

# Pet Bereavement

## A guide for the Loss of a Beloved Pet

When a pet dies  
That special warm place  
In our hearts  
Suddenly becomes empty...  
And, as in all painful events,  
It will take time  
To get over the loss...

But there is something  
To hang onto.  
We realize, as time passes,  
That animals have  
A way of teaching us about loving,  
About loyalty, about joy  
And friendship...

And whatever we've shared  
In their presence  
Can never really be lost.

(Hallmark greeting card – “Cold Noses, Warm Heart” line.)



### **WinterSpring**

*We're not afraid to be with loss.*

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## **PET BEREAVEMENT**

The death of a beloved pet is commonly the first loss we experience in life. Although we know it is inevitable many of us are unprepared for the loss, and don't know how to help others, or ourselves when a pet loss occurs. Friends and relatives may offer support and understanding much more freely when a loved one dies, and may fail to recognize the importance of bereavement over a non-human companion. This can make the death of a pet the hardest loss some will ever face.

*Insensitive remarks often heard when a death occurs:*

It's just a dog (cat, bird, etc.)  
No sense dwelling on the past.  
Support groups are for weaklings.  
He had a good life  
You still have other pets  
God needs her more than you  
You can get another pet

Don't cry  
You must be strong  
Be glad he's out of pain  
Think of the good times  
Count your blessings  
Others have it worse  
Try to stay busy

These responses suggest to us that we should not feel badly about our losses. They encourage us to avoid our feelings and put pressure on us to get over the loss as soon as possible. While well meaning, these comments minimize the griever's pain and don't acknowledge the loss. They also suggest we have no right to be upset or distressed, and that grieving is wrong.

### **UNDERSTANDING GRIEF**

Grief is one of the most normal and natural emotions that we can feel: yet it is one of the most misunderstood. People may feel ashamed of their bereft state, as if it is something to be embarrassed about. Yet grief is a very healthy psychological response that requires expression and acknowledgement. Our society may reward the stoic, strong avoidance technique. However, attempts to suppress feelings of grief can actually prolong the healing process. With expression and acceptance, we can move through the process of grief, and know that it is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. Grieving takes time. It is a process, not an event. There is no specific time frame for this process. In fact, grief may last for weeks, months, or even years. Healthy grief, however, gradually lessens in intensity over time.

Many do not understand the overwhelming feelings of grief prompted by the illness or death of a companion animal. During the grieving process, it's common to experience sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, helplessness, shock, or depression. Physical sensations may include crying, hollowness in the stomach, sighing, tightness in the chest and throat, weak muscles, a dry mouth, appetite and sleep disturbances, and fatigue.

After the loss of an animal, preoccupation with memories may occur. A person may imagine the pet is still alive. All of these are common, healthy reactions to the normal grief process. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Expecting grief to disappear on a certain time schedule is unrealistic, and only creates more stress for the bereaved.



## **THE PHASES OF GRIEF**

We can expect certain emotions to manifest as we move through grief. Remember that these phases may occur in random order, or we may return to one phase or another, as there is no "cookie cutter" that shapes everyone's grief. These emotions are initially shock and denial, generally occurring immediately after learning that the pet is terminally ill, injured or dead. This can feel like a nightmare, and we may feel disoriented. After the shock wears off a little, anger and guilt may take over. If the death was violent, prolonged or preventable, we may feel this phase more strongly. If the animal disappeared, never to return, the loss may be especially difficult, since the possibility of a return may prevent us from grieving. If the end is brought about by euthanasia, we may doubt that the right decision was made, even if it was made with thoughtful consideration and advice from a veterinary. The decision to end an animal's life, even when that animal is suffering through a terminal or degenerative condition sometimes evokes a strong sense of personal responsibility and guilt. Owners may worry that the decision was premature or unnecessary. Many times, our anger or guilt will be directed toward family members, friends or even our veterinarian. Sometimes these feelings of anger or guilt are turned inward. We may unjustly blame ourselves for not having the power to save our pet or for not having loved our pet enough. Another phase is sorrow and depression, also very normal. During this time, we often feel the greatest sense of loss. These feelings of grief come in waves and we may find ourselves suddenly crying, especially when something reminds us of our pet.

