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## **Coping with the loss of your pet.**

Grief is a normal response to the loss of your pet, whether their death follows a prolonged illness or comes suddenly. Because our bond with a pet can be as valuable as a human relationship, our grief can be the same as that experienced after the loss of a person. When adapting to the upheaval brought about by this loss we may experience both physical and emotional traumas.

When a pet dies, we expect that our pain will be acknowledged and shared by our family and friends. If their lack of response compounds our grief, we must realise that we do not need anyone else's approval to mourn the loss of our pet. We do not need to justify our pain to anyone nor fault those who cannot appreciate the depth of our grief. The joy and love we shared with our pet is not a blessing given to everyone.

The death of a pet means the loss of their unconditional love and the loss of a loved one to care for. These feelings of loss can be particularly intense for elderly or single people, or childless couples. The death of a pet can revive painful memories and unresolved conflicts that amplify your upheaval. Seek comfort from friends who understand, other pet owners, professional counsellors or clergy. We have a list of resources available to help pet owners deal with the loss of a pet.

### **Some Expressions of Grief.**

There are many ways we manifest our grief. Grieving is an ongoing process which each person experiences in their own way. More recent thinking is that there isn't a progression through stages until we finally "get over it", but that grief will be expressed through a combination of some of the qualities below – not necessarily in the order given – and that they may occur or recur at any time. Most people who have experienced great loss will eventually find a new sense of equilibrium that includes the memory of their dearly departed.

#### **Denial**

This is a normal response to deal with an overwhelming situation. Everything feels unreal. This is a temporary defence mechanism that carries us through the first wave of pain.

#### **Anger**

As the reality and its pain emerge, we are not ready for the intensity of emotion and may redirect it as anger. We may also experience guilt or fear during this phase. The anger may be directed at the pet, the veterinarian, our friends, family or ourselves. Do not hesitate to ask the veterinarian to give more explanation of your pet's illness or injury in a manner that you understand. Discuss costs and burial arrangements. Honest, open communication is important.

#### **Bargaining**

This stage is a weaker line of defence to protect us from the painful reality. We may ask for a deal or reward from God or higher power or we may regret not getting faster or alternative treatment.

#### **Depression**

Sad feelings of hopelessness and helplessness occur when we miss our pet and think about them constantly.

#### **Acceptance**

The gift of this stage does not reach us all. It takes courage to allow ourselves the opportunity to make our peace. This is not necessarily a stage of happiness but rather withdrawal and calm. The depth and intensity of mourning depend on many factors: our age, the circumstances of the death, the nature of our bond with the pet and our relationship to friends and family members. Usually children recover more quickly, while the elderly take the longest. Sometimes the bereavement of a pet enables us to achieve acceptance the death of a person.

### **Explaining Pet Loss to a Child**

Although children tend to grieve for shorter periods of time, their grief can be traumatic and confusing and just as intense as it is for adults. Patience is required to answer their repeated questions. It is natural to want to protect children from painful experiences and to want to avoid the pain that is felt when repeatedly discussing our loss. Most parents will be surprised how well their children adjust to death if they receive honest and simple explanations and plenty of hugs and reassurance.

Some important points when dealing with a grieving child are

1. Tell the child the truth. This helps them resolve their grief. Never say things like “God took your pet” or the pet was “Put to sleep”. The child may fear that God will take them or their loved ones or become afraid of going to sleep.
2. Include the child in everything that is going on.
3. Explain the permanency of death.
4. Give the child permission to grieve. Tell their teacher. Talk about the pet's death with your child and talk about death honestly.

In this way your child will understand that life must end for all living things and that their family can be relied upon to extend comfort and reassurance. They will also learn that expression and discussion of our uncomfortable feelings helps us to deal with them.

Two and three year olds typically have no understanding of death. They consider it as some kind of sleep. Tell them their pet will not return and reassure them that it is not their fault. Their ready acceptance of a new pet in the others place is not callousness. It is appropriate to their level of understanding. Temporary loss of speech and generalised distress are common reactions.

Four, five and six year olds have some understanding of death but in a way that involves a continued existence. They may think that the pet is continuing to eat, breathe and play underground or is just asleep. Reassure them that they are not responsible for their pet's death, and that their death is not likely. Grief can take the form of disturbances in bladder and bowel control, eating and sleeping. You can help by initiating some brief discussions about their feelings and concerns.

