



WHEN A CHERISHED PET DIES

“After several months I am still so distraught over the death of my dog, Pixie, I can’t even talk about her. I miss watching TV with her on my lap and I miss her companionship.”

— Diane, 74-years-old

Pets can be an important part of life, holding a special place in the heart. A pet can be a faithful companion, an integral part of one’s home life and daily schedule. A pet can provide unconditional love that many people, particularly older adults, may get from no one else. When a special pet dies, this loss can have a significant impact on a person’s health and well-being. Today, there is a growing public awareness about the anguish people can feel when a cherished pet dies, and more community resources are available to help those grieving a pet.

How Do Older People Benefit from Having a Pet?

Pets can provide their owners with a sense of purpose and fulfillment, companionship, affection, acceptance and friendship. Pets rely on their owners for food, water, exercise and medical care, which may give the owner a feeling of responsibility and of being needed. In return, pets often express contentment through their chirps, wags, licks or purrs. A pet may provide opportunities for physical contact, such as touching, hugging, cuddling, and can even be a sleep partner. Owners talk to, spend time with, and have fun with a pet. Through these interactions, a pet can become an integral part of everyday life. For many, a pet can hold the rank of “valued friend” or “close family member.”

Caring for and providing a loving home to an animal can help an older person remain active and healthy. This active involvement with an animal can help lower blood pressure, decrease stress, reduce bone loss, lower cholesterol levels, and improve blood circulation. A pet may also provide an opportunity to meet and socialize with others, such as gathering with other pet owners in the park or conversing with the staff at the vet’s office. Thus, a pet can help lessen or prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness.

How Might the Death of a Pet Affect Older People?

Losing a cherished pet means losing a significant relationship. Your pet loss can feel overwhelming, particularly if you are experiencing other losses, many of which are common to the aging process.

It is not unusual, for example, for older adults to have longtime friends, a spouse, and a pet die all within a short time of each other. Your pet may have been the one link left to your past, or perhaps was your loyal companion during an otherwise lonely time. Or you may have moved from your old neighborhood to a new environment, and your pet may have been a source of strength during the transition to your new home. For those coping with a chronic illness, your pet may have comforted you, by staying nearby or licking your hand. For others, your pet may have been trained to help you with daily activities. For example, just as a seeing-eye dog is specifically trained to help someone with vision impairment get around, your pet may be trained to be able to move easily and fetch things in the house for you or alert others in case you needed help in an emergency.

The loss of your pet may change your outlook on your life. For example, you may lose a sense of purpose in your day if you experience feelings of emptiness or sadness when no longer having a dog to walk, a bird to talk to or a cat to brush. In addition, the loss of a beloved pet can remind you of your own vulnerability and mortality. This can lead to feelings of worry about getting another pet, wondering if the pet will become orphaned if you have a prolonged hospitalization or die.

What Are Common Feelings When a Pet Dies?

Grieving is a natural response to the loss of an attachment. It is normal to grieve a pet that has been a part of your life. There is no right or wrong way to express your feelings related to the loss of a beloved pet. Some people are outwardly emotional while others emote privately. Some will grieve for days or weeks while others may take months or even years to recover from the loss of a beloved animal friend. Your own reactions and feelings connected to this loss will likely depend on the nature of the relationship you had with your pet, how long the pet was part of your life, if the death was sudden or gradual, and the situation in which the pet died.

When a pet dies, it is not unusual for a person to experience a range of feelings. When the loss of a pet occurs under particularly stressful circumstances, the emotional response can be quite intense. For example, you may experience anger or helplessness if a precious pet needs to be

given away because of financial limitations, ill health or because of a move to a new place that does not accept pets, like a nursing home or assisted living facility. You might experience anguish if faced with the difficult decision to euthanize a pet. Or, if your pet died from an accident, you may feel guilt if you believe you could have been more protective. Holiday and birthday celebrations may feel less joyful after the loss of a pet. After a pet dies, you might feel sad each year on the anniversary marking the date your pet came into your heart and home.

If your sadness or pain seems to grow over time, or you find the loss of your pet affecting your ability to get things done on a daily basis, it is probably time to seek professional counseling to help you cope with your continued grief.

