important than pets.

For someone who has truly loved a pet, however, the loss of that animal can feel just as devastating as a human loss, if not more. The very things that make animals different than humans often make them more endearing. An animal who doesn't talk can't pass judgment or give you the silent treatment or withhold companionship and love. For many, pets provide a source of unwavering love, affection and companionship. The qualities of a beloved pet are hard to match in human form. The loss of that companion can be heartbreaking.

The truth is that all losses, animal or human, can plunge you into despair and may signal the beginning of a profound spiritual-emotional journey. Like grief for humans, grief for animal companions can only be dealt with over time and in stages.

## Coping with grief

Fortunately, you are endowed with the ability to cry, to rage, to wonder, to tell stories, and to reach out for comfort from another. The more you use these gifts, the easier it will be to find meaning in the loss.

**You might also draw on your past experiences with loss to help you on your way through the grieving process. Some questions to consider:**

- How do you individually cope with loss?
- What have you learned from other losses that will help you meet this loss gracefully?
- What kind of support will help you deal with grief now and in the future?

**“How shall I grieve?” is a question to be answered differently by each person. Here are some suggestions which might be helpful:**

- **Pay attention to your feelings**, even if you don’t understand them. Write about your feelings and talk with others about them.
- **Don’t assume that the current grief will be like previous ones.** You are not the same person who grieved before (though old griefs may definitely come alive in new sorrows).
- **Listen to music**, especially instrumental music that helps express your sorrow and move through it.
- **Create your own art, music and poetry** to express your feelings. Don’t worry whether it is “good.” Just do it.
- **Move your body.** Walk in the woods, exercise or take a yoga class. Anything that gets you moving for at least a short time during the day can help lift your spirits.
- **Spend some time with others who have lost pets.** Check out the message boards and pet loss support groups at the end of this article. If your own therapist or clergy does not work well with the grief of pet loss, find someone who does.

### **How long does it take to grieve?**

Every person experiences grief differently and on a unique time line. Often it depends on how willing you are to feel the grief and work through it. The more you try to repress your feelings, the longer the process might take.

### **Is it normal to feel sad and in pain when grieving?**

It is natural to feel depressed and in pain after losing a pet. Feelings of sadness after death are like a wounded animal’s instincts to withdraw to a safe spot and “lick your wounds.” They can also be an indicator that your usual notions of faith and reality have been shattered, which can lead to deep questions about the meaning of life and impending death. Feelings of sadness can be a cue that you need to slow down and allow yourself to feel the loss. You also need to find a way, when it is time, to move on with life.

While feelings of sadness are normal after death, actual clinical depression is not. If the depressed feelings continue for a long time or if you are unable to return to normal activities, you should consider seeing a therapist and/or your clergy person.

### **How can I deal with the loss of my pet when family and friends devalue my loss?**

Unfortunately, this is a very common situation. Your friends and family may not understand how you could be so upset about losing “just a pet.” They may not understand because they don’t have a pet of their own or because they are unable to appreciate the companionship and love provided by a pet.

To do your best grieving, you need to stand up for yourself. That doesn’t mean arguing with others about whether or not your grief is appropriate, but it does mean accepting the fact that the best support for your grief may come from outside your usual circle of families and friends. Seek out others who have lost pets; they will appreciate the magnitude of your loss, and may be able to suggest ways of getting through the grieving process.

### **Should I get a new pet right away?**

Common wisdom says no, because pets are not interchangeable. Though it’s tempting to fill the void of one pet’s passing with another pet, most vets and grief counselors say it’s best to mourn the old pet so that the new one can be appreciated fully for its own sake, not as a replacement. That may mean choosing another type of pet or a different breed. Follow your instincts; you will know when it is right to bring a new animal companion into your life.

This article was created by Pat McHenry Sullivan, M.A., and Gina Kemp, M.A. Last modified April 09.