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### Specialty Care Services

## Pet Loss and Bereavement Information for Pet Owners



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### The Human–Animal Bond, Attachment and Loss

The number-one reason people give for pet ownership is companionship. Companion animals represent many things to us. They are our best friends, our partners, our siblings, our children. Companion animals often are our main source of social support. They offer us unconditional love and expect very little in return.

We become attached to our companion animals throughout the course of our relationships with them. This companionship and attachment combined with the emotional, physical and financial investment we make in our pets, shapes our bond with them. The human–animal bond represents the types of relationships we have with our companion animals. We form these relationships for many reasons; physical, social, emotional and psychological. Our animals get us out of the house and encourage exercise. Animals help us through difficult times in our lives. Often, our companion animals are a connection to other significant people who are no longer in our lives. The simple act of petting an animal helps us relax. Pet ownership may even contribute to lower blood pressure, heart rate and cholesterol. "The types of relationships people have with their companion animals ... involves an emotional attachment ... affection and responsibility for the well-being of the animal" (Toray, T. [2004]. "The human–animal bond and loss: Providing support for grieving clients," *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 26 [3], 244–59).

When the bond is broken, we experience a vast range and depth of emotions. These emotions are normal and can include, but are not limited to, anger, regret, despair, pain, relief, guilt, shame and loneliness. It is okay to express your emotions. Cry, scream, talk it out. Bottling up your emotions because "no one will understand" can lead to increased stress and perhaps complicate your grieving process. Remember and reflect on all the good times you had with your pet in addition to grieving the loss of your companion animal.

When an individual has little or no support to deal with the loss of a pet, the grief and mourning experienced can be overwhelming and isolating. One of the struggles associated with pet loss is the difficulty in finding a support network (personal and professional) that is ready and willing to help you cope with your loss. Talk to other pet lovers in your family and support circle. If you don't have a friend or family member with whom you feel comfortable talking, ask your veterinarian for a referral to a counselor or pet bereavement group.

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### Pets, Grief and Mourning

Grief is a highly individualized process. The experience of grief varies greatly from person to person. The key to healthy mourning is to recognize and cope with your feelings as they arise. The goal is not closure or "getting over it," but adapting to the loss. You will have good days and bad days, good hours and bad hours. Grief is a

naturally intrusive process that floods our bodies and thoughts with diverse emotions.

Many people who have lost a companion animal also feel profound guilt and shame associated with the loss of their pet. They are often afraid to tell people they are so upset over the loss of a pet (versus another more socially acceptable loss such as the loss of a parent, child or spouse). Some pet owners also feel that by choosing to euthanize an animal, they contributed to or caused the death of their animal.

## Definitions of grief, bereavement and mourning

### **Grief**

1. Defined as keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret;
2. A cause or occasion of keen distress or sorrow (from dictionary.com).

### **Bereavement**

1. Defined as the objective state of having lost someone or something precious; the objective situation of individuals who have experienced a loss;
2. The period after loss during which grief is experienced and mourning occurs;
3. The entire process precipitated by a loss or death (from **"Definition of Bereavement, Bereave"** by Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FT).

### **Mourning**

1. Defined as the process by which people adapt to a loss. Different cultural customs, rituals, or rules for dealing with loss that are followed and influenced by one's society are also a part of mourning.
2. Mourning refers to the outward expression of grief, which is influenced by culture, customs and gender (from **"Definition of Bereavement, Bereave"** by Kirsti A. Dyer MD, MS, FT).

Common Grief Symptoms (adapted from the **Argus Institute for Families and Veterinary Medicine, Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital**)

Although grief responses, in general, differ from one person to another, grief does have many predictable expressions that occur on physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual levels. Before, during and after loss, grief may appear in several of the following forms:

- **Physical:** crying, sobbing, wailing, shock and numbness, dry mouth, lump in throat, shortness of breath, stomachache or nausea, tightness in chest, restlessness, fatigue, exhaustion, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance, body aches, stiffness of joints or muscles, dizziness or fainting;
- **Intellectual:** denial, sense of unreality, confusion, inability to concentrate, feeling preoccupied by loss, experiencing hallucinations concerning loss (visual, auditory and olfactory,) need to reminisce about loved one and talk about circumstances of loss, sense that time is passing very slowly, desire to rationalize or intellectualize feelings about loss, thoughts or fantasies about suicide (not accompanied by concrete plans or behaviors);
- **Emotional:** sadness, anger, depression, guilt, anxiety, relief, loneliness, irritability, desire to blame others for loss, resentment, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feelings of being overwhelmed or out of control, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, feelings of victimization, giddiness, affect that is inappropriate for the situation (e.g., nervous smiles and laughter);
- **Social:** feelings of withdrawal, isolation and alienation, greater dependency on others, rejection of others, rejection by others, reluctance to ask others for help, change in friends or living arrangements, desire to relocate or move, need to find distractions from intensity of grief (e.g., to stay busy or over-commit to activities);
- **Spiritual:** bargaining with God in attempt to prevent loss, feeling angry at God when loss occurs, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, feelings of being either blessed or punished, searching for meaningful interpretation of a loved one's death, paranormal visions or dreams concerning dead loved one, questioning whether souls exist and wondering what happens to loved ones after death, need to "finish business" with purposeful ending or closure to relationship (e.g., funeral, memorial service, last-rites ceremony, good-bye ritual)

