

The Stages of Grief

Losing the pet you love or care deeply about is very painful. You may experience all kinds of difficult emotions and it may feel like the pain and sadness you're experiencing will never let up. These are normal reactions to a significant loss. But while there is no right or wrong way to grieve, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain that, in time, can renew you and permit you to move on.

Given the intense bond most of us share with our animals, it's natural to feel devastated by feelings of grief and sadness when a pet dies. While some people may not understand the depth of feeling you had for your pet, you should never feel guilty or ashamed about grieving for an animal friend. Instead, use these healthy ways to cope with the loss, comfort yourself and others, and begin the process of moving on.

Grief can be complicated by the role the animal played in your life. For example, if your pet was a working dog or a helper animal such as a guide dog, then you'll not only be grieving the loss of a companion but also the loss of a coworker or the loss of your independence. If you cared for your pet through a protracted illness, you likely grew to love him even more. If you lived alone and the pet was your only companion, coming to terms with his loss can be even harder. If you were unable to afford expensive veterinary treatment to prolong the life of your pet, you may even feel a profound sense of guilt.

The process of grief is not a cut and dried process that can be subdivided into strict categories. Rather, the grief process is a continuum, with each person experiencing it in a different way. Dividing the grief process into "stages" helps the grief stricken person to understand that their experiences and emotions are normal. Some people will quickly progress through all the phases, while others appear to get "stuck" in a particular phase. Briefly, the stages of grief are as follows:

- ❖ **Shock and denial**
- ❖ **Suffering of many feelings and disorganization of thoughts**

Expect guilt to arise - Guilt may also factor in during the weeks and months after a loss over being unable to save your loved one or about just living your life. At some point you will likely catch yourself laughing or relaxing. It's natural to actually start to feel better at some point after grieving a loss. It's also natural to feel guilty about it. You may think, "How can I stand enjoying myself when my son is dead?" If you realize that a day has gone by when you didn't think about your pet (which may or may not happen in time), you may feel guilty that you're "forgetting" him or her. If it takes a short amount of time to recover from a loss it doesn't mean you only loved a little. The depth, breadth, and longevity of your grief are not a reflection of how much you cared about your pet.

❖ **Conservation of energies and depression of emotions**

Dealing with the loss of a pet when others devalue your loss can make us want to pull back or spend more time alone even months after the loss. One aspect that can make grieving for the loss of a pet so difficult is that pet loss is not appreciated by everyone. Friends and family may ask "What's the big deal? It's just a pet!" Some people assume that pet loss shouldn't hurt as much as a human loss, or that it is somehow inappropriate to grieve for an animal. They may not understand because they don't have a pet of their own, or because they are unable to appreciate the companionship and love that a pet can provide.

- Don't argue with others about whether your grief is appropriate or not.
- Accept the fact that the best support for your grief may come from outside your usual circle of friends and family members.
- Seek out others who have lost pets; those who can appreciate the magnitude of your loss, and may be able to suggest ways of getting through the grieving process.
- Remember not everyone experiences their pet as a family member like you do and they do not understand.

❖ **Integration and reinvestment of energies**

Moving towards healing - Over time, there is integration of the loss and healing will occur for the bereaved person/owner. However, there are several things that the grief-stricken owner can do to help the healing process:

- Give yourself permission to grieve. Only YOU know what your pet meant to you.
- Memorialize your pet. This can make the loss real and helps with closure. It also allows the bereaved to express their feelings, pay tribute and reflect and draws in social support.
- Get lots of rest, good nutrition and exercise. Take good care of yourself. Surround yourself with people who understand your loss. Let others care for you. Take advantage of support groups for bereaved pet owners.
- Learn all you can about the grief process. Accurate knowledge helps owners realize that what they are experiencing is normal.
- Accept the feelings that come with grief: talk, write, sing, or draw.
- Indulge yourself in small pleasures.
- Be patient with yourself. DON'T let society dictate how long mourning should last.

- Give yourself permission to backslide. Your grief process WILL end and your life WILL be normal again. Grief is like waves in the ocean: at first the waves come in fast and hard, but as time goes on, the waves become less intense and further apart. Don't be surprised if holidays, smells, sounds, or words trigger a relapse.
- Don't be afraid to get help from pet loss support groups or grief counselors. Be sure to consult your own "Higher Power" - either religious or spiritual.

We learn that grief can be the most confusing, frustrating and emotional thing that a person experiences. It is even more so for pet owners. Society in general does not give bereaved pet owners "permission" to grieve openly. Consequently, pet owners often feel isolated and alone. Luckily, more and more resources are becoming available to help the bereaved pet owner realize that they are NOT alone and that what they are feeling is entirely normal.

Grief is the normal response to any important loss in life. It occurs regardless of whether death followed a prolonged illness, or a sudden accident. Grieving people experience both physical and emotional traumas as they try to adapt to the upheaval in their lives brought about by the loss.

Psychologists have long recognized that the grief suffered by pet owners after their pet dies is the same as that experienced after the death of a person. The death of a pet means the loss of a non-judgmental love source. There is no longer anything for the pet owner to nurture and care for. Furthermore, the owner loses his or her contact with "the natural world." These feelings can be particularly intense for the elderly, single people and childless couples for whom the pet also is a child substitute.