Grief & the Loss of a Pet

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Grief upon the loss of a pet is a normal response, and a very individual one. For some people, grieving for a pet who has died may be a more difficult process than grieving for a human loved one. One reason is that the support network of understanding and caring people may be smaller. If a person has lost a human loved one, the friends, family, co-workers, etc., will all be understanding. They may send cards, flowers, and offer food and companionship. This is often not the case when a pet dies. A funeral or memorial service for the deceased person will bring people together to provide mutual support and a sense of closure. Again, in most cases, this does not occur upon the death of a pet. Hurtful comments such as 'Don't be so upset,' 'It was only a cat,' and 'You can get another one,' may add to the grief and feeling of isolation and loneliness.

Stages of grief

We know that grieving is a complex process which includes a number of stages. These stages include: denial, bargaining, anger, sadness, and resolution. The stages may come in a recognized sequence or they may appear as a complex series of emotions and feelings. The length of each stage varies with each person, and often among cultures. Some people may return to a particular stage, such as anger, time and again. Others may reach resolution quite quickly. It does not mean they loved their pet any less, it is just their individual reaction to their loss. In most instances, the grieving process may continue for a few months to almost a year.

Denial: When we hear bad news, some of us have a tendency to deny it. We think it really is not true, that we did not 'hear it right,' or 'it cannot be as bad as that.' This is a defensive mechanism we use in an attempt to insulate ourselves from the emotional trauma we are, or are going to, experience.

Bargaining: When a human loved one is dying, many people may want to 'bargain' with God. If you let my loved one live, then I will... Although this is not as common when a pet dies, many people still experience this stage of grief. Owners of a dying pet may also experience a different type of bargaining such as telling their pet, 'If you recover, I will never scold you again.'

Anger: Anger is a common stage of grief that follows denial. Anger may be towards others such as the veterinarian or another family member. It may also be directed towards oneself in the form of guilt. We may say, 'If I had only brought her to the veterinarian sooner, she would be okay.' Some owners may feel angry at the pet for leaving them alone.

Sorrow and Sadness: Sadness is the stage we most often think of as grief. For many people, losing a pet may be one of the saddest experiences they will ever have. We mourn our loss. We may find it difficult to eat, sleep, or concentrate. We may not want to be around other people; but in reality, this is when we need understanding people the most. Talking to someone who understands our grief is a way to help the healing process begin. Caring people there can listen and help. If you do not know of anyone to talk to, you may wish to call a pet loss hotline. There are also books available written by people who understand the pain of losing a pet.

Resolution: Resolution is the final stage of the grieving process. At this point, we are able to accept that our wonderful friend has died. We start focusing on the wonderful memories we have and the times we enjoyed together. At this point, we may consider looking for a new pet, not to replace our lost friend, but to have someone to enjoy life with. There still may be times when we experience deep sadness, anger, or guilt at our loss, but we can recover from these times faster, and look forward rather than backward.

In addition to these stages, other emotional reactions may be seen. People can experience shock if the death of their pet was sudden and unanticipated, and may experience an emotional numbness. If a pet is missing, the uncertainty of what may have happened to the pet can produce worry and anxiety. When a pet disappears, children may be especially fearful of becoming lost or separated from their family.

Ambiguous loss

In an ambiguous loss, the whereabouts or cause of death of the pet is unknown. The pet may have run away or been stolen, or the owner may have needed to surrender the pet to a animal shelter. In these situations, there is seldom any 'closure.' The owner does not know when or if the pet has died, or if lost, whether the pet will ever come back. As a result, when to stop searching and when to start the grieving process are unsure. There may also be additional guilt associated with this type of loss.

How grief is expressed

In the book, *The Human-Animal Bond and Grief*, the authors describe five manifestations of grief.

Physical: Crying, nausea and loss of appetite, inability to sleep, fatigue, restlessness, and body aches and stiffness are typical manifestations of grief.

Intellectual: When grieving, people often experience an inability to concentrate, confusion, and a sense that time is passing

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very slowly.

Emotional: As described above, many emotions can be expressed in the course of the grieving process. Irritability, a lowered sense of self-worth, resentment, and embarrassment are also common feelings.

Social: Some grieving people often withdraw, may be reluctant to ask for help, and feel rejected by others. Others may show an increased dependency on other people, or an increased need to 'keep busy' and overcommit to activities.

