

Grieving for Your Pet



A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING PET LOSS

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Introduction

The loss of a pet can be one of the hardest things to go through. For many of us, pets have been our partners through life's ups and downs. Some people are surprised to find that they feel as much grief — or even more grief — over losing their pet as they did over the loss of a person.

Grief is the natural way we cope with loss. It is the sum of everything you feel when something or someone important to you is no longer in your life. Grief can leave you feeling worn out, raw, and overwhelmed.

You *can* get through this. That may be hard to believe right now. It will take time and patience. We hope this booklet will help you understand what you're feeling. Understanding your grief may help you find comfort and healing.



How Pet Loss Is Different

Our relationships with our pets are often easier than our relationships with other people. Pets are innocent. They do not try to upset us or hurt our feelings. Since pets give unconditional love and friendship, we may feel their loss more strongly.

One of the hardest parts about losing a pet is that others may not think the loss is important. They may say that your pet was “just an animal.” They may ask you when you’re going to get a new pet. You may even be frustrated with yourself for being so sad.

It’s important to know that your loss is real, and that grieving is normal. The size of your pet does not determine the size of your sadness. Many people feel the same grief over the loss of a bird, mouse, or fish as they do over losing a cat or dog. Any pet represents a special chapter in your life. He or she may have been there during some of your life’s biggest moments.

“Not the least hard thing to bear when they go from us, these quiet friends, is that they carry away with them so many years of our own lives.”

— John Galsworthy, novelist and playwright

After the Loss

The full reality of your loss may not have hit you yet. It may seem unreal that your pet is gone. You may feel like you are just going through the motions of daily life. It may be hard to take time to grieve at work or school.

Having a burial or memorial service for your pet may help heal your grief. Some people choose to make their own rituals. If there is no ceremony, you can remember your pet in your own way.

What you can do:

- **Talk to your vet about burial or cremation options for your pet.** Some areas have cemeteries just for pets. Or you can have your pet cremated and keep the ashes in a special box. If laws permit, spread the ashes in your pet's favorite spot outside.
- **If other family members lived with you and your pet, involve them in planning.** This will help everyone find closure and draw closer together.
- **Give yourself time to accept the loss.** Take quiet time to reflect when you need it. Take time off from work if you are able.

Physical Effects of Grief

The loss of your pet may affect you in ways you did not expect. You probably knew you were going to feel very sad. But there are often physical side effects after a big loss. Some common symptoms:

- Trouble sleeping
- Sleeping too much
- Eating too much
- Not eating enough
- Chest or stomach pain
- Headaches
- Trouble focusing
- Trouble remembering things

These are normal physical reactions to grief. It does not mean you are going crazy or overreacting to the loss. Physical symptoms should improve as your emotions level out.

What you can do:

- **Rest.** Your body needs rest to bear the physical symptoms of grief. If you can't sleep, try herbal teas or soft music to help you relax. Some people find comfort in sleeping with their pet's favorite blanket or stuffed toy.
- **Surround yourself with uplifting people.** Seek out friends who understand your grief or who are willing to listen.
- **Get regular exercise and eat a healthy diet.** Drink plenty of water. Healthy living helps both body and mind.
- **Cry.** Crying helps let the pain out. Tears help release stress, lower blood pressure, and help healing.
- **Avoid harmful habits.** Alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, or other bad habits will only mask grief. This delays the grieving process. It may be even harder to face the pain later. Seek help if you turn to these types of things to handle your grief.
- **Be gentle with yourself.** Limit your "To Do" list. It's okay if you can't stay focused or if you forget things.

Emotional Effects of Grief

Just as each grief journey is unique, so are the emotions of grief. Other members of your family may be grieving the loss of your pet differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel when you are grieving.

Allow yourself to feel all the emotions you need to feel. Try not to ignore them. Also, don't let others tell you how you should feel. Remember that whatever you are feeling is right for you.

There are many different emotions of grieving — too many to list here. Some common feelings shared by grieving people are:

Feelings of frustration

You may be frustrated when a sudden reminder of your pet causes you to break down. You may feel like this is keeping you from moving forward. This kind of back-and-forth is normal. Grief is an emotional journey — it is not something that goes away overnight. Be patient with your feelings.

