



Grief Resources

Coping with the Loss of a Companion Animal

*Coping effectively with grief...
"is not the process of forgetting,
it is the process of remembering
with less pain and more joy."*

- Marie-José Dhaese

Grief

"Time does not heal all wounds, but time softens the intensity of grief."
Anonymous

Grief is a healthy and normal response to loss. Attempting to suppress feelings of grief can actually prolong the grieving process. Grief can feel like being lost. The familiar things we relied on to live each day are gone. We must find new anchors or stabilizers along the way and learn a new way of relating to the world and people around us. It is also common to replay the last moments of your pet's life repeatedly in your mind, like a videotape that keeps playing the same scene over and over. No one can hurry the process or provide a magic cure for grief. When grief is new, it is common to feel exhausted: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Changes in appetite, sleeping patterns, or health are frequently reported. Those who are grieving often describe feelings of being out of control, isolation, and loneliness. Things that seemed so important before may now seem trivial. Others may experience a sense of "life isn't fair" or being in a tunnel or fog while everyday life swirls around them. All of these feelings are normal and part of the grieving process, which follows no organized plan, rules, timetable, formula, or schedule. Don't be surprised if you start to feel better, and then feel as if a wave has hit you. There will be ups and downs in the process of grieving.

"We will not have the intensity of the pain and sorrow we had at the beginning of our grief. We will go on with life and find a new normal for us, but life will never be as it was before the death..."
Carole Dyck, R.N

The purpose of healthy grieving is not to "get over" the death of a loved one, but to integrate the experience of a pet's death into present life. In this process, it is not unusual for certain memories of your pet to become blurred. This does not mean that you are forgetting your pet or that your love is diminished. The truth is, you will ALWAYS love this very special member of your family. The hope is that as time goes on, the feelings of sadness will become less difficult. In the beginning, you may be sad to think or talk about your companion animal. Eventually, the hope is that you will be able to talk and even smile or laugh at good memories.

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Guilt

"It is natural to consider what could have been done differently, but to dwell on blame is not constructive. In reflecting on our experience, I know that I have gained a new perspective on quality of life for pets and what that means for them and us."

- Steven Glass, Veterinary Medical Center client

Guilt and uncertainty are probably two of the most common emotions that people experience after the death of their pet. You may find yourself thinking continuously about what you perceive you could have, should have, or would have done to prevent or postpone your pet's death.

Some suggestions for coping with guilt include:

1. Be truthful with yourself about why you feel guilty.
2. Write a letter to your pet expressing feelings you may be struggling with.
3. Do a reality check. Most people assume that if they had done something differently, the outcome would have been better. It's just as likely, however, that if you had done things differently, the outcome would have been the same.
4. Remember that you are human. No one is perfect. Accepting your imperfections will aid you in working through your emotions.
5. Remember that all living things die. There is not always an answer to why bad things happen and you do not have to find someone (yourself or others) or something to blame. Realize that sometimes you are powerless and that you cannot control everything that happens to your loved ones. What you can control is how you choose to respond to the events that happen in your life.
6. Try writing or talking to a trusted friend or advisor about your thoughts and feelings of guilt. Expressing your concerns in a safe and supportive environment can help you examine your emotions from a different perspective.

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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Honoring the Bond
vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond

Coping with the Loss of a Companion Animal

Seeking Support

"You don't heal from a loss because time passes, you heal because of what you do with that time."
- Carol Crandell

While there is no standard duration for grief, the pain of loss normally eases with time. You can work through the process by applying healthy coping skills, such as talking with others about your memories and emotions and facing the grief, rather than trying to stay distracted or busy to avoid intense emotions. If your feelings of sorrow or guilt have not diminished after several weeks or if they impair your ability to engage in family, social, work, or other functions, you may wish to reach out for support. Many people have found comfort in calling a pet loss support hotline, joining a pet loss support group, reading books about coping with the death of a pet, or talking with a trusted counselor or advisor.

