



Death of a Pet

By Carrie Bauer, LBSW

Often a pet is so much more than “just an animal”, they are often part of the family, or a loyal companion, a constant provider of love and support. Therefore, when your pet dies, it may be one of the most difficult things you have experienced and may cause intense grief.

Acknowledging your Grief

Unfortunately, in our society grief is often not talked about or is seen as a weakness, and after a pet dies someone’s grief may be minimized by others who do not understand the strong relationship between humans and their pets. Some pet owners may even feel like there is something wrong with them for grieving, or that they are “going crazy” for feeling the intense grief they feel, but know that often the feelings you may be feeling are normal. It is important to acknowledge the grief you are feeling from the death of your pet, this means to accept and recognize that the grief you are feeling is real. When you acknowledge your grief, it is easier to know how to help yourself and to find the support that you may need.

Effects of Grief

Each person reacts to the death of their pet differently, and each individual’s grief is personal. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve, but there are feelings and effects that many people experience after the death of their pet. Please note that not everyone will experience these feelings, and if you do not experience them does not mean that you are not grieving the correct way.

- Physical Symptoms: You may experience headaches or stomachaches after your pet has died, that are new or not caused by another illness. You may feel hallow or empty inside, or like a piece of you is missing. You may have trouble sleeping or sleep too much. You may feel exhausted for no reason, or the simplest tasks may seem to use all the energy you have.
- Physiological Effects: You may sense your pet still with you, or think you see them out of the corner of your eye. You may have trouble concentrating, or be thinking of your pet consistently. You may hear them, or have dreams of them at night.
- Behavioral Effects: After your pet has died, you may not want to be around other animals. You may carry around mementos of your pet. You may avoid reminders of them, such as not driving by the dog park, avoiding going on the street you use to take walks on, etc.

Know that grief effects every sense of our being, it is not just an emotion that we feel. When you are able to recognize the areas that grief effects your life, you can better support yourself.

Emotions Caused by Grief

You may experience a range of emotions after the death of your pet, and it can often feel like a rollercoaster of feelings. You may have moments where you cry uncontrollably, and then the next minute you feel numb. You may feel shock if your pet died suddenly or they were in an accident. You may feel helpless, like there was nothing you could do to help your pet. You may even feel relief if your pet had been sick for a while or had been in a lot of pain. There are no wrong emotions when you are grieving, however, it is important to find ways to cope with the feelings that you feel and find healthy ways to release them.

Anger and Guilt

Two emotions that are very common, but not often addressed, after the death of a pet are anger and guilt. These are two emotions that people may feel are “bad” or they shouldn’t feel because they were taught to not feel these emotions.

- Guilt: Often when a pet dies, there is a heavy sense of guilt because we are the ones responsible for our pet who are often helpless without us. You may feel guilty because you left the door open and they ran out in the street. You may feel guilty because you didn’t notice they were getting sick, or didn’t take them to the vet in time. You may feel like you didn’t do enough to help them, or you were unable to financially do more to help them. There are many things that cause grief after your pet dies, but it is important to know that guilt is a normal reaction to grief and is an emotion that must be dealt with. There are two types of guilt: actual and perceived. Actual guilt is when you have *done* something wrong (i.e. you have committed a crime, and received a penalty for the crime). Perceived guilt is when you *feel* that you have done something wrong, and is a false sense of guilt. Often when a pet dies we feel perceived guilt, and in the back of our minds we know that there was nothing more we could have done to prevent our pet’s death. What is important is to not focus on the guilt, accept the things that you were able to control, and let go of the things you were unable to control.
- Anger: You may also feel angry after your pet dies, and find “anger targets” to focus that anger on. Anger targets are people you focus your anger on, even when it is the situation that is causing you anger not that particular person. Your anger towards them may be justified because of something they did, or you may focus your anger on them despite them not having done anything at all. You may be angry at the vet for not treating your pet in a different manner or trying another treatment. You may feel angry at someone who accidentally killed your pet (the person who hit them with their car, the person who was supposed to be watching them). You may even feel angry at yourself for not doing more to help your pet. Anger is a normal and healthy emotion to feel; however, it is not healthy to take your anger out on others in a negative way. It is important to find healthy ways to express your anger, and trying to incorporate things that you already enjoy doing to help express your anger can be especially helpful.

Others may try to minimize or dismiss your feelings of guilt & anger, because they may be uncomfortable with these emotions or they do not know what to say to help you. This does not mean you shouldn’t *feel* the feelings you are experiencing, and if you deny yourself these feelings it may cause prolonged grief.

Finding Support

Each person’s grief is unique and different things help different people, and it is important to find the things that help *you*. Surround yourself with people who do not minimize your grief, often these are other pet owners, but they may be other family or friends who you are close to. Understand that there is no timeframe for your grief, and it is something that cannot be rushed. Find books, resources, or a support group specific to death of a pet. For more information or resources, please contact Hamilton’s Academy of Grief & Loss.