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OVC Pet Trust Coping with the Loss of a Pet

A Support Guide for Pet Owners



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An Introduction

Our pets are our friends, family members and companions. The bond between a person and their pet is a special one. The loss of a family pet may result in a variety of emotions: denial, guilt, anger, sadness, shock, pain and other feelings. Learning how to deal with emotions is important in order to move forward following the death of a pet. It is important to remember that people respond differently to the loss of a pet. You may not experience any of these emotions.

This Pet Loss Support Guide, developed at the University of Guelph's Ontario Veterinary College (OVC), provides suggestions and ideas to help with the journey of healing following the loss of a pet. However, this guide does not replace speaking to a trained health professional should you require additional support. Please refer to the Resources section for more information.

“What we have once enjoyed, we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.” – Helen Keller



Grieving

How do I grieve the loss of a pet?

What should I expect to feel?

How do I cope with my feelings?

Grief is a healthy and normal response to loss. It is also important to know that coping with grief is an individual journey of healing. What may work for some, may not work for all.

Did you know attempting to suppress feelings of grief may, in fact, prolong the grieving process?

Grief can feel 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. It is common to replay the last moments of your pet's life repeatedly in your mind, like a video that keeps playing the same scene over and over.

No one can rush 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, isolated and lonely. Things that seemed so important before now may seem trivial.

“While one of the greatest healers is time, time only heals if you allow yourself to grieve.” – Bojena Kelmendi

Others may experience a sense of “life isn’t fair” or being in a tunnel or fog, while everyday life swirls around them.

It is important to recognize that all of these feelings are normal and part of the grieving process. Grief follows no organized plan, formula or schedule. Don’t be surprised if you start to feel better, and then feel as if a wave has hit you. There will be ups and downs in the process of grieving.

The purpose of healthy grieving is not to “get over” the death of a loved one, but to integrate the experience of loss 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. The hope is that, as time goes on, the feelings of sadness will become less difficult. In the beginning, you may be sad to think or talk about your loss. Eventually, the hope is that you will be able to reminisce and even smile or laugh with good memories.

“Grief is like the ocean, it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.” – Vicki Harrison



Dealing with Guilt

Guilt is one 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:

- Be truthful with yourself about why you feel guilty.
- Write a letter to your pet expressing the feelings with which you are struggling.
- 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.

- Remember that you are human. No one is perfect. We all have our own way of coping with loss and we learn to live with the loss in our own time too.
- 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 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.
- Try writing or talking to a trusted friend or advisor about your thoughts and feelings. Expressing your concerns in a safe and supportive environment can help you examine your emotions from a different perspective.



Seeking Support

Who can I talk to if I need help throughout the grieving process? What resources are available to me online?

Seeking support throughout the grieving process is important. A skilled clinical counsellor, a pet loss support group, or family and friends are good examples of people who may be able to help.

While there is no standard duration for grief, the pain of loss normally eases with time. You can work through 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 the 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,

Coping effectively with grief... “is not the process of forgetting, it is the process of remembering with less pain and more joy.”
– Marie-José Dhaese

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 loss of a pet, or talking with a trusted counsellor or advisor.

Please see the Resources section for more help.



Healing Your Own Way

One of the greatest healers is time. Time only heals if you allow yourself to grieve, and let yourself feel the emotions that may accompany your grief. Only then will you be able to make peace with your loss.

Below you will find some practices and suggestions you may consider when in mourning:

- Be kind to yourself. Grieving is an intensely personal process that you should take at your own pace.
- Ritual is important when you experience loss. Plan a funeral, burial, cremation or a “celebration of life” service for your pet. Invite those whom you know had a special relationship with your pet.

“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.

- Allow yourself to feel the pain of loss in a safe environment. Give yourself permission to cry and do not try to suppress intense feelings, so you can heal and start to move forward.
- Talk about your loss to those you trust will understand. Talking about your loss will help process your feelings and help you once again look at the unique relationship you had with your pet. This may guide you from a place of shock, denial and guilt to a place where you can start to process your grief.
- Try to minimize contact with those who you know will not understand your loss. “Get over it. Get another dog.” Some people may have never experienced that very special relationship with a pet and may not understand what you’re going through.
- Read information on pet loss. There are many books and online resources that offer support when grieving.
- Make a scrapbook, collage, video or a special memorial place for your pet.
- Take good care of yourself. Incorporate some physical activities into your daily schedule to support your sleep and overall well-being.
- Hold a candle lighting ceremony.

