

Coping with the Loss or Death of a Companion Animal

Honoring the Bond

Coping effectively with grief...is not the process of forgetting, it is the process of remembering with less pain and more joy.

Author Unknown

"You don't heal from a loss because time passes, you heal because of what you do with that time."

Author Unknown

Grief

"Time does not heal all wounds, but time softens the intensity of grief."

Author Unknown

Grief is like being lost. The familiar things we relied on to live each day are gone. We must find new anchors or stabilizers along the way and learn a new way of relating to the world and people around us. New grief is all consuming and distorts reality. It is common to mark time in, "before or after my loved one died." It is also common to replay the last moments of your pet's life repeatedly in your mind, like a videotape that keeps playing the same scene over and over. No one can hurry the process or provide a magic cure for grief. When grief is new, it is common to feel exhausted: physically, emotionally and spiritually. Changes in appetite, sleeping patterns or health are frequently reported. Those who are grieving often describe feelings of being out of control, isolation and loneliness. Things that seemed so important before may now seem trivial. Others may experience a sense of "life isn't fair" or being in a tunnel or fog while everyday life swirls around them. All of these feelings are normal and part of the grieving process, which follows no organized plan, rules, timetable, formula or schedule.

"We will not have the intensity of the pain and sorrow we had at the beginning of our grief. We will go on with life and find a new normal for us, but life will never be as it was before the death..."

Carole Dyck, R.N.

The purpose of healthy grieving is not to "get over" the death of a loved one, but to integrate the experience of a pet's death into present life. In this process, it is not unusual for certain memories of your pet to become blurred. This does not mean that you are forgetting your pet or that your love is diminished. The truth is, you will ALWAYS love this very special member of your family.

Seeking Support

While there is no standard duration for grief, the pain of loss normally eases with time. You can ease the process by applying healthy coping skills, such as talking with others about your memories and emotions and facing the grief, rather than trying to stay distracted or busy to avoid intense emotions. If your feelings of sorrow or guilt have not diminished after several weeks or if they impair your ability to engage in family, social, work or other functions, you may wish to reach out for support. Many people have found comfort in calling a pet loss support hotline, joining a pet loss support group, reading books about coping with the death of a pet, or talking with a trusted counselor or advisor.

Celebrate Your Pet's Life

Try the following ideas to memorialize your pet:

- Conduct a memorial service
- Keep your pet's tags, toys, collars, bedding, etc.
- Keep your horse's shoes, tail, mane hair
- Create a picture collage, scrapbook, story or poem about your pet
- If you chose cremation, you may keep the ashes in an urn or locket, or you may choose to scatter them in a place that was special to your pet
- Journal your pet's story; how, when and where you met, unique personality traits, nicknames, what you love the most and what you'll miss the most
- Write a list of your best qualities, from your pet's point of view
- Donate time, money or talent in your pet's honor (to a rescue organization, humane society or Veterinary Teaching Hospital)
- Save condolence cards or e-mails from friends and family

"Monday morning recriminations accomplish little in these situations. I do know that I have gained a new perspective on quality of life for pets and what that means for them and us."

Veterinary Teaching Hospital client, Steven Glass

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Guilt

Guilt and uncertainty are probably two of the most common emotions that people experience after the death of their pet. You may find yourself thinking continuously about what you perceive you could have, should have or would have done to prevent or postpone your pet's death.

Some suggestions for coping with guilt include:

1. Be truthful with yourself about why you feel guilty.
2. Write a letter to your pet expressing feelings you may be struggling with.
3. Do a reality check. Most people assume that if they had done something differently, the outcome would have been better. It's just as likely, however, that if you had done things differently, the outcome would have been the same.
4. Remember that you are human. No one is perfect. Accepting your imperfections will aid you in working through your emotions.
5. Remember that all living things die. There is not always an answer to why bad things happen and you do not have to find someone (yourself or others) or something to blame. Realize that sometimes you are powerless and that you cannot control everything that happens to your loved ones. What you can control is how you choose to respond to the events that happen in your life.
6. Try writing or talking to a trusted friend or advisor about your thoughts and feelings of guilt. Expressing your concerns in a safe and supportive environment can help you examine your emotions from a different perspective.

The Rainbow Bridge

Just this side of Heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge...When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, they journey to the Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable. All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing...They miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind. They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. The bright eyes are intent; the eager body quivers. Suddenly a pet begins to break away from the group, flying over the green grass, legs moving faster and faster. YOU have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart. Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together....

Author Unknown

"Our animals shepherd us through certain eras of our lives. When we are ready to turn the corner and make it on our own, they let us go."

Author Unknown

Additional Resources

For owners struggling with a difficult decision or coping with grief after the death of a pet, a variety of support services including bereavement counselors, support groups, websites, books and articles are available. Volunteers are available to provide a supportive, listening ear to companion animal owners. Please contact the Companion Animal Listening Line (CALL) at (614) 292-1823 for more information or find resources on our web site: vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond

Joelle Nielsen, MSW, LSW
Honoring the Bond Program Coordinator
Veterinary Teaching Hospital
(614) 247-8607
honoringthebond@osu.edu



COLLEGE OF
VETERINARY MEDICINE

Veterinary Teaching Hospital
601 Vernon L. Tharp Street
Columbus, OH 43210-1089
(614)292-3551
www.vet.osu.edu

This brochure is adapted from the original work of Jennifer Brandt, MSW, LISW, PhD

Honoring the Bond is sponsored in part by Schoedinger Pet Services