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Coping With The Death Of Your Pet

When a person you love dies, it's natural to feel sorrow, express grief, and expect friends and family to provide understanding and comfort. Unfortunately, the same doesn't always hold true if the one who died was your companion animal. Many consider grieving inappropriate for someone who has lost "just a pet."

Nothing could be further from the truth. People love their pets and consider them members of their family. Caregivers celebrate their pets' birthdays, confide in their animals, and carry pictures of them in their wallets. So when your beloved pet dies, it's not unusual to feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your sorrow. Animals provide companionship, acceptance, emotional support, and unconditional love during the time they share with you. If you understand and accept this bond between humans and animals, you've already taken the first step toward coping with pet loss: knowing that it is okay to grieve when your pet dies.

Understanding how you grieve and finding ways to cope with your loss can bring you closer to the day when memories bring smiles instead of tears.

What Is the Grief Process?

The grief process is as individual as the person, lasting days for one person or years for another. The process typically begins with denial, which offers protection until individuals can realize their loss. Some caregivers may try bargaining with a higher power, themselves, or even their pet to restore life. Some feel anger, which may be directed at anyone involved with the pet, including family, friends, and veterinarians. Caregivers may also feel guilt about what they did or did not do, and may feel that it is inappropriate to be so upset. After these feelings subside, caregivers may experience true sadness or grief. They may become withdrawn or depressed. Acceptance occurs when they accept the reality of their loss and remember their animal companion with decreasing sadness. Remember, not everyone follows these classic stages of grief—some may skip or repeat a stage, or experience the stages in a different order.

How Can I Cope with My Grief?

While grief is a personal experience, you need not face loss alone. Many forms of support are available, including pet bereavement counseling services, pet-loss support hotlines, local or online Internet bereavement groups, books, videos, and magazine articles. Here are a few suggestions to help you cope:

- Acknowledge your grief and give yourself permission to express it.

- Don't hesitate to reach out to others who can lend a sympathetic ear.
- Write about your feelings, either in a journal or a poem.
- Call your local humane society to see whether it offers a pet loss support group or can refer you to one. You may also want to ask your veterinarian or local animal shelter about available pet loss hotlines.
- Explore the Internet for pet loss support groups and coping information.
- Prepare a memorial for your pet.

What Can I Do for My Child?

The loss of a pet may be a child's first experience with death. The child may blame himself, his parents, or the veterinarian for not saving the pet. And he may feel guilty, depressed, and frightened that others he loves may be taken from him. Trying to protect your child by saying the pet ran away could cause your child to expect the pet's return and feel betrayed after discovering the truth. Expressing your own grief may reassure your child that sadness is okay and help him work through his feelings.

Is the Process More Difficult if I'm a Senior?

Coping with the loss of a pet can be particularly hard for seniors. Those who live alone may feel a loss of purpose and an immense emptiness. The pet's death may also trigger painful memories of other losses and remind caregivers of their own mortality. What's more, the decision to get another pet is complicated by the possibility that the pet may outlive the caregiver, and hinges on the person's physical and financial ability to care for a new pet.

For all these reasons, it's critical that senior pet owners take immediate steps to cope with their loss and regain a sense of purpose. If you are a senior, try interacting with friends and family, calling a pet loss support hotline, even volunteering at a local humane society. If you know seniors in this situation, direct them to this web page and guide them through the difficult grieving process.

Will My Other Pets Grieve?

Surviving pets may whimper, refuse to eat or drink, and suffer lethargy, especially if they had a close bond with the deceased pet. Even if they were not the best of friends, the changing circumstances and your emotional state may distress them. Give surviving pets lots of TLC ("tender loving care") and try to maintain a normal routine. It's good for them and for you.

Should I Get Another Pet?

Rushing into this decision isn't fair to you or your new pet. Each animal has his own unique personality and a new animal cannot replace the one you lost. You'll know when the time is right to adopt a new pet after giving yourself time to grieve, carefully considering the responsibilities of pet ownership, and paying close attention to your feelings. When you are ready, remember that your local animal shelter is a great place to find your next special friend.