



WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN LOSING A PET?

Grief and bereavement are very unique experiences that cannot be categorized into neat and predictable “stages” or “phases.” At times you may feel overwhelmed by a number of emotions all at once; at other times you may find that you go back and forth between different feelings.

There is no checklist to determine how long the bereavement process lasts. Each person will react differently depending on the level of attachment, circumstances surrounding the death, culture and unique personalities.

It is very common to react to the death of your animal companion through feelings such as resistance, shock, disbelief, anger, shame, confusion, and guilt. At times people may feel ‘silly’ or ‘absurd’ while experiencing such intense emotions over the loss of their pet and may wish to isolate themselves, withdraw from previously enjoyable activities or support systems, and / or mask their grief reactions by minimizing and denying them.

WHEN IN ‘CRISIS’: When you are still operating in ‘crisis mode’, things often feel quite raw and fresh. You might experience all of the above-mentioned emotions, especially *shock* and *disbelief*. This is normal and to be expected. You love your animal companion and when the physical bond is broken, you will naturally feel pain.

MOVING AWAY FROM THE EXPERIENCE: When we are faced with the loss of someone we love, we sometimes put up defense mechanisms to deal with this pain. We may wish for a ‘magical’ reunion with our beloved companion or convince ourselves they will come back. Support during this stage is crucial.

ANGER & GUILT: Anger is a normal and expected reaction to overwhelmingly frustrating and distressing situations. It is also an expression of helplessness, mainly when we feel others are responsible or “have not done enough” to save our pet. You may find that your anger is directed at veterinary staff, unsympathetic family or friends, ourselves, and even towards our pet for ‘abandoning’ us.

Just like anger, it is very common and normal for people who have lost their pet to feel intense guilt. This is especially true when we make the decision to euthanize out of necessity, or when our animal is lost due to a human error of some kind.

We may also feel a sense of failure and feel that we haven't lived up to our obligations towards our trusting animals. Strong emotions of guilt and sadness are normal but professional support can assist you through this journey.

MOVING TOWARD THE EXPERIENCE: It is only by moving *toward* the experience of loss, that one can learn to live with it. There is no 'closure' when it comes to grief; this word implies completely separating from the experience. Instead, we want to work towards incorporating the loss into our daily lives by acknowledging and managing it in healthy ways. By embracing the intensity of the emotions, and by allowing yourself to feel the feelings as they come. This means that while "closure" may not fully be achieved, you allow yourself to recognize that you might still feel sadness and longing for your pet but are again able to function almost as per usual (as you would previously to the loss).

While recognizing that feelings of grief may still linger or return, like the ocean's waves, you may go through the motions and the intensity again until the wave subsides. Give yourself the time and the freedom to go through whatever you need to experience.

WHAT HELPS:

- Surround yourself with supportive friends / family / coworkers who understand
- Remain mindful or notice your feelings as they come; cultivate compassion towards yourself as you would an injured animal in need of your care
- Plant Tulips in the memory of your pet (as they return every year)
- Find meaning in your relationship with your pet: What does your pet mean to you? Why?
- What lessons have you learned from your time together? Can you share some of them with the world?
- If you are ready: Volunteer your time and energy into an animal rescue organization or with animal shelter. Caring for animals in need of your comfort may be helpful in your healing journey
- Find professional support or counseling if you feel that you might need some guidance in your journey
- Only when the time is right, you may consider bringing a new pet into your life. This is not a "replacement pet", but rather a new and unique relationship on its own!

Grief, like the ocean waves
comes and washes over,
leaving you wet with tears,
only to recede and come again
bringing with it hope and healing.



Memories and treasures wash ashore
like the lonesome cry
of a fallen autumn leaf

Grab hold of those treasures,
make them yours and let them
drive you to your destination!

Shiri Joshua(c) 2003