The final phase is acceptance of the loss, and reconciling it in our minds, as an inevitable event in our lives, however sad, unfair, and heartbreaking. While pangs of grief will always remain, they diminish in frequency. Gradually, the memories of the pet will focus more on love and shared times, rather than the loss. As you accept these feelings, you are successfully working toward the reconciliation of your grief.

## **GROWTH FROM GRIEF**

If we remember grief is normal, and try not to make judgments about our emotions, we can work through the process. The important goal to work toward is that as we move along, we'll find meaning in a pet's death, a lesson learned or an attitude changed due to the experience. As pet owners, we may know we've grown emotionally, and measure our personal development in terms of our recovery from loss. Down the road comes the realization that we're ready to bring a new pet into our lives without feeling disloyal to the one who died. Life can be enjoyed again.

If we have experienced past losses that have not been properly resolved, the pet's death may revisit the old unreconciled grief. If such feelings persist and interfere with daily life despite the support of family and friends, assistance from WinterSpring or other professionals may be very helpful.



## **THE UNRESOLVED LOSS OF A PET**

While it is always traumatic when we lose a pet to death, it can be more so in the case of a pet that runs away, is stolen, meets an end that we aren't aware of, or a loss that leaves us without a sense of closure. We may be angry, and ask why such a thing could happen? Where are the local authorities, and why aren't they more helpful? We may feel guilty, and ask, why did I allow this to happen? Why didn't I fix the faulty latch on the gate? We may enter denial, and say to ourselves, he will come back, and never face the reality that after an extended length of time, looking, and waiting, our pet will not be back. We may feel depressed, and feel despair there is nothing we can do. Frustration comes when we feel no one cares, or others are not reacting as we are.

Complicating the issue, that there is no final moment, that we tell ourselves, "Now is the time to start grieving." This makes the issue of a lost pet more difficult to resolve. If we feel we have done everything possible to find our pet, this helps in some measure to help us resolve the feelings outlined above. Suggestions to help us include:

Search your neighborhood  
Extend your search  
Contact Animal Control  
Start a poster campaign  
Advertise

Talk to your neighbors  
Contact appropriate registries  
Follow up leads  
Be persistent  
Secure your other pets to avoid loss

*Suggestions for taking care of yourself through this difficult time:*

Focus on your other pets  
Allow yourself to cry and be angry  
Memorialize your pet in some way

Talk to your friends about your grief  
Feel your guilt and pain, express it  
Set a time limit to hope, then let go

### **WHAT CAN I SAY?**

When we think of what is not appropriate to say to someone who is grieving, we also need to think of what is helpful to say, and appreciated by the pet owner.

*Helpful suggestions on supporting through pet loss:*

Say, I'm sorry  
Give hugs and unspoken support  
Listen to them recount the event  
Praise their love for their animal  
Allow feelings without judging

Help to figure out the lesson in it all  
Ask how you can help specifically  
Don't change the subject  
Relate a happy memory of the pet  
Do suggest a call to WinterSpring



## EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia is a painful decision made with the help of caregivers at a time when our pet can no longer live with dignity and without pain. Although this choice is something that frees our pet from his agony, often pet owners feel a huge sense of guilt, as if they were the murderers for bringing about his death. Not only do we mourn the loss of the pet, we may feel as if we didn't try everything we could to save them. Sometimes the cost of expensive treatments with questionable success rates may cause us to make the decision. We may want to blame the veterinarian for his high fees, and in part blame him for the difficult choice we had to make.

Remember that as our pet's caregivers, he is trusting us to make the right decisions. When it hurts us to see our pet suffering, it is out of love that this decision is made. When every breath is a labor, when every step is excruciating, when pleading eyes look up at us to do something, we can know that euthanasia is an act of unselfish love. Unselfish, because it does not focus on our needs, but on the needs of our beloved animal.

Once you've made the decision, realize that options exist along the way. For instance, some veterinarians will come to your home, where the pet is most comfortable, to "put them down."

