Veterinary Wisdom® About The Death of Your Beloved Pet

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Table of Contents

Dedication/Introduction 4
Nobody Told Me It Would be This Hard 6
My Grief is Turning Me Into a Crazy Person 7
The Scoop on Grief 9
If Your Grief Seems More Difficult 11
How Long Will I Feel This Way? 12
What Happens Now? 13
Getting Through 14
The Big G Word… Guilt 17
Ways to Deal With Guilt 19
Guilt Strategies 20
I Feel as Though I Can't Go On… Suicidal Thoughts 21
Taking Heart… Memorializing a Pet 22
What if I Loved a Horse? 24
What if I Loved an Exotic Pet? 25
What if I Loved a "Farm Animal"? 26
The Rest of the Family… What About My Surviving Pets?.. 27
Loving Again… Should I Get Another Pet? 28
Last Thoughts…Take Care of Yourself 29
Between You and Me 30
Inside the Veterinary Hospital 31
About the Author 33
About the ePublisher 34
A Personal Note from Us to You 35

I've written this Booklet for you for dealing with the death of your beloved companion animal. My goal is to help and support you as you move through this difficult time.

If your beloved pet has died, let me tell you how sorry I am and that I wish you weren't going through such pain right now. Your relationship with your pet was very special and unlike any other in your life. Those of us who have loved pets and experienced the joy they bring in our lives know what precious companions they are because they give us an unconditional love. Pets never care about superficial things and help us though some of the most difficult times in our lives. Your pet may have been many things to you including best friend, confidante, child, and even protector. It is rare in life to find such unwavering, constant love as your pet brought to you.

Nobody Told Me it Would be This Hard

If no one has told you this already, it is *completely* normal for you to feel intense emotions of loss. Many pet owners feel devastated and depressed particularly if they were very close to their pet. In some ways, society is slow to acknowledge pet death as the legitimate loss that it is. You may have already heard things like "*thank goodness it was just a dog, or why don't you just go out and get another one?"*

This type of "*disenfranchised grief*" *(grief without social acknowledgement)* may be causing you additional suffering. You may also be surprised or even embarrassed about the depth of your grief. Many people grieving the death of a pet feel this way. I think that many of us who love pets still unconsciously buy into the myth that pet loss should not be as big of a deal as other kinds of loss (like the death of a human loved one). We are startled by the intensity of the grief and feel totally unequipped to deal with it.

If you were very close with your pet and enjoyed that type of unconditional love-- intense grief is natural. You may be feeling so sad and depressed that you can't imagine going on with life without your loved one and wish that you didn't have to. This kind of depression is not uncommon with intense grief. If you find yourself in this situation, please remember that you are not abnormal. Your grief is just an expression of the love and closeness you shared with your pet. Given how much your pet meant to you, wouldn't it be strange if you didn't feel so sad?

My Grief is Turning Me into a Crazy Person

Many grieving people worry that they are that they are losing their minds. Please realize that you are not alone. In fact, seventy-five percent of people who lose pets experience difficulties and disruptions in their work and relationships. Because so many people are embarrassed by their reactions, many suffer in silence and are hesitant to reach out. This does not have to be the case with you.

Grieving is a necessary, unavoidable, and healthy response to loss. As a human being you are meant to grieve when someone you love dies. Studies have shown that the tears shed during grief are chemically different than the tears shed from eye irritation; indicating that we are biologically pre-disposed to grieve. This says to me that we need to experience grief and that suppressing it only makes things harder in the long run.

If you feel that you are going crazy, let me assure you that you are not. Grief just makes us feel that way for a while. Let's address some of the things that may be happening:

Are you feeling overwhelmed? If so, please know that you are not alone. Most people grieving the death of a pet say that they feel that way. Please be assured that this is ***totally normal***. Grief is no minor thing. It hurts like crazy, but needs to be expressed. Grief lands in the "bad" category of human emotion because it feels so awful. There are many emotions that come with being a human that are not so pleasant; it doesn't mean that they are abnormal.

Do you feel that your grief is controlling your life? Please join the club. One minute, you can't stop crying. The next, your mind can't focus on anything. Sometimes you feel guilty, and then you become really angry. Just about the time you feel that you have a handle on things and can function in the world again, everything falls apart and you're back to square one. I'm sorry to say that grief is like that. It's sneaky and unpredictable. You may be riding a roller coaster in a variety of ways ranging from physical complaints to emotional and intellectual changes.

This is all ***normal***. Yes, there's that magic word again…***normal.*** There is a good reason why I'm saying it so much. I want you to be assured that you aren't going crazy. This is what grief looks like. It stinks, it's a real drag, but it is **what it is**.

