

WHEN YOUR PET DIES...

The death of your pet may be a traumatic event – whether it's a pet you've owned for many years or one that's a more recent addition to the family; whether the death has occurred following a prolonged illness or because of a sudden accident. The grief we experience after the loss of our pet can be the same as for the death of a person.

Your Vet understands the loving relationship you have with your pet. Arrange a special appointment or ask that they telephone you for a discussion. Request clear answers to your questions regarding medical diagnosis, prognosis and treatment. Discuss the costs involved and burial arrangements. Understand the options available to you.

It's very important to say "Goodbye" to your dying or dead animal. If your pet is euthanased, you may choose to stay with them while this is carried out. If not, spend time with them afterwards to say "Goodbye" and to allow your mind to register the fact that your pet has died.

What is Grief?

'Grief' is the umbrella term for a range of reactions that we experience in response to a significant loss like the death of our pet. These reactions are physical and emotional and range through shock, disbelief, sense of loss, anger, guilt. While you might be surprised at the strength of your reactions, they are normal. Don't feel silly if you experience a strong grief reaction. You haven't just lost your pet – you've lost a close friend and companion, your non judgemental confidant, source of unconditional love and affection, part of your everyday routine, as well as someone to love and care for. Consequently the death of your 'fur person' can leave an enormous hole in your life – and we react to that loss by grieving.

These feelings can be quite strong if you are elderly, single, or a childless couple (for whom the pet can be like a child). The depth and intensity of the mourning process depends on many factors - your age, circumstances surrounding the death, relationship of the animal to the owner and to other family members,

The Grief Process

There is no rigid time frame, nor is it the same for everyone. There is no right or wrong way to grieve - your feelings might range from relatively mild to strong. These feelings should not be suppressed as it is only by allowing yourself to grieve openly that you will eventually come to terms with the death, and with time, the sadness will fade.

In general, there are five stages (or types of emotional reactions). They don't necessarily occur sequentially and we may move backwards and forwards (called mood swing) through some or all of these emotions and often feel we

don't have control over them. Not every grieving person will experience all of these emotions and some of the stages may not be distinct.

If you feel that you are not coping or not making sense out of what is happening to you, seek assistance. It's important to express your feelings openly, so talk to people you trust and who will empathise with your situation. Many people don't understand how much the death of your animal can mean to you, or they may simply be embarrassed and not know how to react or what to say to you.

You are not a failure if you feel overwhelmed by the death of your pet and ask for help. If this is difficult for you - because you prefer to grieve in private, or you feel that no-one else would understand, it helps to write down what you are thinking and how you are feeling. Writing a poem or story to express your love for your pet and the impact of their death can help.

It is normal to feel depressed and even physically ill in the days following the event. The initial 'emotional numbness' experienced after a death usually lasts for 6-7 weeks and is your mind's way of protecting you from the emotional pain and shock following your pet's death.

You may feel a degree of mental disorientation as you grieve and it is not uncommon to imagine that you can hear your pet around the house or feel its touch against your hand or legs. If this occurs, it doesn't mean that you are going mad - it is simply that you are grieving. With time, these sensations will pass. The grieving process may last for up to 12 months.

Gradually, you will begin to adjust to life without your pet. You will have started to come to terms with their death and the feelings of sadness, anger and pain begin to abate. At this stage, you may find it difficult to be constantly reminded of your absent pet and might want to dispose of their belongings or put them away until a later date. You may prefer to keep the memory of your pet alive by displaying photographs or other mementoes.

When you are able to remember your pet with happiness and affection rather than sadness and grief, you are starting to recover from your loss. You are in a position to make a rational decision about whether or not you should obtain a new pet. No new pet will ever be able to replace the fur person you have lost (and neither should they), but you will find you have enough love to give a new pet and a big enough space in your life they can share with you. It's not disloyal to replace the pet you've lost. The disparity between human and animal life spans means we will have a succession of pets during our lives. Each of those pets is unique and will hold its own place in our hearts and memories.

THE EMOTIONAL STAGES OF GRIEF

1. **DENIAL** Shock at learning the news of the terminal illness or death of your beloved pet. "I can't believe it tell me it's not true I don't want it to be true". This disbelief or denial of the reality of the situation is a temporary response that carries us through the first wave of pain. We feel stunned and bewildered as if everything is 'unreal'.

2. **ANGER** As the masking effects of denial begin to abate, reality and its pain emerge. This intense emotion takes the form of anger and we might lash out at inanimate objects, complete strangers, ourselves, family, friends, God, or the vet who diagnosed the illness and was unable to cure the disease, or who performed euthanasia of your pet. Anger may even be directed at our dying or deceased pet. Rationally, we know the animal is not to be blamed but emotionally, we may resent it for causing us this pain or for leaving us. We feel guilty for being angry, and this makes us even more angry. You might also experience feelings of guilt or fear during this stage, asking, "Why him? Why now? Why that way?"

