



Saying Goodbye to a Pet

Our pets are brought into our homes and our hearts, where they are cherished and loved. We talk to them, sharing our secrets, dreams, and fears with them. We trust them with our hearts and they listen to all we have to say. What more could we possibly ask for?

Unfortunately our treasured companions have much shorter life spans than we do. Saying good-bye is never easy, but knowing what to expect and realizing that you're not alone can make the grieving process a lot easier. There are five stages of mourning that most people pass through, although everyone experiences them at different intensity levels, for varying lengths of time, and not always in the same order. Along the way some of the stages converge and overlap. One of the most important things to realize is that the feelings are normal.

Denial

Denial is an escape from the difficult reality of what has happened and allows you to sidestep the pain and hurt for a little while. Sometimes you'll almost hear Rover's collar jingle, or swear you can almost feel Felix brush up against your legs. It is not uncommon for people to believe their pet is wandering around outside somewhere. This notion is especially strong for people who choose not to see their pets after they've passed. It is normal to go through a period of denial, thinking that everything will remain the same. But if the denial stage lasts too long, the painful feelings will likely sneak up when you're least prepared for them.

Anger

Much like denial, anger is another way of focusing the pain and hurt on something. It is human nature to look for someone or something to blame when you are sad and hurt. Realizing that sometimes suffering just happens is difficult to do, so people tend to find a scapegoat to pin the blame on. Our pets sometimes end up as the scapegoats because we're angry with them for leaving us. Anger can also be directed inward or at someone else in the family-especially if it seems that something could have been avoided. Veterinarians are another convenient target for anger, because they euthanized the pet. Even though anger is one of the normal steps in the grief process, it is important to remember that no one is to blame. Death is simply an unavoidable fact of life.

Guilt

When a pet dies, people often blame themselves. Wondering what could have been done differently is all too common. Many people wonder what would have happened if they had only fed their pet a better diet or exercised them more. Another common outlet for guilt is wishing that you had spent more quality time with your pet when she was alive. If only you had taken her every day for that morning walk she loved so much. The key thing to remember about guilt is that it doesn't do any good and won't change the past. Difficult as this may be, there is no point in feeling guilty about these things now that your pet is gone. You'll feel better once you accept the things you cannot change and move on with your life.

Depression

Feeling depressed after the loss of a loved one is completely understandable. Being withdrawn, lost, and confused is normal. Many people experience a loss of appetite or an inability to focus, and find that taking care of even the simple things becomes a chore. Depression is like a steep downhill slope-once sliding downhill, it is difficult to stop and return to normal. Losing a cherished pet can open the floodgates and release many other unrelated feelings and emotions you may have been repressing, making the depression even worse. For many people their pet was their only constant-everything else in life may be unpleasant and difficult, but they could always count on Rover to meet them at the door with a kiss. Pets offer amazing unconditional love and support. When that source of strength is removed, it is no surprise that depression follows.

Acceptance

Accepting that a dear friend is gone is hard to do. It is a long road to travel, but there are many things to do along the way to make it easier. You must, for example, allow time to mourn. Sadly, some people don't understand what it feels like to love an animal with their whole heart; consequently, they also don't understand why anyone would be upset when an animal dies.

But you know what an important role your pet played in your life, so cherish those memories. Bringing out your pictures of your departed friend may help. Remembering all of the good times with your pet will bring a smile to your face, even if it is through tears. And although it may be painful to think about her now that she's gone, it will help you to focus on the good things and move past the pain. You may also want to seek out support. Family, friends, clergy, and counselors offer a vast network of resources to help you in your time of need. Talking to other people who understand the loss will help you immensely. All of these things will help make it easier to accept the loss, deal with it, and move on.

Easing the pain

Although nothing will take away the loss, here are some things you can do to help move through the stages of grief and into acceptance. Different strategies work better for different people.

Change your schedule. If you routinely did something for your four-legged friend, like feeding or walking her at the same time daily, try to do something else during that block of time to keep your mind occupied.

Move things around. As you walk through the house, you may find that you still look for your pal in her favorite spot. It may help to rearrange things slightly so that you don't keep looking at her favorite sunny spot on the rug.

Create a memorial. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, but doing something in honor of the departed friend may help you feel better. Try making something using photos of your pet, planting a tree or bush in her memory, or donating money to an animal foundation.

Write it down. Writing down your feelings can be as simple as composing a letter to your pet or jotting down your feelings and memories in a journal. Include all of the things you wish you could tell her and all of the things that you wish you could have done. This is a great way to let go of any guilt.

A Poem for the Grieving . . .

Do not stand at my grave and weep. I am not there, I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow, I am the diamond glints on snow. I am the sunlight on ripened grain, I am the gentle autumn's rain. When you waken in the morning's hush, I am the swift uplifting rush Of quiet birds in circled flight. I am the stars that shine at night. Do not stand at my grave and cry, I am not there, I did not die.

-Anonymous

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