



PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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How Do I Cope With The Loss Of A Pet?

By Patricia A. Donoghue, Ph.D.

A majority of Americans own pets, often making them an important part of the “family.” Pets each have their own individual personalities and habits that endear them to those they live with. Inevitably, however, all pets die. When pets pass away, owners are often left with a variety of emotions. The sadness and acute sense of loss one can feel at the loss of a pet is a reflection of the strong attachment that existed.

These emotions can be very strong and can include sadness, a sense of loss, anger, relief, and emotional turmoil. Crying is normal when someone loses something they care about. Do not be afraid or ashamed to cry over the loss of your pet.

Sharing Your Grief.

It is helpful to share your grief with others close to you who will understand and appreciate what your pet meant you. Some people, especially those who do not own pets, may not understand why someone might get upset at the loss of a pet. It is best to seek out people who will validate your experience and offer you support. If the grief and sadness seem overwhelming, go on for an extended period of time, or interfere with your ability to sleep, eat, work or take care of daily activities, it is a good idea to seek professional services. It is not uncommon for psychologists to see clients who are grieving the loss of a pet.

Working Through It.

People have many different ways of working through sadness and loss. One way people cope with the loss of a pet is to memorialize the pet in some way. Often people will keep a collar, a toy or some other object that they associate with their deceased pet. People also keep pictures of their pet. While these objects and pictures may at first cause a person to feel pangs of sadness, many people find that over time these same objects and pictures also help them recall the happy times and fond memories of their deceased pet. Some people hold a private service or ceremony for their pet. Others may find comfort in volunteering with animals in some way or making a donation to an animal charity in their pet’s name.

Taking Your Time.

Many people who were attached to a pet that died will eventually get another one. This makes good sense if one wants to care for another creature and bring a new life into their home. However, it is not a good idea to rush into the decision to get a new a pet simply because one is sad about a recent loss. It is better to take time to heal from the current loss. Of course, the same issues should be considered before getting a new pet as they were for the first pet, such as: Am I in a position to care for another living thing at this time? Do I have the time and resources to care for an animal?

Our ability to love pets also makes saying goodbye to them difficult. However, even after they have gone, the memories and shared experiences are still carried on by those who loved them.

Talk to someone who can help. If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.