Feelings of anger

Anger over a loss is normal. Because your pet relied on you for care, you may be angry with yourself. You may feel like you didn't do enough. You also may be angry with the veterinarian or with God. It's okay to be angry. Recognize your anger. Let it out in ways that do not hurt yourself or others. Scream in your car, hit a pillow, or exercise to release anger.

Feelings of relief

You might be relieved if your pet was very sick and needed a lot of care. You may feel guilty for feeling that your burden has been lifted. It's okay. You are allowed to feel relief.

Feelings of shock

In the first days after the loss, you may be alarmed when you wake up and your pet isn't in his or her normal place. During grief, it is also normal to not feel anything at all. There may be a period of time when you feel stunned, lost, or empty.

Feelings of guilt

You may think you could have prevented the death if you had noticed signs of poor health sooner. You may feel bad that you did not have the money for costly treatment. Know that you are having these feelings because you loved your pet very much.

Feelings of regret after euthanasia

Making the decision to euthanize a pet is a painful one. You may feel like you waited too long and let your pet suffer. You may wonder if you should have waited longer. If you are having regrets, try to accept that you cannot change what has happened. Trust that you made a choice based on your best judgment. Remember that your courage and love freed your pet from pain.

Feeling awkward about sharing your grief

You might find that others are not comfortable with your grief. You may try to hide your feelings in order to feel accepted, even around other pet owners. There is nothing wrong with grieving for your pet. Your pet was a part of your family.

Feeling as though your pet is still there

After the loss, you may feel like you can still hear, see, or feel your pet. This is normal when you have lost a daily presence in your life. Try to think of this as a daily reminder of the love you shared with your pet. It will get easier with time.

Adjusting to Daily Life

After the loss, it can be hard to adjust to daily life. Parts of your day centered on the needs of your pet: feeding, walking, playing, grooming, and other daily duties. The sudden loss of these routines can leave you feeling empty. Each missed routine is a reminder of your lost pet.

This can be really hard on those who live alone. You may not have any other family to support you through your grief. You may feel like you no longer have a purpose in life without your pet to feed and care for. Reach out to your friends and community for support.

Whatever your situation, it can be painful to get through the day when your pet is no longer there. Be gentle with yourself during these early days of grief.

What you can do:

- **When you are ready, find new, positive habits to fill your time.** Try doing them during times you used to spend with your pet. For example, if you went on daily walks with your dog, invite a friend to walk with you.
- **Make a list of activities you really enjoy.** Put them on your calendar. This will give you things to look forward to. Some ideas:
 - Meditate or do yoga
 - Go for a walk or exercise
 - Read an uplifting book
 - Call or visit with a friend
 - Watch your favorite show
 - Work in a garden
- **Be aware that grief can affect your judgment.** Try to wait a while before making any big decisions.

Expressing Your Grief

Expressing grief is an important part of healing from loss. Doing this might seem too overwhelming at first. Try small ways of expressing your grief when you feel ready.

Talking about your grief is a healthy way to express it. Share your feelings with a fellow pet owner, online support group, or counselor. Don't feel bad about distancing yourself from people who don't take your grief seriously.

If you are not comfortable talking, you may want to express yourself creatively. Writing, drawing, music, or other forms of art can help. Keep your work private or share it with others. You don't have to be a great writer or artist. The goal is to let your feelings out in positive ways.

What you can do:

- **Some ideas for creative expressions:**
 - Keep a journal
 - Write poetry or a story
 - Make a scrapbook
 - Sing or play an instrument
 - Paint or draw
 - Build or make something
- **If faith helps you, connect with your spiritual community.** It is normal to rethink beliefs or adopt new beliefs after a loss. You can still rely on your faith community for support.
- **Write a letter or journal entry addressed to your pet.** If you are having trouble letting go of anger or guilt, use this space to say you're sorry or vent your feelings.
- **Try online support groups.** There are many websites focused on helping those who have lost a pet. Just reading other people's grief stories can be comforting.

Remembering Your Pet

When you lose a pet, you may be afraid that your relationship with your pet is also lost. You might be worried that you will forget your pet over time.

The loss of your pet does not make the time you spent together any less important or special. Focus on the happy times you had with your pet. Just like any other family member, your pet will never be forgotten.

