



Pet Loss Grief Is Real Grief

An explainer and goodbye ritual guide · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Losing a pet can hurt as deeply as losing a person. That grief is valid.
- Pet loss grief is often "disenfranchised," meaning others may not recognize it as real.
- Rituals, memories, and permission to grieve help healing.

Why losing a pet hurts so much

Pets offer daily companionship, unconditional affection, routine, and comfort. They are there for the ordinary moments of life. For many people, a pet is family. When that bond ends, the loss affects daily routines, sense of purpose, and emotional support all at once.

When grief isn't recognized

Grief researcher Dr. Kenneth Doka coined the term "disenfranchised grief" to describe losses that society doesn't fully acknowledge. Comments like "It was just a dog" or "You can get another one" can leave people feeling alone or ashamed of their grief.

If the decision to euthanize was part of the loss, guilt is very common, even when it was the kindest choice.

What the research says

Disenfranchised grief describes losses that are not openly acknowledged, socially supported, or publicly mourned (Doka, 1989).

Pet loss can produce grief comparable to other significant losses, and is often disenfranchised, which can complicate healing (Cordaro, 2012).

Tool: My Goodbye Ritual Guide

Choose any rituals that feel meaningful. There is no right way.

Ritual idea	My plan
Create a memory box (collar, photos, toy)	

Ritual idea	My plan
Write a letter to my pet	
Plant a tree or flowers	
Make a photo album or video	
Hold a small ceremony with family	
Donate to an animal shelter in their name	

A letter to my pet

Dear _____,

Strategies to try

- **Allow yourself to grieve.** Your feelings are valid, whatever others say.
- **Talk to people who understand.** Fellow pet lovers or pet loss support groups can help.
- **Keep routines gently.** Walks or times of day may feel empty. Fill them with something kind.
- **Help children grieve.** Use clear, honest language and let them be part of rituals.
- **Wait before a new pet.** There's no rule, but give yourself time to grieve first.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Write the "last good day."** Describe a favourite ordinary day with your pet in detail. It helps memories feel less overshadowed by the end.
- **Write a decision letter.** If you chose euthanasia, write about why. Seeing your reasons on paper can ease guilt.
- **Fill the routine gap.** If walks or feeding times feel empty, replace them with a gentle new ritual, like a short walk alone or a cup of tea.
- **Volunteer in their honour.** Helping at a shelter can turn grief into connection when you're ready.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What did my pet bring to my life?

What is my favourite memory of them?

What do I miss most in my daily routine?

Is there anything I feel guilty about? What would I say to a friend feeling the same?

When to reach out for support

If grief after losing a pet feels overwhelming, lasts a long time, or brings up other losses, talking with a therapist can help.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Cordaro, M. (2012). Pet loss and disenfranchised grief: Implications for mental health counseling practice. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 34(4), 283–294.

Doka, K. J. (Ed.). (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington Books.

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