

Wheaton Animal Hospital  
266 Roosevelt Road  
Glen Ellyn, IL 60137  
(630) 530-1500

## TEN WAYS TO COPE WITH THE LOSS OF YOUR PET

1. **Give yourself permission to grieve** because you've experienced a tremendous loss. For many of us, beloved pets are our "children"—companions who provide us unconditional love.
2. **Realize that you're not going crazy when you grieve deeply for your pet.** It's normal when you've sustained a great loss to feel debilitated for a while. So take all the time that you need to heal.
3. **Know that guilt often accompanies grief**, especially over pets. Because your pet couldn't tell you that he/she was sick, you may feel guilt about not taking him/her to the vet sooner. Or you may feel responsible if your pet was killed after escaping the yard. Guilt—which suggests that you could have done something—can mask the fear of being powerless to keep your pet alive.
4. **Find a special way to say goodbye to your pet.** Often, pet loss happens so quickly that you don't have time to say the things you wanted. But you can do so even after a pet has died. Write a letter to your pet. Have a family ritual celebrating his/her life and acknowledging death. Or look at a photo of your pet and tell him/her all you would have said if there had been time.
5. **Pick a meaningful way to memorialize your pet.** Make a scrapbook, plant a tree, write a poem, or donate money in your pet's name to a charity for animals or a pet loss support hotline.
6. **If you decide to get another pet do so only when you are ready.** You will never be able to replace the pet you have lost; it takes time to invest emotionally in another.
7. **Find at least one other person you can talk with to openly about your loss.** Share your feelings without censorship. Realize that family members or other beloved ones may grieve differently or be in too much pain to support you.
8. **Be especially good to yourself**, because it takes a lot of energy to grieve. Get extra rest, eat healthy, exercise, and deeply relax through massage or meditation. Seek professional assistance if necessary.
9. **Find creative expression for your feelings.**
  - \*Do journaling. Write down whatever you're feeling without criticism.
  - \*Work out your feelings in clay. Be mindful of what you've created because it will have a special meaning for you
  - \*Use pastels, oils, charcoal, pen, or pencil to draw your feelings.
  - Make a collage that captures your feelings in pictures.
10. **Each day, do at least one that brings you joy.** Fly a kite, take a walk, garden, watch the sunset, listen to music, see a funny movie, and allow yourself to laugh! Laughter releases the body's natural opiates and gives respite from pain

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## Common Grief Symptoms

Although grief responses, in general, differ from one person to another, there are many predictable expressions of grief. These expressions occur on physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual levels. Before, during, and after loss, grief may appear in several of the following forms.

**Physical:** crying, sobbing, wailing, shock and numbness, dry mouth, a lump in the throat, shortness of breath, stomach ache or nausea, tightness in the chest, restlessness, fatigue, exhaustion, sleep disturbance, appetite disturbance, body aches, stiffness of joints or muscles, dizziness or fainting

**Intellectual:** denial, sense of unreality, confusion, inability to concentrate, feeling preoccupied by the loss, experiencing hallucinations concerning the loss (visual, auditory, and olfactory,) a need to reminisce about the loved one and to talk about the circumstances of the loss, a sense that time is passing very slowly, a desire to rationalize or intellectualize feelings about the loss, thoughts or fantasies about suicide (not accompanied by concrete plans or behaviors)

**Emotional:** sadness, anger, depression, guilt, anxiety, relief, loneliness, irritability, a desire to blame others for the loss, resentment, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feelings of being overwhelmed or out of control, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, feelings of victimization, giddiness, affect that is inappropriate for the situation (nervous smiles and laughter)

**Social:** feelings of withdrawal, isolation and alienation, a greater dependency on others, a rejection of others, rejection by others, a reluctance to ask others for help, change in friends or in living arrangements, a desire to re-locate or move, a need to find distractions from the intensity of grief (to stay busy or to over-commit to activities)

**Spiritual:** bargaining with God in an attempt to prevent loss, feeling angry at God when loss occurs, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, feelings of being either blessed or punished, searching for a meaningful interpretation of a loved one's death, paranormal visions or dreams concerning a dead loved one, questioning whether or not souls exist and wondering what happens to loved ones after death, the need to "finish business" with a purposeful ending or closure to the relationship (a funeral, memorial service, last rites ceremony, good-bye ritual)

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### **Factors That Can Complicate Grief**

If one or more of these factors are present, the grief process may be complicated and more difficult to complete.

