

## **Heal Your Heart: Coping with the Loss of a Pet Guidebook** **©2009, Karen Adele Litzinger, All rights reserved.**

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### **Stages of Grief**

Similar to human loss, there is a range of emotions that you may experience during the process of grieving your pet. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, just your way. The grief process can vary widely depending on your relationship and the circumstances of your animal's death.

However, many people find it helpful to know that some of the following stages which apply to grieving any death or serious illness also apply to the process of grieving your animal companion. See if they fit your experience.

Denial: *"This can't be happening."*

Some people feel numbness or shock, such as after your veterinarian gives you unexpected bad news. It can last for a few minutes or for several days after the actual death, especially after an accident or with a missing pet.

Anger: *"This shouldn't have happened."*

Anger may be directed at the veterinarian or at yourself for not being able to prevent or cure the situation. This is frequently accompanied by guilt. Many people refer to this as the "should have" and "could have" stage.

Bargaining: *"Make my pet get better, and in return I'll...be the best dog owner, never let the gate open again, etc."*

This stage is more frequent in processing catastrophic or terminal news, and may be a plea to a vet or a higher power.

Depression: *"I'm so sad, I don't feel like doing anything."*

Sadness may come briefly at unexpected times, such as when you miss your loving companion greeting you at the door or when you see a reminder of your pet. Or it can be a pervasive sense of losing your best friend and the routine you shared together.

Some people prefer to express their sadness when alone and others prefer a listening ear or a pet loss support group. Crying is usually helpful to release the pain and to allow for healing. Some people may also feel anxiety and physical symptoms. If your sadness negatively affects other parts of your life over a period of time, seeking professional help for depression may be helpful.

Acceptance: *“I will keep loving memories of my pet in my heart and go forward with my life.”*

This is the recovery stage in which sadness is replaced, in whole or part, with fond memories of your pet. There is more of a focus on future activities. You may even begin thinking about bringing a new pet into your life.

Some people do not experience all of the above stages or may move back and forth through them. Grieving can last for days, weeks, months or intermittently for years. There is no right or wrong way.

### **Healing Symbols, Actions and Rituals**

Consider some of the following ideas for remembering and honoring your beloved pet and to assist in your healing process.

- Create a photo album or collage dedicated to your pet.
- Set aside a special area or shelf with your pet's special items, such as tags, collar, photos and/or urn.
- Purchase a memento with your pet's name engraved.
- Light a candle near your pet's picture.
- Play special soothing music.
- Plant a flower or tree in memory of your beloved companion.
- Recite a reading in your pet's honor or write a poem or song.
- Hold a burial or scatter ashes in a meaningful manner.

Some people like to memorialize their pet privately, and some people prefer sharing the experience with friends or family. Some find comfort in photos or personal effects and some cannot bear to look at them. Some people find comfort in these gestures immediately, and others engage in a ritual long after the death. There is no right or wrong way. Feel free to decide what is right for you.

## **Taking Care of Yourself**

Whether your animal just died or it has been a while, try to take care of yourself emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. You took loving care of your pet. Now honor your pet by taking care of yourself.

### *Emotionally*

- Allow yourself to cry. The tears can help wash away your pain and prepare the path of healing.
- Take time for yourself, whether a “mental health” or bereavement day off of work or quiet time from your routine at home.
- Share your news and sadness with supportive people. Calls or emails about your loss help others to know about this major event and can naturally bring support. Know that not everyone will understand your grief for your beloved animal companion, but the ones who do will make the sharing worthwhile.
- Call a pet bereavement counselor or join a pet loss support group (see the resource list for immediately accessible national resources).
- Listen to special music, take a bubble bath, or treat yourself to a special food.
- Write, paint, dance, knit or do woodworking - any creative, constructive activity that can help you cope or bring some joy back into your life.

### *Mentally*

- Increase your understanding of pet loss using one of the books cited in the resources section.
- Read poems and writings about pet loss to help you know that grief is universal.
- Use the website resources to gain a sense of understanding and community.
- Use affirmations to reframe any guilt you may have regarding the loss.
- Plan changes to your past routine so that you are not always reminded of your loss.

### *Physically*

- Though a small food treat can be a coping mechanism, try to make healthy choices and not overindulge.
- Try to get enough sleep, though your sleep may be disrupted for a time after the loss.
- Although it is fine to take some time to bury your sorrows in bed, exercise can help you feel better.
- Be careful not to mask the pain with alcohol or drugs. This can delay or derail the grieving process. If you find yourself engaging in excessive use of substances, you may need professional help.

### *Spiritually*

- Regardless of your beliefs, tap into a source of comfort in a way that aids your healing, be it religious writings, philosophical readings or communing with nature.
- Attend worship services or spiritual meetings which speak to you.

### **Euthanasia: A Heart-wrenching Decision**

When a beloved pet is suffering, many people find themselves faced with the difficult and painful question of whether and when to end their pet's life humanely.