## Factors That Can Complicate Grief

If one or more of the following factors are present, the grief process may be complicated and more difficult to complete:

1. No previous experience with significant loss, death or grief.
2. Other recent losses.
3. Personal history involving multiple losses.
4. Little or no support from friends or family.
5. Societal norms that trivialize and negate the loss.
6. Insensitive comments from others about the loss.
7. Feelings of guilt or responsibility for a death.

8. Untimely deaths like those of children, young adults or young companion animals.
9. Deaths that happen suddenly, without warning.
10. Deaths that occur after long, lingering illnesses.
11. Deaths that have no known cause or that could have been prevented.
12. An unexplained disappearance.
13. Not being present at death.
14. Not viewing the body after death.
15. Witnessing a painful or traumatic death.
16. Deaths that occur in conjunction with other significant life events like birthdays, holidays or a divorce.
17. After-death anniversary dates and holidays.
18. Stories in the media that misrepresent or cast doubt on medical treatment procedures.
19. Advice based on others' negative experiences with death or on inaccurate information about normal grief.

## Types of Grief and Pet Loss

**Complicated grief** is unresolved, incomplete or unfinished grief. It usually is characterized by a prolonged sense of mourning and often occurs in conjunction with underlying psychological/psychiatric issues. Clients often describe themselves as "feeling stuck" in their grief. Complicated grief is not intrinsically pathologic. You are not crazy just because you are having a hard time coping with loss!

Complicated grief occurs quite frequently in pet loss and can contribute to behavior changes, depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress and compassion fatigue. Symptoms of complicated grief may include: continued disbelief in death of the loved one; inability to accept the death; persistent flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive memories; and continuous yearning and searching for the deceased.

**Anticipatory grief** is the "normal mourning that occurs when a patient or family is expecting a death...it includes all of the thinking, feeling, cultural and social reactions to an expected death that are felt. . . . [I]t includes depression, fear, anger, sadness, extreme care for the dying person [pet], time/action in preparation for the death and time to complete unfinished business" (from <http://www.cancer.gov>). It is likely we will outlive our pets, so one could say we are anticipating their deaths from the moment we acquire them.

**Disenfranchised grief** is experienced by an individual after a loss that is not socially acknowledged or supported. The loss does not "fit" into societal rules for mourning. The mourner is often left to cope with his/her emotions related to the loss with minimal social recognition of the loss or support. Mourners are expected to continue with normal routines (e.g., coming to work, not having or attending memorial service/rituals). Pet owners often experience disenfranchised grief when we hear statements like:

"It's just a dog."

"You can get another cat!"

"Are you really that upset about an animal?"

"Oh well, there are so many other animals who need homes!"

## When Grief Consumes Us: Seeking Professional Help

**Suicidal ideation**—Are you at risk to harm yourself?

**Homicidal ideation**—Are you at risk to harm others?

**Illicit drug and alcohol use**—Have you started using drugs or alcohol to help you cope with your grief and bereavement?

**Extreme depression**—Are you having difficulty with basic activities of daily living such as getting out of bed, eating, bathing or going to work because of your feelings of grief and mourning?

If you are experiencing any of these feelings, it is time to get professional assistance. Contact your physician, mental health practitioner or, if this is a life-threatening emergency, contact 911 immediately.

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## Myths and Realities of Pet Loss

**From Harmony Animal Hospital, Pet Loss, Pet Loss Grief Support, Pet Bereavement, Pet Death, Caring and Sharing**

By Larry Kaufman, M.S., LMFT

"I didn't know anyone else felt as deeply as I do toward animals," a number of people have confided in me. When it comes to your love of animals, you may not be as alone as you think! Some pet owners are extraordinarily attached and dedicated to their animal companions. So when their good (or best) friends die—or otherwise leave their lives—they are heartbroken and sometimes devastated.