- No previous experience with significant loss, death, or grief
- Other recent losses
- A personal history involving multiple losses
- Little or no support from friends or family
- Societal norms that trivialize and negate the loss
- Insensitive comments from others about the loss
- Feelings of guilt or responsibility for a death
- Untimely deaths like those of children, young adults, or young companion animals
- Deaths that happen suddenly, without warning
- Deaths that occur after long, lingering illnesses
- Deaths that have no known cause or that could have been prevented
- An unexplained disappearance
- Not being present at death
- Not viewing the body after death
- Witnessing a painful or traumatic death
- Deaths that occur in conjunction with other significant life events like birthdays, holidays, or a divorce
- After death anniversary dates and holidays
- Stories in the media that misrepresent or cast doubt on medical treatment procedures
- Advice based on others' negative experiences with death or on inaccurate information about normal grief.

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### ***Children and Pet Loss***

"The experience of childhood pet loss rarely gets the attention it deserves."

"Many children are actively involved in their pets' daily care. It is only fair to give them the option of also being involved in the circumstances surrounding their pets' death."

"By protecting children from experiences with death, adults deny them the opportunity to learn how to master feelings of loss. When children are shielded from adults' expressions of grief, they are denied the role models necessary for them to learn normal, healthy coping behaviors."

"Children grieve just as deeply as adults, but express their grief differently depending on their level of cognitive development."

#### **Infants to 2 years:**

Babies can feel when stress escalates, but they are not aware of the cause of the tension. Infants may cry, withdraw and/or regress. Babies are reassured best by hugs, cuddling and special time devoted to them. Keeping routines as normal as possible is also helpful.

#### **2 to 4 years old:**

\*"Toddlers and preschoolers understand pet loss is a significant family event, but do not understand that death is permanent and universal."

\*They miss their furry playmate and ask a lot of questions. They are willing to talk about death and are more relaxed and curious about it than any other age. They may or may not cry about their loss initially, and their symptoms of grief may come and go with degrees of intensity.

\*Young children explore death through play. They may draw pictures, bury stuffed animals in their sandbox or plan funerals for their dolls. These are healthy responses and should be encouraged.

\*If members of this age group are not encouraged to express their fear and sadness about death through play or open displays of emotion, they may vent their emotions by acting out.

\*"Toddlers may also develop separation anxiety or psychosomatic complaints (stomach aches and sore throats). Changes in children's personality, daily habits, social lives and behaviors can be indications that more positive vehicles of expression of grief are needed."

#### **5 to 8 years old:**

\*Early school-aged children are less willing to talk about death. They often think of death as the Grim Reaper or Dark Angel. "They believe it is possible to hide from or avoid death. Because of this belief, these children may feel angry at people who die. They do not understand why their loved ones did not just run away or hide when death came to get them."

\*It is common for children to feel that they are responsible for the death.

\*Children may discuss death in morbid details with friends and make up elaborate stories. For a number of reasons, grief may be delayed and may not

be manifested for weeks and even months after the loss. At this time, it may be necessary to go over the circumstances surrounding a pet's death with them and reassure them that they are not responsible for what happened.

"Around age 8 death is understood to be permanent and universal. When a pet dies, it is important that these children have the opportunity to talk about their animals and to ask questions about death."

### **9 to 12 years old:**

\*"They are capable of sustaining intense periods of grief and can become preoccupied with a loss, particularly if they have ever had feelings of abandonment or rejection before."

\*"A pet's death can trigger memories of previous losses. Grief for a pet may be connected to earlier, equally disturbing deaths."

\*"Children may ask somewhat shocking questions about dismemberment during autopsies or deterioration of bodies after burial." This is one of the ways they deal with anxiety. Parents should give honest answers and find ways to help them resolve their feelings.

Some suggestions include viewing a pet's body, helping to dig a grave and participating in a goodbye or memorial ceremony. "As with younger children, opportunities for heart-to-heart talks or questions and answers are usually appreciated."

### **13 to 17 years old:**

\*Adolescents can be self-conscious and hyperemotional. One day they want to be treated like an adult and the next they want to be reassured like a young child.

\*One day a teen is devastated by a pet's death and the next day it is no big deal.

\*One of the developmental tasks of adolescents is to establish independence and adults should not insist that they grieve in a certain way or within a certain timeframe.

\*"Teens may hide their feelings and/or act them out in angry, antisocial ways. Peer approval and acceptance are important to them; if friends are supportive of their grief, it is much easier for them to deal with the death of a pet."