“Time does not heal all wounds, but time softens the intensity of grief.” – Anonymous

- Walks are one of the best forms of exercise. If you have memories associated with walking your dog, take your walks at a different time and in a different area initially. Later on, when you feel better, you can go back to your previous routine, such as meeting with other pet owners with whom you used to chat.
- If you live alone, try to change your patterns and routines. Try to be with others more often and stay away from unhappy people.
- Avoid certain types of movies that may be upsetting and actively seek out movies that are entertaining. If possible, enjoy them with someone who is supportive of what you are going through.
- Although you may feel some initial resistance, make time to visit friends and family. Try to go out more frequently and on a regular basis. You can still take memories with you and share them, if you choose.
- If possible, try to avoid any situations that may prove upsetting.
- Meet with other pet owners and talk about what you are going through.
- Attend pet bereavement support group sessions. They may be a helpful healing experience.
- Try writing a journal or letters to your pet.



Celebrating, Memorializing, Honouring

Pet owners may find it helpful to celebrate and honour the life of their pet.

Decide how you will honour your pet's life and keep their memory alive. Place an emphasis on the happy experiences you shared. Let children honour their pet in their own way, and encourage activities to help them experience and express their love and grief. Examples include drawing or painting pictures, compiling an album, scrapbook or memory box, viewing videos, writing or sharing memories, planting a shrub or tree, reading books on pet loss, etc.

The following are some ways that people have found helpful in their journey of grieving:

- Conduct a memorial service.
- Keep your pet's tags, toys, collars, bedding, etc.

"Best friends live forever in the memories we keep."
– Anonymous

- Save sympathy and condolence cards and emails from family and friends.
- Create a picture collage, scrapbook, story or poem about your pet.
- Have a mold made of your pet's paw print as a cherished keepsake. Veterinary hospitals may provide this service.
- Create a journal of 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.
- Create or purchase a memory necklace with your pet's name or a memorial angel pin to wear in honour of your pet.
- Donate time, money or talent in your pet's honour to an animal charity.
- If you chose cremation, there are many options for how you can keep your pet's ashes. Your veterinarian can be a great resource for what is available in your area.

“How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.”

– A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*



Helping Children Grieve

How to talk to children about death?

How do children cope with pet loss?

Let children express grief in their own way.

- Children sometimes react to death with outbursts of laughter, aggressiveness, hostility, boisterous activity or in some other manner that may be unacceptable by adult standards. Be patient and supportive. Recognize that children grieve differently than adults, requiring parental understanding and guidance. Try to keep your child's routines as normal as possible. Behaviour deemed inappropriate may be positively redirected by role-modelling acceptable alternatives for the child. Although these reactions are quite normal, prolonged adverse reactions may indicate a need for the support of a professionally trained grief counsellor.

Explain death in a developmentally-appropriate manner.

- Properly explaining death can help demystify the concept and alleviate possible guilt. Explaining death to children can help alleviate their fears and misconceptions. Children often wonder if the death could have been prevented or if the same thing might happen to them. Children may also wonder if they caused the death by something they said or thought. Make sure your child does not feel at fault; they should understand that their thoughts, feelings or words did not cause the death. Be simple and concrete. “It’s okay if you got mad at Socks. Your thoughts didn’t hurt him.”

Be simple and concrete, and avoid euphemisms.

- Use words such as “died” or “is dead.” Explain that every living thing can get sick or be hurt and that no living thing lives forever. Children are very literal and may become confused when adults use other terms for death such as “passed away,” “gone to sleep,” “moved on to a better place,” “left us,” or “gone on.” Such phrases might cause children to feel rejected or abandoned by the pet, or imply the pet may return, or encourage children to go searching for the lost pet.

Don’t blame the veterinarian.

- Your children may become distrustful of veterinarians and other health professionals if they overhear any conversations expressing blame for the loss of their pet.

Show emotions.

- Respect your child’s need to express and share feelings of sadness. Let them see your expressions of grief. By talking

about sad feelings and crying, children learn that these emotions and behaviours are acceptable and appropriate. Do not feel as if you must have all the answers; sometimes just listening is enough. Expect that young children will ask and need answers to the same questions over and over again. Encourage your children to talk about how they are feeling, as opposed to assuming that a lack of expression of grief is an indication that they are coping well with the loss of the family pet.

Don’t immediately get a new pet in an effort to “replace” the one you lost.