The Scoop on Grief

I've told you already that your feelings are normal. But what can you expect as you move through your grief process? What will the days and weeks ahead be like for you and how can you prepare yourself? As you grieve, you may have a variety of reactions and although grief responses can differ from one person to another, there are many predictable expressions of grief that you may experience. These responses can occur on physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and even spiritual levels. Below is a list of general responses:

Physical
crying, sobbing, numbness, shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, sleeplessness, appetite disturbances, or other physical discomforts. It is not uncommon for people to succumb to a cold or other illness while grieving. Studies show that one's immune system can be compromised when they are grieving.

Emotional
shock, sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, fear, loneliness, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feeling overwhelmed, feeling hopeless and helpless, or a desire to blame others. It is not unusual for people to experience great relief after a death has occurred and this sense of relief can give rise to additional guilt. It is important to understand that relief comes from knowing that the pain and uncertainty of an impending death has come to an end. Knowing there in an end to long-term suffering would be a natural relief to anyone, it does not mean that you are heartless…just human.

Intellectual
denial, confusion, an inability to concentrate, erratic thoughts, intellectualizing about the loss, hallucinations (such as hearing your pet in the middle of the night) and thoughts about suicide (not accompanied by concrete plan or behaviors). True suicidal impulses are not normal and are discussed later on. Intellectual disturbances may make your life even more difficult if you need to take care of details after a death has occurred. It is important to give yourself extra time when processing

complex information because your brain is not operating at its optimal level.

Social
wanting to withdraw from others or feeling a need to reach out to others for support, feeling compelled to move away from your current living situation or having a strong desire to "run away" from what is familiar. You may also attempt to distract yourself from the grief by staying too busy or over-committing yourself to activities.

Spiritual
anger at "God" or a higher power, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, feelings blessed or punished, searching for meaning in a loved one's death, paranormal visions or dreams of a dead loved one, questioning the afterlife, and needing to "finish business" with a purposeful ending (a funeral, memorial service, last rites ceremony, or good-bye ritual).

Although I've provided you with this list, please keep in mind that your grief is unique and you will experience it in your own time and your own space. You should never place expectations on yourself to grieve in a certain way.

If Your Grief Seems More Difficult

The death of a beloved companion is very difficult in any situation. However, it can become even more overwhelming in certain circumstances. Grief is determined by many factors and some of them can make grieving the death of a pet particularly difficult. Below is a list of factors that may "complicate" your grief:

- When your bond with your pet was so strong that he/she was the biggest or only source of support in your life
- If your pet died a traumatic death (and you witnessed it) or if you were the accidental cause of your pet's death
- If you've recently experienced other major losses
- If you are feeling unusually guilty about your pet's death
- If you have little support from your friends or family
- If you have a personal history of many other losses
- If you have little or no experience with personal loss
- If your pet's death occurred suddenly without warning
- If you were not present at your pet's death/did not view the body after death to say good-bye
- If your pet died after a protracted and arduous illness
- If your pet's death has no known cause or was one that could have been prevented
- If your pet's death is presumed due to a long and unexplained disappearance

If any of these situations apply to you, I strongly encourage you to reach out for support to help you with your feelings. There are many resources out there including pet loss support groups.

How Long Will I Feel This Way?

Unfortunately there is no set time frame for your grief. Grief can last anywhere from weeks, months, to years. Much of it depends on the type of bond you shared with your pet. As I said earlier, you will grieve in your own way and in your own time. ***Normal*** grief however, does tend to lessen in intensity over time. Although I readily use the word ***normal,*** I'm not all that fond of the expression ***"time heals."*** It's not as accurate as ***"time helps."*** As a grief counselor I can tell you that you are never going to wake up one day and not miss your pet. The tincture of time never makes the grief go away completely as it shouldn't. However, you should find that as time goes on, you will not hurt as much as you used to. As time goes on you may not think about your loved one in exactly the same way or feel the same intensity of pain with your grief.

If it's been months since your pet died and you feel that there has been *absolutely no* movement in your grief, this may be a sign that you are experiencing complicated grief. This is something best addressed by a professional counselor and I *strongly* encourage you to seek out some support.

What Happens Now?

Once you understand why you are feeling this way, you're probably wondering what to do next. I would like to offer some practical grief strategies in helping you with your grief. Some ideas may fit for you, other may not, but I hope that you at least try some of these and see what happens. One commonly held belief about grief is that it is something you should just let lay there and hope it will get better. I disagree. Grief is an emotional wound and like other wounds needs time, care, and attention in order to heal. There is an old expression in therapy…feelings that move change. Many people who are grieving find that if they take action with their feelings, they find "movement" in their grief.