Should you be in the room with your pet? This is an intensely personal decision, that only you can answer. Many decide to be there, who wish for theirs to be the last voice heard, comforting with loving arms around them, being there until the end. But not everyone can face this devastating experience. Some regret not being there, having missed out on finalizing and accepting the pet's death, or not being there to say goodbye. Keep in mind no veterinarian expects you to be a pillar of strength. Neither should your family or loved ones. They know how much our pets mean to us, and they know that above all, taking care of ourselves, doing what makes us feel comfortable, and avoiding what makes us uncomfortable, is the most important.

Regardless of what our decision is, realize that there is comfort in sharing our feelings with a caring friend, who is willing to listen without placing blame or judgement. Feel free to cry and express your rage, your guilt, and not be concerned with trying to hold up for other's approval. It is appropriate to grieve for our beloved pets at their death, and if we can work toward resolving our guilt, through forgiveness of ourselves, then healing can begin, at the time that is right for us.

There are suggestions included in this packet for memorializing your pet. Creating a space to remember and honor your pet often brings solace. Whether you choose to have the pet cremated, buried either in your yard or at a pet cemetery, or have the body disposed of in some other way, it is important to have a spot to go for remembrance.



## **PUTTING YOUR PET TO REST**

Even when a pet's death is expected, People may avoid dealing with the inevitable decision on what arrangements should be made. Hasty decisions made at the last minute often leave us without the benefit of choosing a method that leaves us without regrets.

Children especially benefit from taking part in the decision process. Knowing that his beloved pet is comfortable in their special resting place is extremely important to him. Keep in mind while deciding, what is best for you and your family.

### **Burial**

If a suitable place is available, you may choose a burial on your own property, or the property of a compassionate friend. Your decision will need to take into account the availability of land, the local laws governing interment in undesignated areas, the accessibility of a pet cemetery and the expense of these different methods.

Many find it extremely satisfying to bury a pet in a familiar yard or field, wrapped in its blanket, accompanied by a favorite ball or plaything. Placing the pet under a flowering shrub or tree, where the dog used to lay, has special meaning.

After choosing a site, contact the city clerk or police to learn what is legal, and whether a permit is required. The grave should be a minimum of three feet deep. Consider whether the property will change hands, and whether the spot chosen will remain undisturbed.

Should you choose a pet cemetery, which may seem like a financial indulgence to some, know that these establishments have a wide range of costs and services. Check to see what is offered and what works for you. One of the most comforting aspects of choosing burial in a pet cemetery is that the owner can make periodic visits to the gravesite.

For those who cannot afford the cost of a private interment, some cemeteries or shelters will perform a communal burial. While the treatment is obviously not as personal, the arrangement satisfies many owners. Wherever you choose, remember the best place to bury a dog is in the heart of his master.

### **Cremation**

An alternative to burial, cremation now accounts for nearly forty-five percent of pet disposals. It is quick, clean and generally less expensive than burial at a pet cemetery. Options exist for budgetary concerns, and whether you want to retain your pet's ashes. Most pet cemeteries have facilities for performing individual cremation, and will bury the ashes on the grounds or scatter them in special memorial gardens. Retaining the ashes is a good choice for pet lovers who move from place to place, as a small urn is easily transported. It is a source of satisfaction for many owners to be able to keep this memorial in their possession.

If costs are prohibitive for you, veterinarians and animal shelters may perform communal cremation. Keep in mind the loss of the pet's individual ashes will occur through this method.



While you may choose to have your veterinarian or animal shelter hold the pet's body in a vault until you feel ready to proceed, this long-drawn-out process presents a problem for many people. It does allow you to take the time to make the right decision for you.



## Suggested Eulogies to be Read at Your Pet Memorial

### **Lonely House**

*No more cat tracks on the floor  
Muddy scratches on the door*

*Puff of hair upon the stair  
Lacy fretwork on the chairs*

*Indentations on my bed  
Markings where she laid her head*

*Smudges on the window pane  
Showing where she watched in vain*

*Haunts where she is wont to lay  
Remind us that she is away*

*My house is neater, that is true  
But, oh, so still and empty, too*

### **Four Feet In Heaven**

Your favorite chair is vacant now  
No eager purrs to greet me  
No softly padded paws to run  
Ecstatically to meet me

