Grief & the Loss of a Pet

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Grief upon the loss of a pet is a normal response, and a very individual one. For some people, grieving for a pet who has died may be an even more difficult process than grieving for a human loved one. One reason is that the support network of understanding and caring people may be smaller. If a person has lost a human loved one, the friends, family, co-workers, etc., will all be understanding. They may send cards, flowers, and offer food and companionship. This is often not the case when a pet dies.

The death of a pet is difficult enough to bear; in some cases, the whereabouts or cause of death of the pet is unknown. The pet may have run away or been stolen, or, the owner may have needed to surrender the pet to a humane shelter. In these situations, there is seldom any 'closure.' The owner does not know when or if the pet has died, or if lost, whether the pet will ever come back. As a result, when to stop searching and when to start the grieving process are unsure. There may also be additional guilt associated with this type of loss.

Doing something positive during this time of sadness may help the grieving process by celebrating the life of the pet. Activities which may help include:

- Planting flowers or a tree in memory of the pet
- Making a charitable donation or volunteering your time at a local shelter
- Holding a funeral or memorial service (you may want to personalize a monument or memorial urn as a tribute to your devoted pet.)
- Placing your pet's nametag on your key ring
- Creating a memorial photo album or scrap book
- Framing a photograph

Do Animals Grieve?

We all know of animals who have stopped eating, playing, or interacting when another pet in the household has died. They are experiencing a loss of their own; plus they often sense the owner's sorrow as well. After a pet dies, we can help the other pets in the household by keeping their routines as unchanged as possible. Increasing their activity

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through going for walks or playing with toys may be helpful. This will not only benefit your pet, but help you too. If they are acting depressed or are not eating, be careful not to reinforce or reward their behavior. Giving them extra attention or different food when they behave this way may actually cause them to start using those behaviors as ways to obtain more attention or get special treats.

Should I get another pet?
When or if you should get another pet varies with the individual and the choice is a personal one. Some people may want to find a new pet almost immediately. Sometimes, they may have unrealistic expectations of the new pet, especially if they are getting a young, rambunctious animal after an older, mature one has died. Others need longer to work through their grief before they are physically and emotionally ready for another pet. In either case, we all know you are not replacing your pet, but finding another animal with whom you can share life. Some people may find it is just not possible for them to have another pet. You need to do what is right for you.

In general, you should give children some time before getting another pet. Getting a pet too soon may cause the child to feel guilty or disloyal, and they may have difficulty bonding to the new pet. The child may also think that if something happened to them, they would soon be forgotten and a substitute would be found. They need to understand that friendships cannot immediately be replaced.

People who have a pet who has died need to talk to someone. Often, family members and friends are very supportive, but in some instances, they may not understand how important your pet was to you. It is important to find someone who does understand.

Pet Loss Resources

Colorado State University – Argus Institute (staffed by counselors)
www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu/grief.htm (this website lists many local telephone resources)

University of Illinois
Toll-free: 877-394-2273 (CARE)
www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE/

Michigan State University
517-432-2696
cvm.msu.edu/alumni-friends/information-for-animalowners/pet-loss-support

Ohio State University
614-292-1823
E-Mail: petloss@osu.edu

Tufts University

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508-839-7966
www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss/

Washington State University
Toll Free : 866-266-8635
509-335-5704
www.vetmed.wsu.edu/PLHL/

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