Since more and more animal lovers are "coming out of the closet," fewer animal lovers are feeling as alone with

their intense pet-related grief. More and more animal lovers are openly talking about their deep bonds with their furred, feathered, finned and scaled friends. People's attitudes toward pet loss have really changed in the last 40 years, especially in the last decade. Despite growing enlightenment, misperceptions about pet loss still persist. These myths hinder healthy mourning. Here are some of the myths followed by the realities.

**Myth: People who experience intense grief over the loss or anticipated loss of a pet are crazy, weird or strange.**

Reality: Individuals who say this, or believe this, are judgmental. Experiencing powerful feelings of distress over the loss of a loved animal companion is usually normal and healthy. People have strong feelings about the loss of a pet because they are capable of intimate attachments and deep emotional bonding. This is something to be proud of, not something to put down.

**Myth: Pet loss is insignificant when compared to the loss of human life. To mourn the loss of a pet devalues the importance of human relationships.**

Reality: The loss of a beloved animal companion can be as emotionally significant, even more significant, than the loss of a human friend or relative. People are capable of simultaneously loving and caring about both animals and humans. One doesn't have to detract from the other.

**Myth: It is best to replace the lost pet as quickly as possible. This will ease the pain of loss.**

Reality: Animal companions cannot be "replaced." They are not interchangeable. They are all separate, different individuals with unique personalities. People need to feel emotionally ready to get another pet before they can successfully adopt a new animal into their hearts and family. Some people attempt to avoid the mourning process by rushing out to get a "replacement" pet. This isn't good for people or for the pets.

**Myth: It is best to mourn alone. This is a way to be strong and independent, and not burden others with your problems. Besides, you need to protect yourself from being ridiculed for loving and missing your special animal friend.**

Reality: It takes courage to reach out to others. Mourners can greatly benefit by the empathy, caring and understanding of supportive others. But be selective about where you turn to for help since some people do not take pet loss seriously.

**Myth: Resolution and closure to mourning occurs when you have succeeded in having only pleasant memories of your pet.**

Reality: It is rare that anyone ever achieves complete resolution or closure to a profound loss. One is left with psychological scars, if not with incompletely healed wounds. It is unrealistic to expect that you will one day be left with only pleasant memories. Besides, being left with only pleasant memories is one-sided and doesn't present a balanced view of reality—not a goal that would be healthy or valuable to pursue. One cannot fully appreciate pleasant memories unless one has unpleasant memories with which to contrast them.

**Myth: It is selfish to euthanize your pet.**

Reality: Euthanasia is a compassionate and humane way to end the intense suffering or declining quality of life of a companion animal. Viewed in this context, it would be selfish to unnecessarily prolong the suffering of a seriously ill or injured animal. Ask yourself this: Whose needs and best interests are being served—those of the owner or animal companion?

**Myth: In journeying through the bereavement process mourners go through five predictable step-by-step stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.**

Reality: Thirty-three years ago, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross presented her theory on how people who are dying cope with their upcoming deaths in her pioneering book, *On Death and Dying*. Neither the research literature nor the observations of therapists and scholars have supported her claims. It is more accurate to speak of the mourning process as being unique for each individual. This process proceeds through three general phases—beginning, middle and end.

**Myth: The best way to cope with unpleasant loss-related feelings and thoughts is to suppress and bury them. Keep busy so as to not dwell on your troubles.**

Reality: Upsetting feelings and thoughts will not just go away. They will, instead, go underground (become unconscious) and later return—causing you problems. Achieve a balance by thinking and talking about what is upsetting you when you are able, but avoid overdoing it. Know your limits.

**Myth: When a person starts talking with sadness about missing his/her pet, it is best to redirect their attention to pleasant memories they have about the pet.**

Reality: This may be an example where the listener has good intentions but will produce bad effects by his/her response. People who talk about their unpleasant feelings are looking for a receptive ear. Redirecting the conversation or changing the subject reflects the discomfort of the listener rather than the needs of the mourner.

**Myth: Time heals all wounds. Just give it enough time and you will no longer feel so badly.**

Reality: Time by itself does not heal the pain of grief related loss. It's what you do with your time that matters. Some people suffer the harsh or even traumatic effects of pet loss for years, or even a lifetime. A successful course of mourning requires intentional hard work.

