

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF A PET

by John White & Gill Minter

For many owners, it is terribly important to be able to say goodbye to their dead or dying pet. If it is necessary to have it euthanased, some (but not all) owners feel that they would like to stay with their pet while this is done. This is possible, but even if you cannot be there, you will be allowed to see and perhaps spend some time with him or her. This will enable you to say goodbye and allows you to verify in your own mind that he is actually dead.

Allow yourself to grieve

At the death of a pet, you are likely to experience a whole variety of emotions - going through shock, disbelief, pain, guilt, depression, anxiety, and finally, acceptance, at which time recovery begins. This is quite natural and these emotions should not be suppressed. It is only by allowing yourself to grieve that you will eventually come to terms with the death. With time, the sadness will fade.

At a difficult time, you will need the help and support of your family and friends. Too often however, this is not forthcoming - many people do not understand how much the death of an animal can mean to someone, or they may simply be embarrassed and do not know how to react.

You should allow yourself to express your feelings openly - discussing them with someone who will sympathize is often the best way. You may find it useful to talk to your veterinary surgeon, who will be familiar with the circumstances of your pet's death. He or she may also be able to put you in touch with a local support group.

It can be difficult for you - because you prefer to grieve in private, or you feel that no-one else would understand - it can be helpful to write down your thoughts. Many grieving pet owners have found solace by expressing themselves in the form of letters.

Feeling depressed

It is normal to feel depressed and even physically ill in the days following the event. Symptoms of depression which you may experience include crying, lack of interest in life, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, feelings of despair and hopelessness, headaches and fatigue.

Owners may feel a degree of mental disorientation in grief and it is not uncommon for owners to imagine that they can see their pet around the house or feel its touch against their hand or legs. If this occurs, it does not mean that you are still in contact with your pet - it is simply that you are grieving. With time, these sensations will pass.

Although the grieving process can last for up to 2 years, if the depression is so severe that it disrupts your life for more than a few weeks, or if you feel that you cannot cope, you should consider seeking professional counseling.

Depression can often be expressed more openly under these circumstances and this is an essential part of the healing process. Grief which remains suppressed or unresolved can last for months or even years and can later manifest as physical symptoms, which may not respond to therapy in the normal way.

Gradually, you will begin to adjust to life without your pet. You will have started to come to terms with his death and feelings of sadness, anger and pain are no longer so profound. At this stage, some people may find it difficult to be reminded of their absent pet and may wish to dispose of his belongings or put them away until a later date. Others prefer to keep the memory of their pet alive by displaying photographs or other mementos.

When you are able to remember your pet with happiness and affection rather than sadness and grief, you are beginning to recover from your loss. You are able to go about your daily life in a more normal way and you are in a position to make a rational decision about whether or not you should obtain a new pet.

Say goodbye

People are surprised at the depth of feelings they experience following the death of their pet. The truth is that a loved one is more than just a companion, he is a valued member of the family and part of your everyday life. His loss can leave a void which may be just as big as that left following the death of a human friend or relative.

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