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Healing After Pet Loss

Posted By *April Norris* On March 10, 2014 @ 4:19 pm In | [Comments Disabled](#)

Grief is the normal, natural process of adjusting to the loss of a loved one. We cannot go through life without being touched by grief. Contrary to popular belief, grief does not unfold in clean, linear stages, nor does it have a timeline.

The loss of an animal is often just as difficult, if not more so, than losing a human family member because our relationships with our animals are remarkably intimate and mutually supportive – they love us ‘no strings attached,’ hold our secrets, and accept us as we are. When daily routines center around caring for an animal, their death can also disrupt our sense of home, our sense of safety, our sense of purpose, and our sense of identity.

It is important to remember that grief is a *full body experience* that can impact our mind, our feelings, our social relationships, and our beliefs about the world.

Grief ‘symptoms’ can include:

Physical:

aches and pains
exhaustion and insomnia
dehydration
nausea or loss of hunger

Emotional:

guilt & despair
rage
anxiety & relief
yearning

Cognitive:

preoccupation with an animal’s illness and death
distraction
rigidity/lack of flexibility
confusion



Social:

isolating from friends, social circles, and loved ones
using work to avoid going home
rigidity/lack of flexibility
avoiding social situations

Spiritual:

anger at Higher Power
searching for meaning
questioning what happens after death ("*is my animal okay?*", "*where is my animal now?*", "*do animals have souls?*")

What can I do to help myself heal?

After a loss, it is important to tend to your broken heart, and in whatever way that feels safe to you, allow yourself to feel the pain of the loss. Most people find comfort in maintaining daily routines and creating rituals to honor their animal's memory. When humans die, the process of mourning often includes obituaries, funerals, and public memorials. Doing the same for a loved animal honors their life while also giving others a chance to support you.

Talking to others who can listen to your stories and feelings without judgment can help — most grievers want to know that they are normal, their feelings are valid, and they are not alone.

When will I get over this?

It is common for people to want to feel better. On the other hand, it is also normal for grievers to fear feeling better because that might mean letting go of — or betraying — a loved one. Keep in mind that grief is not something we get over, but something we move through. When we lose someone whose presence changes us (often for the better), we can't help but be changed, too, by their death. The process of coming to terms with a death can take a long time, but you will eventually find your way to a place where the pain of your animal's absence is less of a focus than the positive, loving memories that come to mind when you remember them.

Would talking to someone help?

If you are significantly preoccupied with questions or guilt about your animal's death, have witnessed the acute injury or traumatic death of your animal, or are feeling "stuck" in any aspect of your grief, it might be useful to connect with a professional who can provide extra support. The Veterinary Hospital has counselors who understand how difficult it is to lose an animal. Please call us at (919) 513-3901.

Recommended Reading:

Abercrombie B. (Ed.) (2011). *Cherished: 21 writers on animals they have loved and lost*. New

World Library.

Gatto, K. (2005). Beyond the rainbow bridge: A thoughtful guide for coping with the loss of a horse. Half Halt Press.

Greene, L. & Landis, J. (2002). Saying goodbye to the pet you love. New Harbinger Publications.

Kowalski, G. (2012). Goodbye, friend: Healing wisdom for anyone who has ever lost a pet. Stillpoint Publishing.

O'Neill, E. (1999). The last will and testament of an extremely distinguished dog. Henry Holt & Company.

Wolfelt, A. (2004). When your pet dies: A guide to mourning, remembering, and healing. Companion

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