**Myth: The best way to protect yourself from the pain of pet loss is to not get another pet.**

Reality: Depriving yourself of an animal companion is a very high price to pay to help insure yourself against experiencing another painful loss. Instead, you may wish to summon up the courage to put in the effort necessary to work through your mourning-related psychological issues. Despite the pain of loss, you can still look forward to one day sharing happiness and joy with a new animal companion. Unfortunately, one of the

prices we pay for loving so deeply is to suffer deeply when the bonds with our cherished animal friends are broken.

**Myth: Children handle pet loss rather easily; that which occurs in childhood has little carryover into adult life.**

Reality: Just because children do not react as overtly as adults, or communicate directly with words, does not mean they aren't experiencing strong reactions inside. Not infrequently, the loss of a pet is the first significant loss the child will have experienced. The profound effects of this loss, and how parents or other caregivers handle it, might reverberate in the child for many years to come.

**Myth: It is best to protect children from the upsetting truth of what has happened to their pet.**

Reality: Some parents/caregivers think they are helping their children—sparing them pain—when they do not tell them that their pet has died. They sometimes make up a story that they gave the pet away or that the pet ran away. What the parents don't realize is that through their well-intentioned deceits they are undermining the trust their child has in them, and paradoxically causing the child more pain in the long run. Some children, for example, will unfairly blame themselves for their pet "running away."

**Myth: Pets don't mourn for other pets.**

Reality: Some companion animals develop strong bonds with other pets in the household and they will show some of the same kinds of symptoms of mourning as people do—such as loss of appetite, "searching" for the missed loved one and acting depressed.

**Myth: Pet loss is something you should be able to "get over" on your own. There is no need for someone to see a professional pet loss counselor in order to deal with this.**

Reality: Some people have a self-interested need for you to "get over" your pet-related mourning as soon as possible, before you are ready to do so. They feel uncomfortable with your distress. If, for example, you broke an arm, you would go to a physician to get help. So why wouldn't you see a human-animal bond specialist to get help for a broken heart? This can be seen as an investment in your mental health and peace of mind.

Overcoming these myths can be difficult—for maintaining these beliefs does have some advantages. But those who don't work through their feelings and reactions about mourning are likely to experience a variety of physical, intellectual, emotional, interpersonal and spiritual symptoms later. It's very hard to learn new and healthier ways of feeling, thinking and behaving, but the many benefits are worth the effort.

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## Talking to Your Children about Pet Loss

(from the [Argus Institute for Families and Veterinary Medicine, Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital](#))

The death of a family pet is often a child's first experience with death and loss. It is an important time for parents and other adults to teach children how to express grief in emotionally healthy ways free of shame or embarrassment. Some helpful guidelines are as follows:

- Be as honest as possible. Avoid euphemisms like, "put to sleep." These can be frightening and confusing to children (especially young children). Encourage parents to be honest with their children about a pet's death and don't collude in lies.
- Understand that the emotional responses to a pet's death vary according to the child's relationship with the animal. Don't assume that a child's reaction will be the same as the adult's.
- Recognize that pet death is a significant loss for children and should not be trivialized or minimized.
- Discover what the individual child is thinking and encourage parents to be open and receptive to any questions/concerns that child may have.
- Be alert to "magical thinking." Young children often mistakenly believe they are somehow responsible for the pet's death. Make parents aware of this and encourage them to talk openly with their children.
- Encourage parents to involve children as much as possible in decisions surrounding the pet's illness and death.
- Educate parents about the benefits of including children in the euthanasia procedure if the children are well prepared and given a choice.
- Don't encourage replacement of pets.
- Encourage parents to involve their children in a good-bye ceremony and in memorializing the pet.
- If veterinarians and veterinary professionals determine children are unsupported in several of these areas, referrals to human service professionals are appropriate. Human service professionals might include teachers, school counselors, social workers, family therapists, members of the clergy and counselors or support group facilitators who specialize in pet loss. It is wise to talk to human service professionals before referrals are made. Even though human service professionals may be highly qualified and skilled at what they do, they may not be trained to deal with grief or with issues of pet loss.

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## Choosing Euthanasia

(from "**Euthanasia: The Most Painful Decision**," by Moira Anderson Allen, M.Ed. )

Euthanasia comes from the Greek language with the literal meaning of a "good death."

In veterinary medicine, we refer to euthanasia as the "act of inducing death in a calm and easy form, without stress or pain ... [it refers to] death with compassion, [and] includes understanding, kindness, tenderness, mercy, love and the most important thing, companionship (Frid, M. H. and Perea, A. T. [2007]. "Euthanasia and thanatology in small animals," *Journal of Veterinary Behavior*, 2, 35–39).

Often, we can accept the reality of the loss, but being the actual agent of that loss—being the one who must decide when, where and how the death will occur—is beyond our ability. Since euthanasia is not practiced in human medicine, we have no frame of reference or experience with this choice.