### **18 to 21 years old:**

\*The death of a childhood pet often represents a rite of passage, the loss of a link to a simpler, more innocent time.

\*Adults can verbally acknowledge the symbolic connections that exist between the pet and the young adult's childhood.

"Young adults may feel guilty for "abandoning" their pets by leaving home to attend college, go to work or get married.

\*"Guilt is not easily swept away, but young adults benefit from and appreciate words of comfort from sincere adults."

### **Facilitating Companion Animal Death:**

\*"With adequate preparation, children who are old enough to think and speak for themselves are able to choose whether or not to be present at euthanasia. They can also decide how to say goodbye to their pets, how to honor their pets' memories and whether or not to view their pets' bodies."

\*"The key to exposing children to any of these potentially frightening experience is preparation. For example: if children want to be present for a euthanasia, they need to be clearly told what will happen while they are in the room, what they will see, how their pet will look, feel and behave and what is appropriate behavior after the pet dies (e.g., petting, hugging, crying or just spending time with the body). Overall, children need to be given permission to think, feel and behave in ways that are meaningful for them."

\*During pet loss, it is important for the adult to avoid using euphemisms like "put to sleep" and "went away," since children are "put to sleep" every night.

\*Words and phrases like "died," "dead," "helped to die" may seem harsh, but they help children clearly understand and accept the reality of the pet's death.

**In the Perspectives July/August, 1994**

Laurel Lagoni, M.S. and Carolyn Butler, M.S.

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### ***Other Pets May Suffer Over The Loss***

If you have other pets, they can be profoundly affected by the loss of an animal they have known for years. "Our surviving cat Alexis grieved visibly for about nine months after his death," said David. "She would pace and cry, especially at night. She didn't seem to enjoy life and became extremely dependent on us—very watchful and protective when before she was very aloof."

He continues, "Then we got another cat and she gradually went back to her old self. Now, almost two years later, she seems to be happy again."

Claudia reported that after her cat Chessie died, her other two cats stopped playing and clearly grieved for several months. In another case, a pet owner's cat became so ill that she had to be hospitalized and intravenously fed and medicated.

Donna said that after her cat Fluffy died, her two other cats would not lie down in the deceased pet's basket.

Mark said that when his beagle Toby died, his other dogs sniffed the body and watched as he held the dog before burial. They were fairly subdued while we buried him, and didn't eat that day, but were okay after that," he says.

Your other pets may cry out and search for the other animal. In one case, a poodle, the daughter of the mother dog that died, howled all night after her death.

In another case, an older ferret who had essentially "mothered" a younger one, was very despondent after its death. She searched the house for the missing ferret until she fell down in exhaustion. For days afterward, the animal frantically searched the apartment. Afterward she checked once or twice and finally gave up.

Other behaviors may also be exhibited. The pet may ignore you or act like it doesn't like you anymore.

The pet may even behave in a hostile or aggressive manner when it had always been friendly in the past. In one case, a woman said her cat hissed at her after a much-loved ferret was euthanized. These are all symptoms of grieving.

Kathy, whose cat Huntress died after eighteen years with her, said that her other two cats were affected when the cat became very ill. They spent a lot of time with her in the last few weeks she was with us. After she died, they stayed very close to me and seemed to want more attention and cuddling than usual.

### **What To Do**

Your other pets will probably need some extra tender loving care for awhile. On the other hand, if an animal clearly indicates that it wants to be left alone, don't press yourself upon it.

You may also wish to leave the television or radio on when you go out, to provide some comfort.

If your other pets seem to become ill or refuse to eat, take them to the veterinarian. It may also help to "explain" to them what happened. They won't understand the words, but the tone of your voice may convey some comfort. But don't give your pets too much attention you don't want to reward them inadvertently with food or attention or both for acting depressed or unhappy.

Try to keep your other pets to their regular routine. This helps caretakers *and* animals.

This excerpt is from Chapter 11 of:

**When Your Pet Dies, Dealing with Your Grief and Helping Your Children Cope**

By: Christine Adame

## Pet loss hotlines/support groups

Chicago Veterinary Medical Association

Helpline & Support group ("Wings"): 1-630-325-1600

\*Support group meets the 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday of every month at 7:30p.m. at the CVMA offices, 120 East Ogden Avenue, Hinsdale. (No reservations needed, no charge, but donations are accepted)

\*Long distance calls will be returned collect.