Seven, eight and nine year olds understand that death is irreversible. They usually don't think death will happen to them but may be worried about their parents. Parents should respond frankly and honestly to any questions that arise about death and its implications. Grief may manifest as problems at school, with learning, being antisocial, hypochondriacal or aggressive. Symptoms may not occur until weeks or months later.

Adolescents usually relate similarly to adults, although some may exhibit denial in the form of lack of emotion. Be aware that they may be experiencing sincere grief inside.

Grieving pets can exhibit similar symptoms to their bereaved owner. They may become restless, anxious or depressed. There may be much sighing along with eating and sleeping disturbances. Often they will search for their dead companions and crave more attention from their owners. You can help the surviving pet by keeping to normal routines. Take care not to reinforce the new behaviours eg by offering different foods to the picky eater or overdoing to attention. Allow the surviving pets to work out their new dominance hierarchy. A few scuffles may occur. Don't get a new pet as company for them until you are ready and have the energy for it. Allowing the pet to sniff the dead body of the deceased pet to “Say Goodbye” may help some people to feel better but it is difficult to know if this helps the surviving pet.

## **Deciding to Euthanase**

Everyone hopes that their pet will pass peacefully away lying in their favourite spot. The impact of a pet's death is greatly increased when, as responsible and loving caretakers, we decide to have a pet euthanased.

Euthanasia is the induction of a painless death. It is accomplished by an intravenous injection of a concentrated anaesthetic. Apart from the slight discomfort of the needle passing through the skin (the same as for any injection), the injection is painless and consciousness is lost within seconds. Soon the breathing and then heart stop.

Veterinarians do not exercise this option lightly. Their training and professional lives are dedicated to diagnosing and treating disease. Veterinarians are keenly aware of the balance between extending an animal's life and its suffering. Euthanasia of an animal who is suffering is the ultimate act of mercy. It requires great courage and selflessness on the pet owner's part to reach this difficult decision. We may feel angry for having to face this pain, or postpone the decision in the hope it will not be necessary. The fundamental guideline is to do what is best for the pet. It helps to imagine what action you will look back on with least regret.

Some questions to ask yourself are: What is my pet's quality of life? Is s/he eating well, playful, affectionate? Is s/he interested in surrounding activities? Is s/he tired and withdrawn or in pain? What options do I have to improve my pet's comfort? If behaviour is the issue, have I consulted with a specialist? Do I still love my pet with the conditions and restraints it places on me? What is my quality of life? Will I be present at the euthanasia? Will I want to assist? Should I be alone or bring a friend? Will I want my vet to arrange the burial or cremation or will I bury my pet at home. Do I want to adopt another pet or allow time to recover from this loss before even considering another pet.

## **HEALING**

Only time can heal but these are some things you can do to facilitate the healing.

1. Give yourself permission to grieve. Only YOU know what your pet meant to you.
2. A memorial makes the loss real, helps with closure, allows you to express your feelings and calls in social support.
3. Get lots of rest, good nutrition and exercise.
4. Surround yourself with people who understand your loss. Let others care for you. Take advantage of support resources for bereaved pet owners.
5. Learn about the grief process so that you can realise your experience is normal.
6. Accept the feelings that come with grief. Talk, write, sing, draw
7. Indulge yourself in small pleasures
8. Be patient with yourself. Don't let society tell you how long you should mourn.
9. Give yourself permission to backslide. As time goes by the pain will become less intense and life will be normal again. Don't be surprised if holidays, smells, sounds or words trigger a relapse.
10. Don't be afraid to get help from support groups or counsellors
11. Be sure to consult your own higher power, either religious or spiritual

## **Conclusion**

Grief for a lost pet is a confusing, frustrating and emotional experience not generally understood by our society. Bereaved pet owners can feel isolated and alone. Luckily more resources are becoming available to help bereaved pet owners realise that they are not alone and that what they are feeling is completely normal.

*If you or your child are finding the grieving process difficult, perhaps a phone call to a counsellor may help. Sydney-based David Foote is a veterinarian who has also trained in bereavement counselling and is happy to arrange a phone consultation with you. He can also with decision making for pet euthanasia and coping with pet terminal illness.*

*He can be contacted at <http://www.davidfoote.com.au/> or on 0425 281 424*