### Important Questions to Ask Yourself

- Do I have the financial means to provide for treatment?
- Do I have the emotional resources to cope with caring for a chronically sick or terminally ill animal?
- Is the relationship with my animal changing because they are sick?
- Is my pet in pain?
- Is my pet safe?
- If I were in my pet's place, what would I want?
- How do I define my pet's quality of life? What is the quality of my life with my pet?

### Important Questions to Ask Your Veterinarian

- Is there a reasonable chance for recovery, cure or comfort?
- How much more time will I have with my pet if I choose continued treatment?
- If I choose euthanasia, what will happen to my pet's remains?
- If I do not choose euthanasia at this time, will you provide me with options to help keep my pet comfortable?
- Is veterinary hospice an option?
- Where can the euthanasia take place? Do I have to bring my pet into the office?
- Can I be present for the euthanasia? Can I choose not to be present?
- What will happen during the euthanasia process?

Whenever possible, it's best to develop a plan, taking into consideration three basic issues:

**1) When should you consider euthanasia?** When your pet is ill, this may be the last question you want to think about. Yet it is the most important question you may need to answer.

Start by asking your veterinarian what types of symptoms to expect as your pet's illness progresses. What stages will the disease take? How long before kidney disease produces incontinence or renal failure? How long before tumor cells invade the lungs or other organs? How long before symptoms become medically unmanageable, before pain becomes severe and untreatable? At what point will your pet become unable to function normally; at what point will its suffering become extreme?

This information can help you form your plan. For example, you may decide to seriously consider euthanasia when your pet can no longer breathe easily, or eat or drink, or find a comfortable position in which to sleep, or when it seems to find your touch painful. By defining a "decision point" in advance, you place boundaries on the suffering your pet is likely to endure.

**2) Will you be there?** Many people feel it is important to be present during euthanasia. Many others feel unable to handle this traumatic event. And make no mistake: Witnessing the euthanasia of your beloved companion is traumatic (though it can also help allay fears that your companion suffered). This is not a decision to be made lightly, or based on someone else's choices.

Most feel that the pet's well-being is the most important consideration. If you believe your pet will feel more comfortable or secure in your presence, you'll probably want to stay, no matter how difficult it will be. On the other hand, if you're concerned that your own reaction and grief may disturb the pet more than the process itself, you may prefer to stay away.

If you choose not to be present, don't simply leave your pet with the veterinarian. Some clinics hold "to-be-euthanized" pets until after clinic hours, which simply adds to an animal's trauma. Make sure that your pet is going to be euthanized immediately, while you wait in the waiting room or car.

**3) What will you do next?** The worst time to decide what to do with your pet's remains is at the last minute. It's far better to begin discussing options weeks in advance. Indeed, even the owner of a perfectly healthy pet can begin considering the answer to this question at any time, particularly if you want to make special funeral or private cremation arrangements, or want a particular type of funerary product (such as a special urn or casket). For many, this decision involves both physical and spiritual issues. How do you (and your family) distinguish between body and soul? Do you feel that your pet will be "closer" to you spiritually if its remains are close to you physically (e.g., in a cremation urn)? Do you feel that your pet's spirit will be happier if it is interred in a familiar, beloved location? Or do you feel that your pet's soul and personality are not associated with its physical remains, which you're quite happy to leave with the veterinarian? There's nothing foolish about such considerations. For many, the certainty that they have provided for their cat's spiritual needs can go a long way toward healing the spiritual wounds of the owner.



## Myths about Euthanasia

Many people have mixed feelings about euthanasia, for good reason. No matter how well-intentioned we may be, this act feels like murder to many of us, and guilt may often haunt us long after the act. Even when we know intellectually that euthanasia may be the “best” or “most merciful” choice, this means little when we face the decision itself. Many pet owners cling to misperceptions that provide apparent justification for postponing this decision—often at the expense of the pet itself. Three common misperceptions include:

