

Grieving for the loss of your pet

“It is a myth to think that dealing with the death of a pet is easier than dealing with the death of a human loved one. The loss of a beloved pet can call into play a person's deepest spiritual beliefs and most profound emotions.”

Marty Tousley
(Children and pet loss, a guide for healing)

Useful Websites

Solace Pet Loss Ireland:

www.solacepetlossireland.com

The Blue cross: www.bluecross.org.uk

Society for Companion Animal Studies:

www.scas.org.uk

Peata: www.peata.ie

DSPCA: www.dspca.ie

Further Reading

Barton Ross, C. (2005) *Pet loss and children*

Carmack, B. (2003) *Grieving the death of a pet*

Greene L., and Landis, J. (2002) *Saying Goodbye to the pet you love*

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You and your pet

Pets can bring a special presence into the life of you and your family. They provide a loving connection and a way to share our deepest emotions without the need for words. They are our 'welcome home' at the end of a hard day, our link to other pet owners and a part of our daily routine. We go through so much with our pets that they become woven into the fabric of our lives. It is therefore natural that when we lose such a valued friend it will cause us deep pain, no matter what the species of animal - dog, cat, bird, horse or rabbit.

Grieving your loss

It is normal to feel grief when you lose a pet but sometimes family and friends do not fully understand and you may not be given the support people usually have when a person close to them dies. You might even be seen as odd or crazy for expressing grief for an animal companion. This reaction can add to the pain and trying to hide your emotions and get on with normal life may be difficult. You might also be feeling doubt and guilt over the decision you made to put your pet 'to sleep' - especially if you did not have time and support prior to making this decision.

Breaking the news to children

It can be difficult to break the news to children that a pet is very ill or has died. Although we may want to protect

them they have a need to grieve and a right to know what has happened. This may also be their first experience of death and if it is handled well it can provide valuable learning for coping with future loss. When breaking the news to children try to be as honest as possible, using words that they will understand. Encourage them to remember the happy times you shared with your pet and to record these memories through photos, drawings, poems, etc. Other pets in the family may also show signs of upset and need extra attention as they adjust to the changes in the household.

Suggestions for how to cope with your loss

There are a number of things that you can do to help you cope with the loss of your animal companion. You may find the following guidelines helpful, but remember that you are the best person to decide what you need.

- Accept that the pain of this grief is normal and allow yourself time to feel sadness, anger, guilt or whatever it is you need to feel.
- Try to share your emotions with someone who will understand - a friend, family member, other pet owners or veterinary staff.
- You may wish to bury your pet's body or scatter their cremated remains in a special place. Having a ritual or ceremony at this time can be a helpful way to mark how much your pet has meant to you.

- Keep a memory box full of favourite toys and keepsakes. Record special memories - put photographs in a scrapbook, paint a picture, write a story or poem. You can also put a photo and story on a memorial website for animals.
- It is important to look after yourself when you are grieving. Try to take regular exercise and eat well-balanced meals. Rest is important and if your sleep is disturbed try winding down with a warm, milky drink or soothing music. Set up new routines to replace those you had with your pet e.g. change the time and location of walks. Avoid making any big decisions and seek the company of supportive family and friends.
- It is up to each person or family to decide whether or not to get another pet. Some people choose to do this immediately, while others need time before they can make room in their hearts for a new relationship.

Sometimes grief can seriously affect your sleep, eating habits and ability to cope with life. If this is the case then you might benefit from professional counselling with someone who will understand and value the loving bond you had with your animal companion.