What you can do:

- **Keep your pet's things for as long as you need to.** You may want to keep your pet's belongings for a long time. Or you may not want to keep anything at all. Do what feels right to you. Consider donating your pet's things to an animal shelter when you feel ready. Some people keep a small memento of their pet, like a collar or favorite toy, in a special place.
- **Keep a photo album of your pet.** Put these photos in a family room, or keep them private.
- **Post a memorial on social media, a pet loss website, or a blog.**
- **Light a candle for your pet.**
- **Plant a flower or tree in your pet's favorite spot in the yard.**
- **Donate to your local animal shelter.** Give a few toys, a bag of your pet's favorite food, or anything else the shelter may need.
- **Pick a symbol that represents your pet,** like a heart or a paw print. Think of him or her whenever you see one.

Grieving Children

For many children, the loss of a pet is their first experience with death. The ways adults around them react to this loss can set the tone for kids. It may affect how they understand and deal with grief for years to come.

A child can have a very close bond with a pet. A pet is a playmate and a best friend. The loss of a pet can be huge to a child. Children will need your support as they grieve during this time.

What you can do:

- **Let children see you grieve.** They need a good example to follow. Show them it's okay to cry. Show them how to work out their grief through play, art, or talking.
- **Be honest when talking about death.** Let children know what happened to the pet. Assure them it is not their fault. Avoid saying things like "He went to sleep." This can make kids feel afraid of sleeping. Avoid saying the pet ran away. Kids may wait for the pet to come home and feel betrayed when they learn the truth.
- **Do not replace the pet without talking to your child first.** Even a pet as small as a goldfish can be important to your child. Getting a new pet without giving your child time to process the loss can cause emotional distress.
- **Keep in touch with how kids are doing in school.** They may begin to act out as they try to cope. Let your children's teachers know about the situation.
- **Involve your children in age-appropriate rituals after the loss.** Invite them to draw pictures or make something for the pet. Older children can post a memorial on social media.

Other Pets

Other pets in your family may also be affected by the loss. Even animals that did not seem to get along with your pet may be confused or act strange. They are adjusting to daily life without your lost pet, too.

It is normal for your other pets to change sleeping or eating habits. Many signs of animal grief are like what you may be feeling: loss of appetite, feeling tired, lack of joy, and other changes in behavior. Your other pets may try to look for their missing friend. Like you, they will adjust to the loss slowly over time.

What you can do:

- **Give your pets extra love and attention.** They may become more loving or clingy during this time. Reassure them that you are not going away.
- **Stick to your normal routine as much as possible.** Feed, walk, and play with your pets on the same schedule as before. More changes may make it harder for your other pets to adjust.
- **Talk to your vet if your other pets become overly anxious or stressed after the loss.** Your vet may suggest special medicines or training.

“Until one has loved an animal,
a part of one’s soul remains unawakened.”

— Anatole France, poet and novelist

Getting a New Pet

Many people who go through pet loss struggle with the idea of getting a new pet. Even if they really miss having a pet, they may feel guilty about “replacing” the pet they have lost.

Each pet is unique. Any new animal you bring home will not be replacing the pet you lost. Think of the new pet as another addition to your family.

Some people feel ready to get another pet right away, but others never do. Only you will know when or if you are ready for a new companion. Wait until you feel emotionally ready to accept a new animal into your life.

What you can do:

- **Remember that your new pet is not the same as the pet you lost.** Your new pet will have its own traits and behaviors. Try not to compare it to pets you’ve had before.
- **Do not feel pressured to get another pet.** It’s okay to decide that you do not want to bring another pet into your life. Sharing your life with an animal is a personal choice.
- **Talk with family members who live with you before deciding.** Other family members may need more time. If you all choose to get a new pet, be sure the new pet gets along with your other pets.

Moving Forward

For some, the grieving process can take days or weeks. Other people may need months or years to move through their grief. Do not rush yourself. Take all the time you need to grieve.

As you work through grief, you may cry less and enjoy yourself more. This does not mean that you miss or love your pet less. You are being comforted by memories of your pet instead of relying on your pet's daily presence.

Over time, the wounds of your loss will heal. Seeing places and things that remind you of your pet will bring joy instead of tears. Until then, take life one moment and one step at a time. May you find moments of peace and happiness — now and in the future.


"It is amazing how much love and laughter [pets] bring into our lives and even how much closer we become with each other because of them."

— John Grogan, from *Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World's Worst Dog*

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