Celebrate Your Pet's Life

"Our animals shepherd us through certain eras of our lives. When we are ready to turn the corner and make it on our own, they let us go." Anonymous

Some owners would like a way to memorialize their companion animal. The following are some ways that others have found helpful:

- Conduct a memorial service
- Keep your pet's tags, toys, collars, bedding, etc.
- Keep your horse's shoes, tail, mane hair
- Save condolence cards or e-mails from friends and family
- Create a picture collage, scrapbook, story, or poem about your pet
- If you chose cremation, you may keep the ashes in an urn or locket, or you may choose to scatter them in a place that was special to your pet
- Journal your pet's story; how, when, and where you met, unique personality traits, nicknames, what you love the most, and what you'll miss the most
- Donate time, money, or talent in your pet's honor (to a rescue organization, humane society, or veterinary medical center)

Adopting Again

The decision about bringing another animal into the home is very personal. Some families may decide not to adopt a new companion animal because of the emotional, physical, or financial demands involved with companion animal care. Others may feel the time is right to share their home and heart with another pet.

The time to consider adopting a new companion animal is when the entire family has had sufficient time to deal with the emotions of grief. Adopting too soon can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment toward the new family member. The important thing to remember is that bringing another animal into the home is not a betrayal of the one that is gone. You will never replace the one you've lost. You will simply be opening your home and heart to a new friend.

For families who want to consider adoption, it will be important to remember that each companion animal has a special and unique personality. Take time to discuss different sizes, breeds, or colors before making a final decision. Consider the needs and temperament of any surviving companion animals.

The Honoring the Bond program at The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

The mission of the Honoring the Bond program is to recognize and honor the human-animal bond by providing support to companion animal owners. Honoring the Bond program services are available, at no cost, to clients of the Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center.

Our social workers can assist in the following ways:

- Act as a liaison between the companion animal owner and veterinary medical team
- Provide crisis intervention during difficult situations
- Assist in processing difficult decisions (quality of life assessments, treatment decisions)
- Be present before, during, and/or after euthanasia
- Facilitate family discussions with children
- Provide assessment and referral for further follow-up counseling, if needed
- Provide resources, including reading lists, websites, counselor and pet loss support group referrals, cremation/burial resources, memorial ideas, etc.

If you would like to speak with someone from the Honoring the Bond program, you may:

- Ask your clinician, student, or client services representative to contact us
- Contact us directly at (614) 247-8607
- Access our website and email at: vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond

Honoring the Bond is sponsored in part by:



schoedingerpetservices.com
(614) 224-0010

This brochure is adapted from the original work of Jennifer Brandt, MSW, LISW, PhD



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Honoring the Bond
vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond

Do Companion Animals Grieve?

Do Companion Animals Grieve?

Families that live together form close attachments. When a companion animal dies, surviving pets may “cling” to their human family members, be more reactive to stimuli, appear anxious or depressed, or demonstrate a loss of interest in playing, sleeping, or eating. These behavioral and emotional changes may be a temporary response to the loss, a distress response to the owners’ sadness, a distress response to changes in routine that occur as the result of the death, or an underlying medical condition.*

If you have concerns about your surviving animal’s behavior, you may consider scheduling a consultation with our Behavior Clinic at vet.osu.edu/vmc/behavior.

Look for Changes in the Social Structure

Watch for changes in the relationships between surviving companion animals; particularly if the surviving pet often looked to the other pet for direction. Such reactions may be more common in species or individuals that show more elaborate social interactions.

It can be stressful whenever members are added or lost from groups of social animals. Remaining animals may begin to show signs of separation anxiety. These behaviors include panting, pacing, whining, drooling, howling, barking, and not eating treats while alone. When your pet is alone, video can be utilized to help monitor and record stress levels.

Exercise is the best non-drug stress reliever you have available for your pet. It can also be a helpful tool in managing your grief response. Prior to beginning a new exercise program with your pet, consult with your pet’s veterinarian and your own family doctor.