1. *Euthanasia isn't nature's way.* Some pet owners reject euthanasia as “unnatural.” Nature, some say, has a timetable for every life, and by artificially ending a life, we're disrupting nature's plan. While charming, this belief overlooks the fact that by providing treatment, surgery, medication, or any other form of care for a sick (or injured) pet, we are already extending that pet's life far beyond what would occur if matters were left in the not-so-tender hands of “nature.” Euthanasia is often not so much a question of “artificially ending” a life, but of determining when to cease artificially extending that life.
2. *Euthanasia is selfish.* One of the most common sources of guilt is the belief that one has euthanized a pet “too soon” or for “selfish” reasons. “I should have tried harder,” many people tell themselves. “I should have been willing to do more, spend more, get a second opinion, stay up all night to take care of her.” Yet the person who worries most about not having “done enough” is often a person who has already gone to superhuman efforts to care for that pet. A far more dangerous form of selfishness is to prolong a pet's suffering simply to postpone one's own.
3. *My pet will tell me when it's "time."* Many of us have heard of pets who allegedly offered some indication of acceptance of death, of being “ready to move on.” And who among us would not welcome that sense of being granted “permission” to end a pet's life? Such a “signal” would remove the dreadful burden of having to make that decision on our own. Unfortunately, for many that signal never comes. By convincing ourselves that our pets will “tell us” when it is time to die, we risk two hazards: Prolonging a pet's suffering by waiting for a sign that never comes, or torturing ourselves with guilt for acting “too soon.”

The painful truth is that if your pet is terminally ill, and especially if it is suffering and unable to function, it will die; the decision you must make is not whether its life will end, but how, and how much discomfort, you are willing to allow it to endure. Stefanie Schwartz, DVM, sums up the issue in one vital question in her book, *Canine and Feline Behavior Problems*: “Which choice will bring you the least cause for regret after the pet is gone?” Unfortunately, “no regret” is often not an option.

## Suggested Reading

- *Surviving the Heartbreak of Choosing Death for Your Pet*, by Linda M. Peterson
- *A Final Act of Caring: Ending the Life of an Animal Friend*, by Mary and Herb Montgomery available c/o Montgomery Press, P.O. Box 24124, Minneapolis, MN 55424.

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## How Soon Should You Get a New Pet? by Moira Anderson Allen, M.Ed.

When your pet dies, how soon should you get a new one?

Until recently, the standard answer has been “right away”! That may not always be the best advice, however: Obtaining a new pet before you have had time to work through your grief can cause problems for both you and the pet.

So when is the right time? There is no single answer to that question, because everyone experiences grief in their own way. For some, the loneliness of an empty house makes grieving more difficult, and a new pet can help the process. Others, however, may feel resentful toward a pet obtained too soon.

The time to obtain a new pet is when you have worked through your grief sufficiently to be confident that you can look forward to new relationships, rather than backward at your loss. For some people, that might be a matter of days or weeks; for others, it might be months or years. Regardless of when you choose to obtain a new pet, however, the following suggestions can help you ease the transition and make the new relationship more rewarding for you, your family and the pet.

## Ten Tips on Choosing a New Pet

1. Don't make a hasty decision. Give yourself time to think. Don't let anyone rush you into a decision or pressure you into making a choice that isn't right for you. (If it isn't right for you, it won't be right for the pet either!) Also, don't let a well-meaning friend or relative force the decision on you by getting you a new pet before you are ready.
2. Don't think of the new pet as a “replacement” for your previous pet. You don't replace relationships; you build new ones. Your new pet will be a companion with whom you build an entirely new set of memories and experiences.
3. Do look for a pet that is in some way different from your previous pet. If possible, select a different breed or sex. Avoid obtaining a “lookalike” pet, because if your new pet looks like your previous pet, it is easy to be disappointed when it doesn't act like that pet. Consider a pet with different colorings or markings from your previous pet.
4. Do research your choice carefully. Shelters are deluged with pets that were selected unwisely and subsequently “dumped.” Make certain the breed, size, sex, behavior and needs of your new pet are appropriate for your lifestyle. Avoid the temptation to adopt the first animal you see to “fill the void.”
5. Do involve all family members in the decision to obtain a new pet. In particular, consider the needs and feelings of your children. Children build strong attachments to pets and may feel that giving their love to a new pet is “disloyal” to the previous pet. Make certain all members of the family have had a chance to work

through their individual grieving process. Involve everyone in discussions of what sort of pet to obtain. If possible, let your children help you select a new pet.

6. Don't give your new pet the same name (or nickname) as your previous pet.
7. Don't expect your new pet to be just like the one you lost. Don't expect the new pet to do the same things your previous pet did, respond in the same ways or have the same characteristics. Instead, enjoy your new pet's individual behaviors, responses and characteristics as they develop.
8. Don't compare your new pet to your previous pet. After many happy years with an animal companion, it is easy to forget that, when it was a puppy or kitten, it too was destructive, disobedient, noisy or not housetrained. Your new pet will soon grow out of its "difficult" phase.
9. Do consider the needs of your surviving pets. Will they welcome or resent a newcomer? Some pets seem to genuinely mourn the loss of a companion, and you may find that you need to introduce a new pet simply to comfort the survivor. Remember, however, that most cats and dogs are territorial by nature, and that it will take them time to adapt to a new pet. Once you have introduced a new pet into the household, make sure your existing pets receive lots of attention.
10. Do consider obtaining a new pet before the loss of your previous pet. If your pet is growing old or is ill consider introducing a new pet into your home now. In many cases, the presence of a young and active pet has revitalized an older animal. More importantly, this avoids the problem of attempting to build a relationship with a new pet while you are still grieving for the previous pet.