Spiritual: The death of a pet may result in a person bargaining or feeling angry with God. The grieving person may try to find some meaningful interpretation of the death, and question what happens to pets after they die and whether pets have souls.

Help and healing

It has been shown that when grief can be expressed, the time needed for healing is often less. Similarly, if the expression of grief is restricted or withheld, the healing process may take much longer.

In addition to talking with others, to do something often helps us work through our grief. By doing something positive during this time of sadness, we expand our focus by celebrating the life of the pet. Activities which may help include:

- Planting flowers or a tree in memory of the pet
- Making a charitable donation
- Holding a funeral or memorial service
- Drawing a picture, making a clay sculpture or doing needlework of something that reminds you of your pet (you could do this yourself, or have it done by a professional)
- Placing your pet's nametag on your keyring
- Writing a poem, song, or story
- Composing music or a song
- Creating a memorial photo album or scrap book
- Writing a letter to your pet
- Framing a photograph
- Volunteering your time

People who have a pet who has died need to talk to someone. Often family members and friends are very supportive, but in some instances, they may not understand how important your pet was to you. It is important to find someone who does understand.

There are certain circumstances which can intensify the grief. If a person has recently suffered other losses, feels responsible for the death, or has never fully grieved an earlier death, the grieving process is often more complex. If the pet died of a disease similar to one which the owner or a loved one currently has or has had in the past, the grief can also be compounded.

If the pet has shared a significant event in the owner's life e.g.; was a gift from a spouse, the pet alerted the owner of a fire or otherwise 'rescued' the owner, or the pet has 'gotten them through' a difficult period in their life, grief can be compounded. When the pet was a significant source of support for the person, e.g., the person lived alone, adjusting to the death of the pet may be extremely difficult.

In some instances, when the pet dies, the owner also loses a significant activity. For instance, when a working dog dies, the owner has lost not only a pet, but a co-worker, someone who has shared activities with the owner many hours of the day. People who lose an assistance dog may lose their independence and the ability to even perform simple daily activities.

Some children or adolescents cannot remember life without the pet. For them, too, loss of the pet may be especially difficult, and professional help may be indicated.

In all of these situations, talking to a professional experienced in grief counseling (bereavement counselors, clergy, social workers, physicians, psychologists) is often advised and can assist the healing process. Support groups, pet loss hotlines, and books on pet loss can also be helpful.

When a child's pet dies

Always be honest regarding the death of a pet. You do not have to discuss all the details, but the child needs to understand what is going on. A child will find out the truth in the end and may become less trusting of the parent, or feel betrayed if not told the truth. The child should be able to participate in the arrangements. If the pet is to be buried, the child should always be given the option to be there. Burying the pet without the child's knowledge can, again, make the entire grieving process more difficult for the child, and make the child less trusting of his parents at a time when he really needs them.

If at all possible, prepare the child ahead of time for the death. Mementos can be very important for children, and they may want some pictures of them and the pet, a plaster cast of the pet's foot, etc.

Many factors can contribute to how a child will feel when their pet dies. The child's age and

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maturity are important factors. As with older people, the relationship the child had with the pet, the circumstances of the pet's death, and other events or losses the child has experienced will influence the grieving process. The ability of the parents and others to provide support will also play an important role in helping the child work through the grief.

Some generalities on how children may respond differently to the loss of a pet, as related to age are discussed below.

Infants and Children up to two years: Infants and very young children may not understand the death of a pet, but they are very aware of the tension and change in emotional state of those around them. Reassuring them by hugging and holding them, and keeping the household routine as normal as possible will help.

Toddlers and Pre-school Children: In general, children under 7 years of age do not understand that death is permanent. They will need help in understanding the pet will not wake up or come home. Do not try to hide a pet's illness or death from a child. They are often the first to sense that something is wrong. Trying to isolate them from a pet's death may cause them to feel abandonment or betrayal, and takes away their right to say good-bye. Help them to know it is okay to ask questions (they usually have many) and feel sad. Even children at the age of two can experience feelings of grief and sorrow. Underplaying the significance of a pet's death may result in a child feeling no one would care if she, too, died.