There are now pheromones available, in sprays and atomizers, and collars, which may be effective tools for reducing your pet’s anxiety. DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) is a replication of the pheromone that a mother dog releases while nursing her young. For cats, Feliway is a replication of the calming cheek marking pheromone. Many veterinarians, pet stores, and pet supply catalogues have these products available.

For the most part, allow the companion animals to work out their own relationships. Punishment should be avoided as it increases levels of anxiety, fear, and aggression. Instead, try rewarding positive behaviors and interrupting undesired behaviors with obedience commands or redirection to a new activity.

Common underlying medical conditions can contribute to behavioral changes. A thorough medical examination may be needed to rule out these conditions. If you have any questions or concerns regarding changes in a surviving companion animal’s behavior, consult with your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist, or a certified applied animal behaviorist.

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Written by Brandt, J., Shreyer, T., Day, S., and Feltes, E. (2005) and adapted from *The Human Animal Bond and Grief* by Lagoni, Butler, and Hetts

*Important Health Alert

If a cat stops eating, this can be a medical emergency. Please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

If a dog stops eating, alert your veterinarian.

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Do Companion Animals Grieve?

Adopting Again

In any family, new members join by birth, adoption, friendship, or partnership, but not always by design or plan. The time to consider adopting a new companion animal is when the entire family has had sufficient time to deal with the emotions of grief. Adopting too soon can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment toward the new family member who cannot take the place of the companion animal who has died.

Some families may decide not to adopt a new companion animal into their lives because of the emotional, physical, or financial demands involved with companion animal care. Others may feel the time is right to share their home and heart with another pet. For families who want to consider adoption, it will be important to remember that each companion animal has a special and unique personality. Take time to discuss different sizes, breeds, or colors before making a final decision. Consider the needs and temperament of any surviving companion animals. When adopting a new pet, remind yourself that getting another pet is not an act of disloyalty. After all, your companion animal was happy when you were happy.

Assistance with identifying the best match for your family (pre-selection counseling) is available through most small animal practitioners, veterinary behaviorists, and certified applied animal behaviorists.

To read more about introducing new pets, please visit indoorpet.osu.edu.



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Helping Children Cope with the Serious Illness or Death of a Companion Animal

Honoring the Bond

Should Children be Informed?

YES! Learning to accept illness, injury or death is a natural experience in life. It is important that children have the opportunity to participate in family discussions of these issues. Being involved in the decision-making and treatment process of a family pet that is seriously ill or injured may provide valuable lessons for children about responsibility, compassion, commitment and coping.

WHY? When a companion animal is ill, parents often try to hide worry and anxiety from their children. This protection philosophy can backfire. If children do not find out the information they need from you, they may seek other, less reliable, sources of support. Each time a child inquires and is denied adequate information, they delve into their own imagination or memory to create an answer. The longer such misinformation exists, the more difficult it is to correct. Because of the anxiety and fear created by not talking with children about serious issues that impact the family, children may experience adverse emotional reactions. They may become angry, hoping that their tantrums will restore normality. They may neglect playing and eating because of guilt—not realizing that their own actions had nothing to do with the illness, injury or death of their companion animal. Involving children throughout the process will most likely alleviate fears and anxieties.

HOW? Each child is a unique individual and your discussions will be based on a variety of factors, including age, development, personality, religion, and culture. Offer explanations or answer questions at the most basic level appropriate for your child. Let your child guide you with additional questions. The well-being of your child should be the main focus. Your child may be consulted and encouraged to participate in decision making, but never forced.

Developmental Stages and Grief

The following serve as general guidelines for the grieving process of children. Many children develop differently and you will need to follow your child's lead. (Adapted with permission of the Bereavement Committee, University of Virginia Health System, and the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia)

Infants and Toddlers can and do grieve. To them, the death of someone close can be an issue of separation and abandonment. They may experience sleep disturbances, regressive behavior, or explosive emotions. Use a reassuring, loving voice and gestures to show your child that someone is there to love and care for them.