### Some additional considerations:

- If your pet died of a contagious illness, make certain your home is thoroughly cleaned before a new pet is brought in. Dispose of items that might carry the illness, such as bedding, rugs or toys.
- Give some thought to the disposition of your pet's belongings. Some people enjoy passing a pet's things to a new pet; others, however, feel that such items should not be transferred. If you prefer to dispose of your pet's possessions, consider whether a shelter might benefit from those that are in good condition.
- If you're not certain whether you're ready for a new pet, but you need to cuddle something furry and warm, consider volunteering as a "pet cuddler" or even a foster parent to help socialize adoptable animals at your local shelter. You'll be able to give love and receive comfort without making a commitment. And who knows? You may discover the perfect companion to share your life!
- When a pet dies, grief is a normal and natural response. Never let anyone tell you that you are crazy or silly to grieve over "just an animal." The loss of a relationship brings pain-so do what you need to do to work through that pain. Cry, grieve, pound a pillow, talk to a friend or support group, conduct a memorial service that will help you pay tribute to your pet while saying good-bye. Then, when the time is right for you, you'll be able to share your love with a new, well-chosen animal companion.

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## Animals Grieve Too

### Do Pets Grieve? by Maggie Johnson

When my mother was dying, her 14-year-old Himalayan Cat, JuJu, didn't leave her bedside except to nibble on his dinner and use the litter box. We think he knew what was happening. He was tender and patient and quiet. What's more, he was uncharacteristically tender and receptive to the rest of us, whom he usually turned his nose up at. It was as though he was feeling the pain right along with us. He seemed smart enough to know that it's a little easier if you don't have to go through the loss of a loved one all by yourself. After five days at her bedside, she passed away. JuJu stayed in her room for about a week, until we had to bring him to his new home. Since my mother lived alone and he had to go somewhere, my sister and I thought the best place for him would be our Aunt Deb's house. He knew Deb well, he liked her, and her home offered plenty of space and affection for him.

Whether it's the loss of a companion animal or the loss of a person within the home, animals may experience feelings of grief and depression just as people do. And just like people, no two pets grieve the same. Signs that a pet may be grief-stricken include a loss of appetite, an increase in sleep, depression, restlessness, aimless wandering, confusion and/or excessive barking or meowing. Chances are, as long as there are no underlying health problems, it is safe to assume that these behavioral changes are a natural part of the animal's mourning process.

While animals typically grieve for two to six weeks, sometimes mourning can take place for up to six months. A pet's reaction to the loss of a human caregiver will often be different than his reaction to losing another pet companion. When a family member dies or moves out of the house, a pet may pace, whine or engage in destructive behavior. When a companion pet dies, they exhibit more depression and more inactivity. In either case, a pet will often be seen searching to house for their missing companion. If you see this happening, feel free to give your grieving pet something that still holds the scent of his lost companion and let him be comforted by it.

It is quite common for a grieving pet to demand more affection and attention from others. Extra love and affection can be a healing comfort to both you and your pet. Your pet needs extra love and affection just as a person would during a time of mourning but be careful not to mistakenly reward certain behaviors that you don't want your pet to adopt permanently. There is always a balance to everything. It is understandable to hand out extra dog treats or bring out the catnip more frequently if you see your pet is sad but keep it balanced so your pet



won't develop bad habits, such as becoming more dependent on treats, being finicky or demanding too much extra attention. If you worry that this may be happening, you may instead try to distract your pet during sad times by playing with him, taking her for a walk or talking to him. Keep the animal's routines as normal as possible. Maintain consistency in exercise, feeding schedules and the amount of attention being given. Eventually your pets will return to their normal behavior. Don't underestimate your pet's ability to adapt. Time is the great healer for grieving animals just as it is for grieving people.

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## The Rainbow Bridge

*The Rainbow Bridge is a place often referred to by people whose pets have died. It is the theme of a work of poetic prose written some time between 1980 and 1992, which has gained wide popularity amongst animal lovers who have lost a pet.*

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies who has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge.

There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals that had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; his eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together...