- During this process, it is important not to rush into making any decisions about adopting a new pet as a means of alleviating the pain of grief. Getting a new pet too soon may imply to children that their grief is unimportant and unnecessary. It might imply that everything is replaceable, including the children themselves. The lesson children can learn through grief is that because relationships are special and unique, they are not replaceable. They also may react with anger or guilt, reject the new pet, or feel disloyal to the one who died.

“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.” – Anonymous



Helping Other Pets Grieve

Do pets grieve?

How can I help my other pet(s) at home?

How long should I wait before welcoming a new pet into my home?

Do pets grieve?

- Families that live together form close attachments. When a companion animal dies, surviving pets may “cling” to their human family members, be more reactive to stimuli, appear anxious or depressed, or demonstrate a loss of interest in playing, sleeping, or eating. These behavioural and emotional changes may be a temporary response to the loss, a distress response to the owners’ sadness, a distress response to changes in routine that occur as the result of the death, or an underlying medical condition.

“The company of many doesn’t erase the loss of one.”
– Anonymous

Important health alert.

- If a dog or cat stops eating, please, contact your family veterinarian as soon as possible. If you have concerns about your surviving pet's behaviour, your veterinarian may be able to provide suggestions to help.

Changes in behaviour.

- Watch for changes in the relationships between surviving pets in the home, particularly if the surviving pet often looked to the other pet for direction. Such reactions may be more common in species or individuals that have complex or significant need for social interactions.
- Changes in lifestyle can be stressful on pets and some may show signs of separation anxiety. This may include panting, pacing, whining, drooling, howling, barking and not eating treats when left alone. If you are concerned about your pet, set up a video camera or device to record their behaviour while you are not home. This can be an excellent way to monitor your pet's stress levels.
- There are a number of ways of managing anxiety and stress in dogs and cats. If you think your surviving pets might benefit, speak to your family veterinarian about options.
- Allow the companion animals to work out their own relationships. Punishment should be avoided, as it can increase levels of anxiety, fear, and aggression. Try rewarding positive behaviours and interrupting undesired behaviours with obedience commands or redirection to a new activity.

- Common underlying medical conditions can contribute to behavioural changes. A thorough medical examination can rule out these conditions. If you have any questions or concerns regarding changes in a surviving pet's behavior, consult with your family veterinarian.

Welcoming another pet into your home.

- The decision about bringing another animal into the home is very personal. Some families may decide not to get a new dog or cat because of the emotional, physical, or financial demands involved with companion animal care. Others may feel the time is right to share their home and heart with another pet. The time to consider welcoming a new companion animal into your home is when the entire family has had sufficient time to deal with the emotions of grief. Introducing a new pet too soon can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment toward the new family member. The important thing to remember is that bringing another animal into the home is not a betrayal of the one that is gone. You will never replace the one you've lost. You will simply be opening your home and heart to a new friend.
- When you have chosen to welcome a new pet into your family, it is important to remember that each pet has a special and unique personality. Take the time to discuss different sizes or breeds before making a final decision. Consider the needs and temperament of any surviving companion animals. Your veterinarian is an excellent resource.
- Each situation and family is different; choosing when to get a new companion animal depends on your feelings and personal circumstances.



"Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains unawakened." – Anatole France

Resources

Available in this series:



OVC Pet Trust: Coping with the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide for Pet Owners



OVC Pet Trust: Preparing for the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide for Pet Owners



OVC Pet Trust: Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet

A complete listing of pet loss support materials including: online communities; grief and bereavement resources; pet loss support groups; pet memorial; suggested pet loss books and other online reading materials are also available on our website. Books on pet loss for children can help parents narrate a story around pet illness and death.

www.pettrust.ca/petlossresources.



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“Learning to lose is the hardest lesson of all, a lesson that we never completely learn to master. Instead, we learn to live *with* our loss.”
– Suzi Beber



OVC Pet Trust, founded in 1986 at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, is Canada's first charitable fund dedicated to the health and well-being of companion animals.

OVC Pet Trust supports innovative discoveries that improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of pets. Funds raised also help provide the next generation of veterinary leaders with the most advanced knowledge, skills and techniques, as well as equipment and facilities for the Ontario Veterinary College.

OVC Pet Trust's Pet Memorial Program provides an opportunity for people to honour the special relationship they have with their pets.

**Learn about OVC Pet Trust at
www.pettrust.ca**

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