No coaxing rubs, no plaintive cry  
Will say it's time for feeding  
I've put away your bowl

And all the things  
You won't be needing  
But I will miss you, little friend  
For I could never measure  
The happiness you brought to me  
The comfort and the pleasure

And since God put you here to share  
In earthly joy and sorrow  
I'm sure there'll be a place for you  
In Heaven's bright tomorrow

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### **Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog**

Near this spot are deposited the remains of one who possessed Beauty without Vanity, Strength without Insolence, Courage without Ferocity, and all the Virtues of Man, without his Vices. This Praise, which would be unmeaning Flattery if inscribed over human ashes, is but a just tribute to the Memory of Boatswain, a dog.

*Written by Lord Byron*

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And now we lay you down to sleep  
You're finally at rest

Our love for you we'll always keep  
You were the very best

You gave us joy for \_\_\_ years  
A memory for each new day

Then came the day of all my fears  
The day you passed away  
A part of us you took with you  
And I can't stand the pain

But when this life on earth is through  
I know we'll meet again





## Memorialization

- Take lots of photographs, and when you think you've taken enough, take some more. Use the photos to fill an album, place them in your pet's favorite spots in the house, make a collage with them, fill a multi-picture frame with them, and carry pictures in your wallet.
- Write a poem, story, song, etc., about and/or dedicated to your pet
- Write down your special memories of your pet. Add to these stories or anecdotes from friends and family. Alternatively you could make a tape recording of the same thing.
- Write a letter to your pet expressing feelings you may be struggling with.
- Make something that reminds you of your pet, e.g., a drawing, a clay sculpture, a needlework project, etc.
- Keep pet tags. You may place these on your key ring so that you will always be carrying the memory of your special friend with you.
- Have a plaque made to honor your pet. Place it in a special place – next to your pet's ashes, on a tree near where your pet was buried, in the hospital where your pet was cared for, etc.
- Make a donation in memory of your pet to a special cause.
- Volunteer your time at a humane organization and/ or help find homes for strays and unwanted pets.
- Join a pet loss support group in your area. Call us at WinterSpring
- Plant a bush, shrub, tree, flowers over or near the location where the body or ashes are buried.
- Scatter ashes in an area that was special to you and your pet.
- Collect pet's collars, tags, bowls, blankets, etc., and place in a special area in honor of your pet. Can also place ashes, sympathy cards, etc., with them.



## GRIEF-WORK “ACTIVITIES”

Light a candle in your loved one’s name—everyone in the house will know that someone else is thinking about him/her too.

Visit a location that is special to you. Think of memories or share memories with a friend.

Bring flowers to the cemetery, leave half the bouquet behind and bring the other half home to enjoy.

Walk, run, jump, row a boat, bicycle, chop wood, scrub floors, paint a room, make a favorite meal to share with friends.

Watch a funny movie, listen to special music, write a song or poem, sing “the remembrance song,” dance in celebration of your loved one’s life, celebrate holidays with a toast to your loved one, make new traditions.

Think of the positive traits of your deceased loved one, and practice them yourself. Perform a kind act in remembrance of your loved one.

Plant a tree, bulbs or flowers, tend them and tell others what they signify.

Keep a journal...write a list of mads/sads/fears/etc. about the loss...i.e., “I’m mad that I’m alone, that you died, that I had no way to stop it...”

Write letters (not to send) in which you bare your soul. Let thoughts and feelings flow, and *do not edit* what you write!

Write affirmations to create positive self-fulfilling prophecies that emphasize your determination to heal...i.e., “I can cope...I *will* survive this tragedy...”

Employ thought-stopping techniques when your thinking is caught in circles. Say the word “Stop!” out loud, trace the letters over and over in your mind, imagine pouring large buckets of grey paint over the troubling thinking.

Pray, meditate, actively practice forgiveness of yourself and others. Write repeatedly, “I forgive myself for \_\_\_\_\_. I forgive \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_.”

Howl, growl, wail, pound a pillow or your bed, twist a towel, scream into a pillow or the woods.

Consciously decide to stop all suffering for certain periods of time.