*Author unknown*

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## Memorializing Your Pet

We use various forms of memorials and rituals after a loss as a coping mechanism. After the loss of a pet, these memorials and rituals are just as important in helping us adapt to our loss. Some ideas for memorializing your animal include:

1. Have a funeral or memorial service.
2. Bury your pet's ashes or scatter them in a meaningful place.
3. Create a scrapbook or photo album of your pet.
4. Write a poem, song, story or obituary for your pet.
5. Make a memorial contribution to a local rescue group, Humane Society or SPCA.
6. Keep your pet's tags on your key chain.
7. Ask your vet to make clay paw-prints of your pet.
8. Keep a lock of fur in a locket or holiday ornament.
9. Plant flowers that bloom every year for your pet (tulips, daffodils, forget-me-nots).
10. Share stories of your pet with loved ones and friends.
11. Decorate your pet's headstone should you choose to bury him in a pet cemetery or memorial garden.
12. Light a candle in your pet's memory.

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## Sharing the Story of Your Pet: Using Journal Writing to Help Your Healing

Working through grief with writing can be just as powerful and helpful as talking about it. Some have kept journals or diaries throughout the course of their lives. For others, the idea of putting pen to paper; or fingers to keyboard is new and daunting. However, the process of expressing your thoughts, feelings and emotions through the written word can help you work through your pain, sorrow and grief as well as remember the happy, fun, loving moments you had with your companion animal.

## Getting Started

- Write where you feel comfortable; maybe that is in a spiral notebook or a leather-bound journal or sitting at the keyboard of your computer. Maybe you want to start a blog to share your experiences with others who are going through similar things. The possibilities are endless and entirely up to you.
- Write when you feel you need to. You don't have to do it everyday, or maybe you will want write in the morning or in the evening. It is entirely up to you how often and when you write.
- Write about what you are thinking about and feeling. It is okay to write about the raw emotions you are experiencing.
- Don't sugarcoat it. It hurts. It's okay.
- Own your writing. Begin with phrases such as "I remember," "I feel," "I wish" or "I believe."
- Write about bad and good times.
- You can choose to share your writing or not. Be aware that others may not understand the expression of your pain, while others may laugh at your funny stories.
- Scribble, draw pictures, doodle if you need to.

### Writing your pet's biography

1. How did your pet come into your life?
2. How did you decide on your pet's name?
3. What were some of the nicknames you gave your pet?
4. What kind of relationship did you have with your pet?
5. Did your pet have favorite toys or sleep in a special place?
6. Did your pet have bad habits?
7. Did your pet have any unique skills?
8. Did your pet teach you things? What were they?
9. Did you take a trip with your pet? Describe this.
10. Talk about the end: was your pet chronically ill? Did she die suddenly? Did you choose euthanasia?
- How did these things impact your relationship with your animal and your grieving?
11. What will you take away from your relationship with your animal?

### Further Reading about Writing/Journaling

- *Writing to Save Your Life: How to Honor Your Story through Journaling*, by Michele Weldon
- *New Diary: How to Use a Journal for Self-Guidance and Expanded Creativity*, by Tristine Rainer and Anais Nin
- *Journalution: Journaling to Awaken Your Inner Voice, Heal Your Life, and Manifest Your Dreams*, by Sandy Grason
- *Blogging for Dummies*, by Brad Hill
- *No One Cares What You Had for Lunch: 100 Ideas for Your Blog*, by Margaret Mason

### Memory-Making and Keeping through Scrapbooking

Are you an avid photographer who loves to capture those funny, quirky, silly, loving and wonderful moments with your companion animal on film? Do you have boxes and envelopes of photos sitting around the house? Turning those photos into a living memorial scrapbook you can share with others can be a therapeutic expression of grief and mourning. It also allows you to be as creative as you desire to help process your feelings and memories. Scrapbooking assists with making meaning out of the loss of your beloved companion animal.

#### Tips to help you get started:

1. Gather your photos. Ask others who may have photos of your pet to share them with you.
2. Involve other family members and children in the creation of the scrapbook.
3. Choose themes to organize your pages. Maybe you want to include pages of your dog swimming at a family vacation or your cat discovering catnip for the first time.
4. Check out scrapbooking Web sites such as:
  5. Local stores such as AC Moore, Michael's and Target also carry a wide variety of scrapbooking tools and products to help you personalize your album.
6. Include journaling about your pet in your scrapbook. Tell stories and jokes; emphasize the wonderful memories you have about your pet. If you saved your pet's tags or perhaps a lock of fur, you can archive these items in your scrapbook, too.

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