Why Are Feelings About Losing a Pet Often Hidden?

You might feel upset and sad about the loss of your pet and find yourself hiding these feelings from others. You may believe it is inappropriate, silly or weak to be so concerned about an animal's death. Or you may have been raised believing that showing emotion is improper making it difficult for you to express personal feelings. If you feel embarrassed, ashamed, or uncomfortable about your emotional reaction to your pet's death, trying to ignore or disguise your grief is common.

In addition, sometimes otherwise well-meaning people may say careless things like, "You can always get another one." This might be true, yet this statement does not acknowledge the uniqueness of your pet and the special relationship you enjoyed. Feeling misunderstood, you might decide not to share the sadness you feel.

Our society does not always recognize the depth of feeling that can accompany the loss of a pet. Thus, many communities offer no way or only very limited ways to share the loss of a pet with others (e.g., rituals, ceremonies, or memorials). Without an organized opportunity to remember a pet, many people feel uncomfortable expressing grief.

Grieving the loss of a pet, while difficult, can be a healthy process. Holding back may leave you with a heavy heart for a prolonged period of time.

How Can I Cope With the Loss of My Pet?

It is common to feel sorrow with the loss of a pet. It is important to realize that things will get better over time. Here are some things you can do to cope with the loss of your pet:

- **Talk** about your feelings for your pet with others who are compassionate, sensitive and understanding.
- **Remember** your pet by creating a scrapbook about them, place a framed picture of them in a special place, or write a story or poem about them.
- **Participate** in a support group, counseling session, Internet chat room or call a pet loss hotline. Your veterinarian or local Humane Society can recommend counselors or support groups that might help you.
- **Consider** holding a memorial service, buying a burial site, or putting a stone marker in your garden or in a room in your house.
- **Make** a memorial contribution in your pet's name to a favorite charity or to an animal rescue organization. Saying good-bye can give you an opportunity to express your feelings, reach some closure, and to think about the role of the pet in your life.
- **Volunteer** with a charity or religious group that you are affiliated with to keep yourself busy and with other people. Animal shelters and animal organizations need people to walk, pet, and care for abandoned animals.
- **Increase** your interaction with family, friends and social groups in your community.
- **Read** books and magazines about pet loss and how to deal with your feelings of grief.

Where to Get Help

National Resources

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). The ASPCA'S Counseling Department offers a full range of pet loss and bereavement services. Its Pet Loss Hotline offers free nationwide consultation to bereaved owners on a 24-hour basis. Local headquarters can provide pet loss support, guidance and counseling services.

Phone: 1-800-946-4646.

Web site: www.aspca.org

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement. This nonprofit organization acts as a worldwide clearinghouse for information on pet bereavement. Its Web site provides a listing of bereavement counselors, hotlines, and support groups as well as a newsletter, email assistance, and chat rooms.
Phone: 1-718-382-0690.
Web site: www.aplb.org

Delta Society. This non-profit international organization is a resource for the human-animal bond. This Website offers a search by state directory of pet loss and bereavement support hotlines, counselors and groups.
Phone: 1-425-226-7357
Web site: www.deltasociety.org

Pet Loss Grief Support. A Web site for grieving pet lovers providing lists of resources including hotlines, counselors, support groups, books and articles. The site offers ways to remember your pet via a pet loss candle ceremony, tributes, healing poetry, chat rooms, and a message board.
Web site: www.petloss.com

The Humane Society of the United States. This site provides information on coping with the death of your pet.
Phone: 1-202-452-1100. Web site: www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care

New York City Resources

Animal Medical Center. Bereavement support group meetings are held several times a month. Referrals for individual counseling are also provided. 510 E. 62nd Street, New York City.
Phone: 1-212-838-8100.

Bide-A-Wee Foundation. This non-profit organization provides free bereavement counseling for anyone grieving the loss of an animal companion due to death, illness or separation.
Phone: 1-212-532-4986. Web site: www.bideawee.org/memorial.asp

This resource provides brief, general information about this health care topic. It does not take the place of specific instructions you receive from your health care providers. For answers to other questions consult your physician or other health care provider.

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