

Grieving for a Pet is Real...and Normal

By Pauline Wallin, Ph.D.

Losing a pet to death is a lonely experience. It's a painful time, for sure – often as painful as when a human friend or family member dies. But you're pretty much left to grieve on your own. There are no established comforting rituals and customs when your pet dies.

Most likely there won't be a funeral. Your loved ones probably won't fly in from out of town to be with you. If you're lucky you may get one or two sympathy cards. And don't expect your boss (even if she has a pet herself) to give you a week's leave of absence to pull yourself together.

After your pet dies you're pretty much expected to move on and "get over it." But the truth is you may never completely get over it, just as you never forget a close friend or family member. We are emotionally bonded to our pets, partly because they evoke the same type of feelings that parents have for their children.

What's normal for mourning the loss of a pet?

The first few days can be quite distressing as you try to go through your daily activities, particularly those times when your pet was involved – morning routine, walks, litter box changes, etc. Just seeing pet food commercials or walking down the pet supplies aisle of the supermarket might trigger sharp pangs of intense sadness.

During the first few weeks you may feel as if you're in a fog. While not every moment is filled with sadness, you may find it hard to read or to focus on conversations and TV shows. You may also have headaches, digestive problems and have trouble sleeping. Thoughts about your pet might pop into your head at random moments, mixed with guilt about what you could have or should have done to prevent your pet's death.

But these symptoms and thoughts generally subside – usually within a few months, depending on your individual personality, how central your pet was in your life, and the nature of your relationships with other people. There is no set time for how long it takes to feel "normal" again.

Contrary to popular belief there are no fixed stages that you must progress through, although everyone experiences a process of emotional adjustment. During this process you may be hit by waves of sadness and even despair. But in between these waves, you're able to experience pleasure – even laugh and look forward to things. With time, the waves occur less often and become less intense. Eventually you will be able to remember your pet with fondness rather than pain.

What can I do when the waves of sadness hit?

Sadness is not necessarily something to be avoided. It's a normal part of grieving, as is crying. However, if you feel distressed for an extended period of time, do something that focuses on others. For example, call a friend, cook a meal for someone, shop for a gift, etc. Doing favors for other people is one of the quickest ways to feel better yourself.

Try to stay in contact with others on a regular basis, so that even when there is no one physically present, you know that you are not alone.

Write about some of the fun times with your pet, being as specific as you can. Make a scrapbook or collage. These positive memories will stay with you forever, and can help mitigate your emotional pain.

Is it OK to talk about my pet? My friends don't seem to want to listen.

After losing a loved one (person or animal) it's normal to want to talk about them. But well-meaning friends and family may try to change the subject in order to discourage you from dwelling on your loss.

Sometimes it's more helpful to talk with others who are going through a similar experience. There are several free online forums and support groups, as well as live hotlines dedicated to grieving pet owners. See the Resources section **[below? sidebar?]** for links.

One friend recommends getting a new pet right away. Another tells me to wait at least a year. Which is right?

There is no specific waiting period. Nor is it necessary to get another pet at all. You need to feel ready to accept another animal companion into your heart. Only you will know when that time comes, if ever. No reason to rush into it.

On the other hand, if you long for the company of a furry friend, you won't dishonor your departed pet's memory by adopting a new one. No animal can replace another, of course. But it will be easier on you if your next pet is a different breed or color. That way, there's less tendency to compare it with the one you lost, and you can more readily appreciate your new pet's unique qualities and personality.

What if I feel worse rather than better over time?

If, after six months, you feel as bad or worse than you did during the first week after your loss, this is not normal bereavement. There may be something else going on. Don't rule out physical problems. If you feel physically ill or if your energy has not returned, do see a medical professional.

If things check out medically, it's possible that you are depressed – which is a different condition than normal grief. A psychologist can help you get to the bottom of what is standing in the way of your healing, as well as help you find ways to cope.

Resources

Pet Loss Message Board www.petlossmessageboard.com

Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, [resources for grieving loss of a pet](#)

...More links at Dr. Ken Pope's website: www.catanddoghelp.com

Books

People experience grief in different ways. Here is a link to [Amazon's bestsellers on losing a pet](#).

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