



Four Tips on Coping with Pet Loss

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Anyone who considers a pet a beloved friend, companion, or family member knows the intense pain that accompanies the loss of that friend. Following are some tips on coping with that grief, and with the difficult decisions one faces upon the loss of a pet.

1. Am I crazy to hurt so much?

Intense grief over the loss of a pet is normal and natural. Don't let anyone tell you that it's silly, crazy, or overly sentimental to grieve!

During the years you spent with your pet (even if they were few), it became a significant and constant part of your life. It was a source of comfort and companionship, of unconditional love and acceptance, of fun and joy. So don't be surprised if you feel devastated by the loss of such a relationship.

People who don't understand the pet/owner bond may not understand your pain. All that matters, however, is how you feel. Don't let others dictate your feelings: They are valid, and may be extremely painful. But remember, you are not alone: Thousands of pet owners have gone through the same feelings.

2. What Can I Expect to Feel?

Different people experience grief in different ways. Besides your sorrow and loss, you may also experience the following emotions:

- **Guilt** may occur if you feel responsible for your pet's death—the "if only I had been more careful" syndrome. It is pointless and often erroneous to burden yourself with guilt for the accident or illness that claimed your pet's life, and only makes it more difficult to resolve your grief.
- **Denial** makes it difficult to accept that your pet is really gone. It's hard to imagine that your pet won't greet you when you come home, or that it doesn't need its evening meal. Some pet owners carry this to extremes, and fear their pet is still alive and suffering somewhere. Others find it hard to get a new pet for fear of being "disloyal" to the old.
- **Anger** may be directed at the illness that killed your pet, the driver of the speeding car, the veterinarian who "failed" to save its life. Sometimes it is justified, but when carried to extremes, it distracts you from the important task of resolving your grief.
- **Depression** is a natural consequence of grief, but can leave you powerless to cope with your feelings. Extreme depression robs you of motivation and energy, causing you to dwell upon your sorrow.

3. What can I do about my feelings?

The most important step you can take is to be honest about your feelings. Don't deny your pain, or your feelings of anger and guilt. Only by examining and coming to terms with your feelings can you begin to work through them.

You have a right to feel pain and grief! Someone you loved has died, and you feel alone and bereaved. You have a right to feel anger and guilt, as well. Acknowledge your feelings first, then ask yourself whether the circumstances actually justify them.

Locking away grief doesn't make it go away. Express it. Cry, scream, pound the floor, talk it out. Do what helps you the most. Don't try to avoid grief by not thinking about your pet; instead, reminisce about the good times. This will help you understand what your pet's loss actually means to you.

Some find it helpful to express their feelings and memories in poems, stories, or letters to the pet. Other strategies including rearranging your schedule to fill in the times you would have spent with your pet; preparing a memorial such as a photo collage; and talking to others about your loss.

4. Who can I talk to?

If your family or friends love pets, they'll understand what you're going through. Don't hide your feelings in a misguided effort to appear strong and calm! Working through your feelings with another person is one of the best ways to put them in perspective and find ways to handle them. Find someone you can talk to about how much the pet meant to you and how much you miss it-someone you feel comfortable crying and grieving with.

If you don't have family or friends who understand, or if you need more help, ask your veterinarian or humane association to recommend a pet loss counselor or support group. Check with your church or hospital for grief counseling. Remember, your grief is genuine and deserving of support.