Ages 3-5: Do not understand that death is final. They know their pet is gone but they believe it is a temporary situation. Preschoolers need reassurance that someone is there to take care of them and that they are secure. Give simple and direct answers to questions about the death. Read to the child from an age-appropriate book about loss. Encourage the expression of feelings through play, talking or drawing.

Ages 5-8: Understand that death is final, but they have difficulty imagining it on a personal level. They may visualize death as an angel, skeleton or monster. Expect questions about the physical aspects of death, and don't be surprised if a child in this age group expresses anger at the pet for leaving them. Answer questions directly. Let them know that their pet loved them and that it's okay to feel angry, or any other emotion.

Ages 9-12: Understand that death is final, personal and something that happens to everyone. Expect children in this age range to ask many questions and to have an almost morbid curiosity about death. Although they may appear to be coping well, preteens tend to keep many of their feelings hidden. Give them the time and opportunity to talk, share, express themselves and ask questions.

Ages 13-16: Because adolescents may not verbally express the intensity of their emotions, they are often mistakenly judged by their behavioral reactions to grief. Adolescents may attempt to mask their emotions from all but their closest friends. Although persons in this age group may refrain from emotions or expressions, clinical studies show that teenagers often have more intense grief than any other age group. Because they want to think of themselves as adults, it is important to encourage and respect their opinions and suggestions.

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How to Help Your Child

Honesty. Using deception, no matter how well intended, is never recommended. It will be difficult to regain the trust of your child if they ever discover that you distorted the truth or lied to them. Prepare children ahead of time for what to expect. Hold a family meeting and discuss the veterinarian's diagnosis, the pet's prognosis and the cost of treatments and care, including side effects and the pet's quality of life. If available and willing, you may want to consider enlisting the help of your veterinarian in having these discussions with your children.

Show emotions. Respect and encourage your child's need to express and share feelings of sadness. Let them see you upset and crying. By talking about sad feelings and crying, children learn that these emotions and behaviors are acceptable and appropriate. Don't feel as if you must have all the answers; sometimes just listening is enough. Expect that young children will ask and need answers to the same questions over and over again. Don't inadvertently cut off their feelings by noting how well your children are handling their grief or how brave or strong they are. Explain that it is the pet's death that makes you sad; otherwise they may worry that they are to blame.

Let children express grief in their own way. Children often react to death with outbursts of laughter, aggressiveness, hostility, boisterous activity, or in some other manner that may be unacceptable by adult standards. Be patient and supportive. Recognize that children grieve differently than adults and should not be punished because adults do not understand their reactions. Do not reward inappropriate behavior, however. Try to keep the child's routines as normal as possible. Behavior deemed inappropriate may be positively redirected by role-modeling acceptable alternatives for the child. (Although these reactions are quite normal, prolonged adverse reactions may indicate a need for the support of a professionally trained grief counselor.)

Respect the feelings of other family members. Recognize that not everyone in the family is equally attached to the pet and that not everyone shows their feelings or grieves in the same way.

Inform others of what's going on in your children's lives. Ask neighbors, teachers, relatives and friends for extra support and understanding of your children right now, and for help in keeping a watchful eye on them at this sad and difficult time.

Understanding Euthanasia

Include children in the euthanasia decision. Children need help to understand why the decision has to be made and a feeling that they've participated in making it. They also need an opportunity to say good-bye and make the most of whatever time they may have left with their pet.

If at all possible, do not plan to euthanize a companion animal while a child is away from home. If this cannot be prevented for medical reasons, be honest. Do not say that the companion animal ran away from home (unless this is the truth).

Help young children understand why euthanasia is necessary, in words they can understand.

Old age: "When animals get very old, their bodies wear out and stop working."

Terminal illness: "Because the disease couldn't be stopped, our pet is very sick. His body has worn out and stopped working."

An accident: "A terrible thing happened (hit by car etc.). Our pet's body was badly hurt and couldn't be fixed. It stopped working."