School-age children: Children between the ages of 7 and 12 can understand the permanence of death. They may ask many questions about how and why the pet died. Children over 12 years of age (adolescents) may have a very difficult time recovering from grief and may not be open about how much emotional pain they are experiencing. Adolescents should not be put in the position of having to take on extra responsibilities such as caring for siblings during this time of crisis.

Euthanasia: Euthanizing a pet can result in considerable confusion for a young child. In explaining euthanasia, simply explain that a painless injection of a powerful medication is given to the pet, which allows the pet to die and not suffer. In general, children under the age of eight are too young to be present when their pet is euthanized. If a child is going to be present at a euthanasia, it is best to have a pre-euthanasia session with the veterinarian to explain what will happen. At this point, it can be determined if it is better for the child not to be present during the euthanasia, but instead, to be invited into the room immediately afterwards. The words 'put to sleep' or 'went away' should not be used with young children, since it may cause them to feel even more confused. They may fear falling asleep themselves, because they think they may not wake up. Some children become terrified if they are told they are going to be 'put to sleep' before surgery. Or they may feel abandoned and that their pet did not love them and therefore ran away.

If financial considerations played a role in the decision to euthanize a pet, the child may believe her parents would not be able to take care of her if she became ill. In these situations, reassure the child that she will always be cared for. The child should also be told that the injection the pet received is not the same as what she receives at the pediatrician.

Expressing feelings: Young children are less able to express their feelings in words and are more likely to 'act out' what they feel. They may show anger or aggression in various situations that do not seem connected to the animal's death. They may start displaying regressive behavior such as bed-wetting and thumb-sucking. They may experience separation anxiety or complain about not feeling well. Activities such as those described above may help the child work through their feelings. Children of this age may think it was something they did or thought that caused their pet to die, and blame themselves. Even if they do not express it, it is often helpful to reassure the child that he/she was not responsible for the death of the pet.

Pet loss and the elderly

For many elderly people, their pet is their sole companion, and some will say, their only reason to live. Many elderly do not have a strong support system and live alone, away from family. They are at a time in their lives when they are experiencing the deaths of friends their same age. Their pet may become the sole focus of their attention and affection. Their entire daily routine may revolve around their pet.

For some older people, their pet may be their last link to the past, and the loss of the pet can trigger grief over previous losses. Their pet may also have been a source of security, barking at strangers or accompanying them on walks.

Elderly people may experience more guilt when their pets die. If they are on fixed incomes and have few financial reserves, not being able to pay for expensive treatments can add a sense of failure to the deep grief of losing a pet. They may also have put off visits to the veterinarian because of transportation or financial constraints, and blame themselves for not getting the pet examined sooner.

Whereas younger people are often able to get a new pet, the elderly may not be in a position to do so. Housing restrictions, financial considerations, transportation problems, and their own health and expected life span may contribute to their decision that they cannot get another pet. Especially if they have had a pet during most of their life, this can be an extremely traumatic time.

Should I get another pet?

When or if you should get another pet varies with the individual and the choice is a personal one. Some people may want to find a new pet almost immediately. Sometimes they may have unrealistic expectations of the new pet, especially if they are getting a young, rambunctious animal after an older, mature one has died. Others need longer to work through their grief before they are physically and emotionally ready for another pet. In either case, we all know you are not *replacing* your pet, but finding another animal with whom you can share life. Some people may find it is just not possible for them to have another pet. You need to do what is right for you.

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In general, you should give children some time before getting another pet. Getting a pet too soon may cause the child to feel guilty or disloyal, and they may have difficulty bonding to the new pet. The child may also think that if something happened to them, they would soon be forgotten and a substitute would be found. They need to understand that friendships cannot immediately be replaced.

Do animals grieve?

We all know of animals who have stopped eating, playing, or interacting when another pet in the household has died. They are experiencing a loss of their own, plus they often sense the owner's sorrow as well. After a pet dies, we can help the other pets in the household by keeping their routines as unchanged as possible. Increasing their activity through going for walks or playing with toys may be helpful. This will not only benefit your pet, but help you too.

If they are acting depressed or are not eating, be careful not to reinforce or reward their behavior. Giving them extra attention or different food when they behave this way may actually cause them to start using those behaviors as ways to obtain more attention or get special treats. The book, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals* by Susan McCarthy and Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson discusses the many emotions of animals and you may find it an interesting and valuable resource.

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