3. **BARGAINING** The normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability is often a need to regain control by beating ourselves up; "If only I'd sought medical attention sooner", "If only I'd come home sooner", "If we changed our pet's diet, maybe it would get well" etc etc. In this stage, there is considerable guilt and the bereaved often asks for a deal or reward from either God, the Vet or someone important. Comments like "I'll go to Church/I'll walk my dog every day, if only my pet will come back to me" are common. This is an attempt to protect us from the painful reality of our pet's death or imminent death.

4. **DEPRESSION** This is often a reaction to the major change in our life created by the loss of our pet. We feel intensely sad, drained and helpless. "What's the use Why bother ... I lose everything that's important to me" etc. we miss our pet and think about them constantly. There are two types of depression associated with grieving. Firstly a reaction to the practical implications of the loss – we worry about the cost of treatment and burial, our own grief and those we've been neglecting (family and work). Sadness and regret predominate. The second type of depression is more subtle and private. It's our quiet preparation to separate and to bid our pet farewell. A simple hug is sometimes all that is needed to ease the moment.

5. **ACCEPTANCE** This phase occurs when the changes resulting from your pet's death are stabilized into your lifestyle (i.e. life without your pet). It is marked by withdrawal and calm. This is not a period of happiness and needs to be distinguished from depression. Pets that are terminally ill or aging appear to go through a final period of withdrawal. Their behaviour implies that it is natural

to reach a stage at which social interaction is limited. The dignity and grace shown by our dying pets may well be their last gift to us. We usually reach acceptance of our pet's death about 12 months after the event.

WAYS WE EXPERIENCE GRIEF

Each of us will grieve in our own way. The following list of symptoms may be experienced - from no symptoms at all, through to mild or even severe ones.

Physical Fatigue and lethargy, headaches, backaches & neck pain, loss of appetite, disturbed sleep and insomnia, dreams, susceptibility to illness, muscle stiffness, nausea, diarrhoea, pounding heart beat, skin rashes, grinding teeth, feeling 'teary' and spontaneous crying.

Mood changes Mood swings (with little control) through the stages of grief – sadness, depression, anger, regret, feelings of 'why me', resentment.

Loneliness A sense of separation and disconnectedness. A feeling of really missing your pet and the interaction you had. Feelings of despair and helplessness

Anxiety Excessive worry can cause tension, fatigue, nausea, panic attacks, feeling fearful, a 'short fuse' and lashing out at those close to you.

Restlessness Searching for comfort or meaning. Feeling keyed up & can't sit for long. Lack of interest in trivia or details. Nothing seems important to you.

Distractedness Unable to follow usual routines. Changes in thought processes; poor concentration, confusion, obsessional thinking, short term memory loss.

Guilt Taking the blame for what happened; that you didn't do more or that you're still alive.

THE HEALING PROCESS

Grief is probably the most confusing, frustrating and emotional thing that we can experience. It is even more so for pet owners as society in general doesn't give bereaved pet owners 'permission' to grieve openly. Consequently, we often feel isolated and alone. Fortunately more resources are becoming available to help the grieving pet owner realize that they are not alone, not crazy and that what they are feeling is entirely normal.

Healing takes time. There are several things that you can do to help speed up your healing process:

- Place your pet's body in a nice, dignified container for burial at home or for your Vet to send off for cremation (e.g. a fabric bag or favourite blanket).
- Allow yourself to grieve. You know what your pet meant to you and being stoic only postpones the grieving process.
- Get lots of rest, good nutrition and exercise.
- Surround yourself with people who understand your loss and let others care for you. Take advantage of support groups for bereaved pet owners if appropriate.
- Learn all you can about the grief process as it will help you understand that what you are experiencing (although painful) is perfectly normal. Accept that mood swings and relapse are part of the grief process.
- Talking about your pet really helps. If your thinking is muddled then write your feelings down, compose a poem or draw a picture to express yourself.
- Indulge yourself in small pleasures.
- Choose the nicest picture of your pet, have it enlarged and beautifully framed.
- Be patient with yourself and take as long as you need to mourn. Don't let others dictate how long mourning should last - anything up to two years is considered normal.
- Accept the feelings that come with grief. These feelings are like waves in the ocean – they rise up, peak then fall away. Initially the waves come in high, fast and hard, but as time goes by, the waves become less intense and further apart. It helps to 'go with the flow' and not fight against these grief feelings as it only intensifies them. When you feel the wave rising, breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose, hold for a count of 3 then breathe out slowly and forcefully through your mouth repeating in your mind "It's OK I know what's happening" on the 'out' breath. Repeat this 'controlled breathing' 3 times.
- Many things can trigger a strong emotional response – seeing an animal like yours on TV or in a magazine, holidays, smells, sounds, words or items that belonged to your pet. Anticipate that birthdays, anniversaries and other celebrations may trigger a response.
- Don't be afraid to get help. There are a number of pet loss support groups and grief counsellors available to help you through this difficult period.
- If it helps, consult your own 'Higher Power' – whether religious or spiritual.