

How to Support a Loved One who is Grieving

Many pets are more closely bonded to one family member than another, and therefore, family members often grieve the loss of a pet very differently. Often, people will feel at a loss for how to help a friend who has lost a pet because they have never had a pet of their own.

The following are some suggestions on how you might support a loved-one or friend who is grieving the loss of a pet:

- Listen without judging or offering advice.
- Realize that sitting quietly while a person is crying can be very helpful. Many people feel like they have to say something to make their loved-one “feel better” and this is not the case.
- Avoid all clichés or words of wisdom. While well intended, these are often very hurtful.
- If you want to help in some way, offer to do shopping, cleaning, or activities your loved-one might not have the energy to do.
- Talk about the pet. This will actually help your loved-one to feel better.
- Write down something you remember and liked about the pet and give it to the person whose pet died. This will bring back good memories and will show your concern and compassion.
- Try not to expect your loved-one to express his or her grief in a certain manner. Each person grieves differently and will take a different amount of time to heal.
- Respect your loved-one’s wish for space or time alone.
- Do not try to talk the person into getting another pet right away. Each person must decide for himself/herself when the time is right.

Children and Pet Loss

Determine Your Child’s Current Level of Understanding about Death

Up to approximately age eight or nine depending on a child’s individual development and experiences, it is common for children to have difficulty in the following four areas when thinking about death.

- Understanding that death is permanent and that their pet will not return
- Understanding that death happens to every person and animal
- Understanding that the body no longer functions after a person or pet dies so there is no longer a need to eat, drink, breath, etc.

- Understanding that the death did not occur as a result of something the child thought, did, or did not do

Ask your children a question about what they think happens when a pet dies and base your explanation of death on their level of understanding.

For example:

- What do you think will happen to Buddy when he dies?

Children do not conceptualize death in the same manner as adults. Young children do not think of death as final or permanent and can be very upset about the death of a pet one minute and laughing and carefree the next. This is normal behavior for a child. When children ask questions about death, answer only the question they are asking. For example, don't give lengthy explanations about what death means or what happens to the body if all your child wants to know is, "how will Buddy eat when it is in the ground?" Answer this question with something like, "once Buddy dies he will not need to eat anymore.", and then let your child determine where to go from there or what other questions to ask.

Be honest with children about the death of a pet. Resist the temptation to say the pet is lost, ran away, or has found a new home. Although you might believe that these explanations will be easier for your child to cope with, they will prevent the death of a pet from being talked about and the grief your family feels from being expressed and shared as a family.

Be careful about the words or phrases you use. Saying that Buddy was "put to sleep" can be confusing to kids because they are put to sleep at night. If an illness has led to your pet's death, and because children frequently become ill, clarify to children that not all illnesses or diseases end in death. Say something like, "some diseases are much worse than others and Buddy had a disease that was really bad and he could not get better." If your pet was euthanized, you could add; "since he could not get better, we asked his doctor to give him a shot that would help him to die peacefully and prevent him from feeling really sick for a long period of time."