Create a memory book. Ask others for contributions. Kids can add stories and drawings. Complete the statement, “When I think of \_\_\_\_\_, I remember \_\_\_\_\_.” Add photos and songs.



## Could You Just Listen?...

*As caregivers we often want to “fix” the pain, to make the person feel better. The following requests emphasize the importance of being “responsive to” rather than “responsible for” each other.*

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked was that you listen, not talk to or do- just hear me.

Advice is cheap; 20 cents will get you both Dear Abbey and Billy Graham in the same paper.

I can do for myself; I'm not helpless- maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince you and can get about this business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling.

When that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice.

Irrational feelings make more sense when we understand what's behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometime, for some people- because God is mute, and He/She doesn't give advice or try to fix things. “They” just listen and let you work it out for yourself.

So please listen and just hear me.

And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn- and I'll listen to you.

*- Author Anonymous*



## **COPING WITH DEPRESSION**

1. Recognize that the major responsibility for alleviating your depression lies with you. It is important to acknowledge it and be open to accepting help.
2. Read about depression in order to recognize the symptoms, causes, types and treatments.
3. Realize that depression serves a purpose. It is best to face it and work through it, rather than avoid it.
4. Talk things over with an understanding friend or loved one. It is one factor that may help you avoid severe depression.
5. See a physician for a complete checkup and discussion of your symptoms.
6. Redirect energy in more constructive channels so there is more pleasure in your life. Pleasure is a source of energy. Take a break for a favorite activity, an evening out, a trip, etc.
7. Exercise helps you to relax, work off bottled-up tension and sleep better.
8. Work on your sorrow. Lean into your pain. Realize and accept the reason for your grief. Allow yourself to experience the many feelings you get, such as anger, guilt, etc. Express your feelings - let out anger by hitting a pillow, swimming, screaming, hitting a punching bag, crying.
9. Become involved with people: do volunteer work, help others.
10. Try to look at life more positively. Try not to expect that bad things will happen. - Make efforts that good will happen.
11. Avoid extra stress or big changes if possible.
12. Practice deep breathing, which stimulates physical energy.
13. Remember that good nutrition is important for mental and physical health.
14. Seek professional help if depression is severe or persistent. It will not be as debilitating or as enduring as it would be if ignored or suffered alone.
15. Examine your feelings to figure out what's specifically troubling you and what can be done.
16. Write down negative thoughts and sort through them for the ones that you might be able to solve. Dealing with problems one at a time helps.
17. Consider yoga and meditation.
18. Depression has its roots in hopelessness. Hold on to hope - grief and depression management take time.
19. Acceptance of the loss and resultant depression makes it less painful.
20. If you feel guilty, seek forgiveness. Find alternatives to self-punishment.
21. Attempt thinking pleasant thoughts for one minute. This may take practice but it is a helpful habit to cultivate.
22. For someone in depression it is important to remember that alcohol itself is a depressant.
23. Replenish self-esteem. Try harder to like yourself. Treat yourself as you would a good friend. Be patient, encouraging, & forgiving. Pamper and be gentle with yourself.
24. Do something you do well, such as hobbies or special activities. Little accomplishments help you to rediscover your self-confidence.
25. Remember, you have a choice. Depression can be managed. It doesn't have to ruin lives.



## **HOW SOON SHOULD I GET A NEW PET?**

Losing a pet can be like losing a part of ourselves. Our house may feel less like a home, and the familiarity of having our pet with us makes us feel less complete. Well-meaning friends may suggest a new pet.

Sometimes the thought of getting another pet seems like we are opening up to have our heart broken again. Others may experience a feeling of betrayal for the deceased pet, as if they are easily replaced. This is especially true for children. They may feel certain they will never want another animal, as they may love their animal with all their heart. For this reason, many decide to put off the decision until the grieving process has been allowed to proceed for a time.

The very heart of animal companionship never changes, the essence of asking nothing but our love and care, while rewarding us with their adoration. While an individual animal cannot be replaced, after a time, the thump of feet at hearing our key at the door, the welcoming yelp of joy, the twining of a kitty around our legs, may seem like something we are ready to experience again. It may be easier to think of a new pet not as a replacement, but as an enhancement of the affection you had for your previous animal.