University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine

877-394-CARE (toll-free) 217-244-CARE (local)

[www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE/](http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE/)

Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine

1-888-478-7574 (toll-free)

[www.vetmed.iastate.edu/animals/petloss/](http://www.vetmed.iastate.edu/animals/petloss/)

University of California at Davis School of Veterinary Medicine

1-800-565-1526

[www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/petloss/index.htm](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/petloss/index.htm)

Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine

607-253-3932

[www.vet.cornell.edu/public/petloss/](http://www.vet.cornell.edu/public/petloss/)

University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine

Pet Grief Support of America

1-800-798-6196

[www.flahf.org](http://www.flahf.org)

Resources on the web:

Argus Institute for Families and Veterinary Medicine

<http://www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu/>

American Veterinary Medical Association:

[www.avma.org/careforanimals/](http://www.avma.org/careforanimals/)

The Delta Society - the Human-Animal Health Connection

[www.deltasociety.org](http://www.deltasociety.org)

Pet Loss Memorials:

[www.theurnist.com-custom](http://www.theurnist.com-custom) (pet urns, angels, and frames)

[www.nepanetwork.com/keepsakes](http://www.nepanetwork.com/keepsakes) (an inexpensive way to memorialize your beloved pet)

[www.foreverpets.com](http://www.foreverpets.com) (wide selection of urns)

Pet Loss Support:

[www.pet-loss.net](http://www.pet-loss.net)

[www.ourpals.com](http://www.ourpals.com)

[www.petvets.com/petloss/](http://www.petvets.com/petloss/)

[www.aplb.org](http://www.aplb.org)

[www.paws2heaven.com/](http://www.paws2heaven.com/)

### Books:

**Goodbye My Friend** by Herb and Mary Montgomery, Montgomery Press, ISBN 1879779005 (2001)

**A Final Act of Caring** by Herb and Mary Montgomery, Montgomery Press, ISBN 1879779021 (1993)

**Pets Living with Cancer: A Pet Owner's Resource** by Robing Downing, DVM, American Animal Hospital Association, ISBN 1583260226 (April, 2000)

**Grieving the Death of a Pet** by Betty J. Carmack, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, ISBN 080664348X (January, 2003)

**Goodbye, Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet** by Gary Kowalski, Stillpoint Publishing, ISBN 1883478227, (1997)

**My Personal Pet Remembrance Journal** by Enid Traisman, Dove Lewis Emergency Animal Hospital, ISBN 0965113108 (1998)

### Books For Children

**Dog Heaven** by Cynthia Rylant, Scholastic Trade; ISBN: 0590417010 (September 1995)  
Ages 4-8

**Cat Heaven** by Cynthia Rylant, Scholastic Trade; ISBN: 0590100548 (September

1997) Ages 4-8

**I'll Always Love You** by Hans Wilhelm, Crown Pub; ISBN: 0517572656 (May 1989) Ages 4-8

**A Special Place for Charlee: A Child's Companion Through Pet Loss** by Debra Morehead, Partners in Publishing LLC, ISBN 0965404900 (1996) Ages 4-12

**A Gift From Rex** by Jim Kramer, DVM, Beaver's Pond Press, Inc.; ISBN 1890676632 (2001)

**Tear Soup** by Pat Schweibert and Chuck DeKlyen, Perinatal Loss, ISBN 0961519762 (2001) Audience: All Ages

**The Tenth Good Thing About Barney** by Judith Viorst, Simon and Schuster Children's, ISBN 0689712030 (1975) Ages 4-8

**Annie Loses Her Leg But Finds Her Way** by Sandra J. Philipson, Chagrin River Publishing Company, ISBN 192982100X (1999)

**Healing Your Grieving Heart for Kids** by Alan Wolfelt, PhD, Companion Press, ISBN 1879651270 (2001)

**Goodbye Mousie** by Robie Harris, Simon and Schuster Children's, ISBN 0689832176 (2001) Ages 5-8

**Tough Boris** by Mem Fox, Harcourt, ISBN 0152018913 (1998) Ages 5-8

#### Books for Parents

**Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child** by Earl Grollman, Beacon Press, ISBN 0807023639 (1991)

**When Your Pet Dies: Dealing With Your Grief and Helping Your Children Cope** by Christine Adamec, iUniverse Incorporated, ISBN 0595092470 (2000)

**When Children Grieve** by John W. James, HarperCollins Publishers, ISBN 0060084294 (2002)

**Healing the Bereaved Child** by Alan Wolfelt, PhD, Companion Press, ISBN 1879651106 (1996)

**A Child's View of Grief** by Alan Wolfelt, PhD, Companion Press, ISBN 1879651009 (1999)