Explain euthanasia in a developmentally appropriate way. Explain that the pet will be helped to die peacefully and without pain.

"We will be taking Fluffy to the veterinarian to help her die. Dr. Smith will give Fluffy a shot filled with medicine that only works on animals. The shot will stop Fluffy's heart. When her heart stops, she won't be able to breathe on her own. She will not feel any pain."

"When an animal is suffering, we can choose to help them die. It's a very sad choice to make, but one that we want to think about because we love Snowball so much. We know that she is very sick and will die."

Avoid the common phrase for euthanasia, "put to sleep." Since we go to sleep nightly, associating this act with death creates anxiety and might lead to disruptions in sleeping routines or behaviors. (It can also cause fear over surgery and anesthesia.)

Allow the child to be present for the pet's euthanasia, if they choose. Let them know you will support their decision. The reality of a peaceful death is less traumatic to children than their fantasy of it. Young children may not understand the permanence of death unless they actually see that their pet is not "just asleep." If your child is not present for the euthanasia, you may ask them if they want to see their pet afterward. Demonstrate that it is OK to talk with their pet and touch its body. Offer older children an opportunity to spend time alone with their deceased pet so they can express their emotions privately, if needed.

Helping Children Cope with the Serious Illness or Death of a Companion Animal

Honoring the Bond

Explaining Death

Properly explaining death can help to demystify the concept as well as alleviate possible guilt. Explaining death to children can help to alleviate their fears or misconceptions. Children often wonder if the death could have been prevented or if the same thing might happen to them. Children also may wonder if they caused the death by something they said or thought. Make sure the child does not feel at fault—that they understand that their thoughts, feelings or words did not cause the death.

“It’s okay if you got mad at Socks. Your thoughts didn’t hurt him.”

Be simple and concrete. Use words such as “died” or “is dead.” Explain that every living thing can get sick or be hurt and that no living thing lives forever.

“Joey was very sick and his heart stopped beating.”

“Fluffy’s body stopped working.”

“You had nothing to do with Skippy’s death. He was very sick and his lungs and heart no longer worked.”

“At some point, all animals die.”

“Many animals have shorter lives than we do. They don’t live as long as people.”

Avoid euphemisms. Children are very literal and may become confused when adults use other terms for death such as “passed away,” “gone to sleep,” “moved on to a better place,” “left us,” or “gone on.” Such phrases might leave children feeling rejected or abandoned, or imply the companion animal may return or encourage them to go searching for the lost companion animal.

Avoid telling children that their pet was so good or so special that God wants it to be with Him in heaven. Children interpret information literally and may become angry with God or fear that they (or you) will be chosen next.

Don’t blame the veterinarian. Your children may develop fear of veterinarians and other health care givers.

What Happens Next?

Explain what will happen to the pet’s remains. If you plan to have your pet cremated, explain that your pet will be taken to a pet crematory, a place where the pet’s body will be turned into ashes. Then your family will take those ashes and (scatter them, bury them in the backyard, keep them in an urn, etc.). The use of words “fire” or “burn” can be scary to children. Be sure to explain that the pet cannot feel any pain. If you plan on burying your pet, explain that your pet will be sealed in a box or casket and put in the ground.

“Fluffy’s body will be put in a room that gets very, very hot. This will turn his body to ashes, which look a little bit like sand.”

“We wanted to cremate Fluffy so we could always have a way to remember him. We will keep his ashes in an urn, at our house. We can always take his ashes with us if we ever move.”

“We are going to bury Fluffy in the ground.”

Plan a memorial ritual. Decide how you’ll honor your pet’s life and keep its memory alive. Emphasis should be placed on the happy experiences that were shared with the deceased companion animal. Let children honor their companion animal in their own way. Encourage activities to help your children experience and express their love and grief (drawing or painting pictures, compiling an album, scrapbook or memory box, viewing videos or home movies, writing or sharing memories, planting a shrub or tree, reading books on pet loss).

“What is your favorite memory of Princess?”

