

The Experience of Pet Loss

I will open my heart in trust that,
In ways I do not understand,
My loved one will continue to be present in my life.

Martha Whitmore Hickman

For many people, the death of a pet means losing a cherished family member who has been a constant companion and source of love in its most innocent and purest form. The animals with which we share our lives and our hearts are frequently the one source of support that remains stable and consistent through the many life changes we experience.

We walk with our pets, we talk with them, we eat with them, we exercise and sleep with them. Why then are we so often surprised by the intensity of emotions we feel when they die? We fall in love with our pets and whether they walk, crawl, or fly, or have fins, fur, or feathers, the loss of such a companion can be heart breaking. If your pet has died, you have a right to be sad, hurt, angry, confused, or to feel overwhelmed. In fact, any emotions that we feel when a person we love dies are very likely to occur when a pet dies.

What You Might Experience

Extreme Sadness

Your loss is significant and it makes sense that you will be sad when you think about your pet. Allow yourself to experience the pain of your loss. Many people attempt to hold in their tears because they feel that if they start crying they will not be able to stop, but they do stop. Crying stimulates the release of endorphins which are our body's natural healing agents. Hiding our emotions or keeping the tears inside can deplete us of energy which, during the grieving process, we cannot afford to lose.

Feelings Of Loneliness

You may find yourself thinking that no-one you know understands what you are going through, and the fact is that no-one other than yourself knows exactly what feelings you had for your pet. Friends or coworkers may say things like "he was only a dog" or "you can get another cat." These comments usually are expressed out of concern but often those who speak these words have not had the wonderful experience of being closely bonded with an animal. Many people are familiar with the human-animal bond that can form between animals such as cats, dogs, and

horses and the people who love them, but perhaps you had a pet such as a bird, iguana, rabbit, or other less common pet and you are finding that others just don't understand how much the loss hurts. Some people just do not know what to say to someone who has experienced a significant loss, and not knowing how hurtful clichés can be, they say anything to fill the silence. Although your bond with your pet is unique and special, there are many other people who also love their animals very deeply, and have lost those companions. If possible, seek out these people and share your experience with them. If you do not know of anyone who is supportive, look for a support group. Call your local Humane Society or Hospice for information on where to find emotional support. If you have access to the internet, go to pet loss web sites. If you feel you would like to talk to a professional about your pain, there are several therapists and counselors who specialize in grief. However, when making an appointment, be certain to ask if the counselor or therapist has experience working with people who are grieving the loss of a pet.

Feeling As Though Your Departed Pet is Present

After a companion animal dies, it is not uncommon to have instances of seeing, hearing, or smelling your pet, or feeling as though the spirit of your pet is present. Many people report these experiences regardless of the type of pet or animal companion they have lost or their own religious or spiritual beliefs. You also may catch yourself reaching out to touch your pet, thinking about feeding, watering, or walking your pet, and then realize that your pet is no longer with you.

Guilt

Pet owners often assume total responsibility for a pet's life, and therefore, often extend that responsibility to believing they could have controlled or prevented their deaths. You might find yourself wondering "what if I would have...?" or, telling yourself "I should have..." You might feel guilty that you didn't give your pet enough treats or that you gave him too many treats. You might believe that she wouldn't have died if you would have gotten her to your veterinarian's office sooner. You could think that you should have known something was seriously wrong, perhaps even before your pet was showing symptoms. If your pet was euthanized, you might feel that you should have waited longer before deciding to have the euthanasia performed or that you should have made that decision sooner. Or, if your pet died a natural death, you might be thinking you should have had him euthanized to prevent suffering toward the end of his life. Guilt is a normal response to the death of a pet. We want to make sense out of what has happened and as a result, we frequently blame ourselves. Feelings of guilt should subside as you progress through the grieving process.

You also might feel guilty when you notice that you are making progress in your grieving process. When you begin to notice that you are crying or feeling sad less of the time, when you can laugh and enjoy yourself, or begin to realize that your pet's illness utilized much of your time and energy, and now you can spend that time doing other things, you might feel as though this means you no longer miss or love your companion animal. However, this is a sign that you are healing from your loss and beginning to reinvest your energy and emotions into living without the physical presence of your companion animal. You are beginning to transform your relationship from an external experience of touching, seeing, smelling, and hearing your pet to an internal process of positive thoughts and memories of your pet. The more you heal from your loss, the less painful thoughts and memories of your departed animal companion will become.

Reliving or Revisioning the Death

Initially, you might find yourself focusing on the events of your pet's death or revisioning what took place at the time of death. Also, it might be very difficult for you to talk about what happened or what you saw, as telling the story can cause you to feel as though you are reliving the event. This can last for weeks or even months if you witnessed your pet dying in a traumatic manner or if your pet was killed by accident. You now have to cope with witnessing what happened as well as dealing with the death of your pet. By replaying the events of the death over and over, your mind is attempting to heal itself by processing and then letting go of the traumatic event. Talking with others who are supportive and understand the bond you had with your pet can help this process along.

Revisiting Prior Losses

Don't be surprised if the death of your pet brings up memories of other losses you have had in your life. If you have lost other pets or people who were very important to you, you might find yourself thinking so much about the previous losses that it gets confusing to sort out your feelings of sadness. When thinking about losses you have experienced in the past, try to remember what was helpful for you in working through your grief. Those same things might be helpful now.

Confusion and Concentration

Frequently, focusing and concentrating on tasks is very difficult. Because of this, you might forget things you have done or think you did things that you did not do, misplace or lose things, or simply feel that you have no energy to think. It might take you longer than usual to grasp or understand information or to learn new things. These are all typical grief reactions.

Because of this, you should exercise extreme caution when driving or doing other activities that require your full attention.

Things to Remember

You are an individual and your way of grieving will differ from the way other people grieve. Your own grieving process also will differ in intensity and duration in the losses you experience throughout your lifetime. Following are a few of the many ways that grief can be expressed and healing enhanced:

- Open expression of emotions such as crying, conversations about loss, etc.
- Drawing, writing poetry, or other artistic expressions
- Internal processing, thinking about the loss, trying to make sense of it, often done during activities such as meditation, exercising, bike riding
- Dedicating time to animal organizations
- Committing to make positive changes in your own life
- Making scrap books or photograph albums of your pet
- Keeping a written documentation of your feelings/journaling

Friends or family members may try to convince you to get a new pet before you feel ready. You are the only one who will know if and when it is time for such a commitment. Some people find it helpful to get another pet before the death of their current pet; others find it beneficial shortly after. Some decide to wait weeks, months, or even years. Some people decide not to bring another companion animal into their lives. There is no correct way for everyone to do this and it is most important that you follow your heart in this decision. You are not betraying your pet that has died by bringing another pet into your life. In fact, many people think of getting a new pet as a tribute to their deceased pet because they have come to realize how wonderful the human-animal bond can be. However, you do want to be certain that you can love your new pet for its own personality and characteristics, and that you are not wanting it to be like your pet that has died.