Whether the circumstances are illness, an accident, or the decline of old age, euthanasia can be a difficult, but courageous and loving choice. It is part of the responsibility you accepted when you brought your pet into your life. How we would love if they could talk and tell us their wishes. But they can't.

It is not unusual to experience some guilt no matter how intensely you weighed the decision. If the animal was clearly suffering, you may experience the emotion of relief, and then possibly guilt about that. The realities of finances may have been part of the decision, but that doesn't mean you loved your animal any less. It is natural to wonder if you decided too soon or waited too long.

There are no clear-cut answers in the heart-wrenching path of euthanasia.

Try to find some comfort in remembering yourself as the loving pet owner who took regular care of your animal companion all during its life with you. And be gentle and loving with yourself, just as your pet was with you.

### **Talking to Children**

If there are children that were part of your pet's life, help them cope by explaining the death and involving them in any rituals. Be direct and age appropriate in your explanations. Consider being brief, and let them lead the conversation with their questions or comments. Avoid using euphemisms like "Toto went to sleep" or "The vet put Fluffy down" since these may cause misunderstanding or fear. Address what happens to the pet after death with whatever spiritual beliefs you may have.

Here are some examples of phrasing:

*"Toto was very old (or sick) and his body stopped working. He died and is no longer with us, but we will always remember him in our hearts."*

*"Fluffy was hit by a car and hurt so bad she could not get better. So I asked the veterinarian to help her die peacefully."*

*“Since Spot has been missing so long, I think he’s gone forever. Sometimes sad things happen which we can’t control. We’ll miss him and can always remember the happy times.”*

Like adults, children cope in varied ways and often differently than adults. Some may express their feelings directly. Others, especially young children, may express their loss through their play. There are resources in the appendix which may help you assist your child process the loss of a beloved pet.

### **Help with Healing**

As you grieve the loss of your pet at your own pace, you’ll eventually feel the pain ease and be less a part of your daily life. It may be days, weeks, or months. You may even have moments of sadness even after a year or more has passed, especially around the anniversary of your pet’s death.

If the sadness moves into significant depression, you may benefit from outside assistance. Symptoms of depression include over- or under- eating, over- or under- sleeping, marked loss in pleasurable activities, or feelings of worthlessness.

For some people the loss of their pet may trigger emotions from past losses. A counselor specializing in bereavement can help you with this complicated grief.

If you witnessed or imagined the violent death of your animal companion, you may want to seek assistance from a counselor who has training in treating post-traumatic stress.

While it is natural to have some disruption to your life, consider getting the help of a counselor if your grief interferes with your daily living,

Please consult the resources section for advice on finding a counselor in your area.

### **Additional Select Pet Loss Resources**

#### **Excellent general resource**

- <http://www.pet-loss.net>

Articles on coping, good links including counseling, and a nice range of bereavement products.

### **Phone counseling**

- [The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \(ASPCA\) National Pet Loss Hotline](#)  
You can access 24/7 services of a psychologist specialized in grief counseling by calling 877-474-3310.
- <http://www.avma.org/reference/hotlines.asp>  
Includes list of hot-line counseling through American Veterinary Medical Association colleges.

### **Counselor listings**

- <http://www.pet-loss.net>  
Lists pet loss counselors by state as well as support groups, hotlines, and cemeteries/crematories
- <http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/>  
The Psychology Today site has a search category for loss and grief, and the profile will tell you how much this is considered the counselor's specialty.

### **On-line Support**

- <http://www.aplb.org>  
Through the Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement, professionally trained volunteers host chat rooms under the direction of a psychologist.

### **For children, teens, families**

- <http://www.griefhealing.com/children-and-pet-loss-links.htm>  
Contains multiple articles on this topic and is an all around good site.
- <http://vetmed.illinois.edu/CARE/child.html>  
This article on the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine site gives advice by age group.
- [When a Pet Dies](#). Fred Rogers, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1988.

### **Memorial products, gifts, remembrance gestures**

- <http://www.foreverpets.com>  
A wide range of urns is the specialty of this site.
- <http://humanesociety.org>  
The Humane Society of the United States provides many meaningful ideas for honoring your pet's memory. Search on "loss grief."
- <http://www.4pawsforever.org>  
Custom keepsakes, garden stones, jewelry and urns. All profits are donated to help privately funded humane shelters and rescue organizations

## **Candle Ceremony**

- <http://www.petloss.com>

Major link to the weekly worldwide pet loss candle ceremony.. Includes chatroom support and language translations. Excellent additional resources.

## **Books**

- <http://aplb.org/resources/books.html>

The Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement has an extensive list of relevant books

- [Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet, Moira Anderson Allen, Dog Ear Publishing, LLC, 2007 \(3<sup>rd</sup> edition\)](#)
- [The Loss of a Pet: A Guide to Coping With the Grieving Process When a Pet Dies, Wallace Sife, Phd, New York: Howell Book House, 2005 \(3<sup>rd</sup> edition\)](#)
- [Pet Loss: A Spiritual Guide, Eleanor L. Harris, Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2002.](#)
- <http://eternalanimals.com>

Multiple pet loss books from a Christian perspective.