“Snowball knows you loved her.”

“It’s okay to laugh and have fun as soon as you feel like it.”

“How about writing a letter or a story, or drawing a picture about the way you feel?”

Don’t immediately get a new pet in an effort to “replace” this one. During this process, it is important to not rush into a decision to adopt a new companion animal to take away the pain of grief. Getting a new pet too soon may imply to children that their grief is unimportant and unnecessary. It might imply that everything is replaceable, including the children themselves. The lesson children can learn through grief is that because relationships are special and unique, they are not replaceable. They also may react with anger or guilt, reject the new pet and/or feel disloyal to the one who died.

“It’s okay to not want a new pet.”

“It’s okay to want a new pet.”



Books about Pet Loss for Kids and Parents

by Laurel Lagoni, M.S.

There are hundreds of books written about coping with loss and grief. When you are looking for one to help your family deal with pet loss, the selection can be overwhelming!

The following list represents stories that portray a variety of specific situations about losing a pet. It also provides a variety of approaches to helping children understand loss and heal their feelings of grief.

For Toddlers, Preschoolers and School-aged Children

Jasper's Day

Marjorie Blain Parker

When a Pet Dies

Fred Rogers (TV's Mr. Rogers)

Saying Good-bye to LuLu

Corinne Demas

I Will Always Love You

Hans Wilhelm

The Tenth Good Thing about Barney

Judith Viorst

**A Special Place for Charlee*

Debby Morehead

**Dog Heaven*

Cynthia Rylant

**Cat Heaven*

Cynthia Rylant

The Legend of Rainbow Bridge

William Britton

Saying Good-bye to Your Pet:

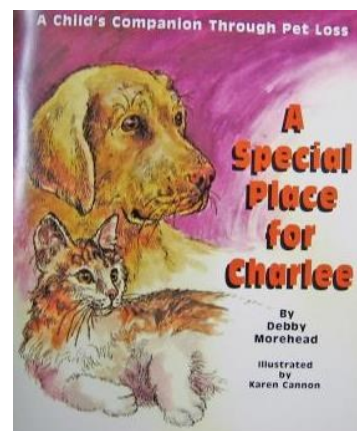
Marge Eaton Heegaard

*Children Can Learn to Cope with
Pet Loss (art therapy)*

Remembering My Pet:

Nechama Liss-Levinson, Ph.D.,
Rev. Molly Phinney Baskette,
and Lynn L. Caruso

*A Kid's Own Spiritual Workbook
for When a Pet Dies (Multifaith)*



For Teens and Young Adults

A Snowflake in My Hand

Samantha Mooney

Lifetimes

Bryan Mellonie

**Goodbye Friend*

Gary Kowalski

Paw Prints in the Stars

Warren Hanson

Mostly Bob

Tom Corwin

Swallowed by a Snake:

Thomas R. Golden

The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing

Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover's Soul

Jack Canfield, Mark Victor Hansen,
Marty Becker, DVM, Carol Kline



All of these titles are available through libraries, book stores or online book sellers. Selections marked by an * are available at www.veterinarywisdom.com

For Parents

Grieving the Death of a Pet

Betty Carmack

Men and Grief

Carol Staudacher

Kindred Spirit, Kindred Care:

Shannon Fujimoto Nakaya, DVM

*Making Health Decisions on Behalf
of Our Animal Companions*

When Your Pet Dies:

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

*A Guide to Mourning,
Remembering and Healing*

The Final Farewell:

Marty Touseley

Preparing and Mourning

When Children Grieve:

John W. James, Russell Friedman,
and Leslie Matthews

*For Adults to Help Children Deal
with Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving
and Other Losses*

Great for the Whole Family

****Dog Blessings:***

June Cotner

*Poems, Prose, and Prayers
Celebrating Our Relationship with Dogs*

****Old Dogs***

Gene Weingarten

are the best dogs

*All of these titles are available through libraries, book stores or online book sellers. Selections marked by an * are available at www.veterinarywisdom.com*