Getting Through

So, what on earth can you do with all this grief? You probably know that there are no shortcuts or magic answers. One of the best things is to be kind and patient with yourself. You might get frustrated because you want to feel better and it's doesn't seem to be happening soon enough. Hang in there and be patient. While you may feel miserable, there are many things that you can do to help yourself. Below I've listed a few suggestions to try.

- **Take a personal day(s) off from work.** You may need time away to take care of yourself but feel embarrassed about missing work. Make your grief a priority. Release yourself from the added pressure if the thought of being around people and co-workers is too difficult. If you prefer, you need not tell your boss or co-workers that it was your pet that died. Simply tell them there was a death in the family.

- **Be around those who can support you and understand your relationship with your pet.** Surround yourself with family and friends who know what your pet meant to you. These are the folks who can best support you and who will be the most helpful. Avoid people who lack understanding. You may not have the strength or the inclination to educate people about your bond with your pet. However, some people draw comfort from explaining their relationship with their pet and educating people about their grief. If this is the case for you then by all means…explain away!

- **Consider notifying select people about your pet's death. This act not only helps break through denial, but also can help you garner additional support. People to notify include:**

  - ✓ Close family and friends who understand your relationship with your pet.

- ✓ Your veterinarian and veterinary staff if they were not directly involved in your pet's death. (Your veterinarian can advise you if you want to consider a post-mortem examination. These exams can shed light on a particular disease process or answer nagging questions that are bothering you).

- ✓ Your pet's groomer or other care provider.

- ✓ Any other professional or animal group with whom you and your pet interacted. This may include

    - Animal daycare facility such as "dog daycare"
    - Animal behavior/training groups
    - Dog or cat breed organizations such as the AKC
    - Animal assistance groups such as Canine Companions, Delta Society's Pet Partners, or Therapy animals
    - Any other animal organizations that you belong to

- **Consider having a memorial service or funeral.**
  Memorialization allows you to sort out your feelings and to make your grief active so that you can move your feelings along. Studies show that people grieve more "successfully" when they are given a formal opportunity to honor the loved one and say good-bye. These ceremonies do not have to be elaborate although they can be. You can decide what feels right for you. Do not hold back simply because you are honoring the life of a pet and not a person. For ideas and suggestions on memorializing a pet, refer to the section included in this e-booklet.

- **Consider a pet loss support group or other type of assistance.**
  Many people benefit from being around others who are experiencing similar situations. Pet loss support groups are wonderful ways to talk about your pet and to be with others who

can empathize with you. There are two types of pet loss support groups. Professional groups on ones lead by a mental health professional who has specific training in the topics of pet loss and grief. They are usually quite structured and are helpful if you are having a particularly difficult time and would like to seek out the opinion of a mental health professional. The second type of group is a peer lead group. These are ones usually run by the members of the group itself or may be lead by a person other than a mental health professional (veterinarian, interested pet owner, etc).

If you do not feel comfortable talking with others in a group, there are many counselors and mental health professionals who have special interests/training in pet loss that you may consider talking with individually. Talking with someone professionally ***DOES NOT*** mean that you are weak or crazy. In fact, just the opposite is true. Emotionally healthy people recognize when times become just a bit too hard and take the appropriate steps to take care of themselves.

- **Take good care of yourself.** When you are grieving, it is essential that you have good self-care. Grieving is hard, hard emotional work and you can't do that if you are exhausted, sick, or depleted. Eat nutritious meals, try to get adequate rest, and remind yourself that you are a priority.

- **Take grief breaks.** What is a grief break you ask? It's exactly what it sounds like…a literal break from your grief. We are not meant to experience grief 24 hours a day. It's simply too hard. Try to remember that there is a whole world out there full of joy and other emotions besides grief. Involve yourself in activities, hobbies, and other things that brought you fulfillment before your pet died (even if you have to force yourself at first). You may find that for a few moments, you experience positive emotions. You are not betraying your pet or grieving "incorrectly" if you find yourself laughing or even feeling happy. You simply should not grieve around the clock.

The Big G Word… Guilt

Guilt. The big "G" word-- the bad word according to many. There's two things you should know about guilt. First, guilt is almost always part and parcel of grief, and two, in some circumstances; it can be really bad stuff. Why? Guilt can be the worst of emotions with grief because it can be the most toxic. You already know that grief is a very normal, natural and inevitable response to the experience of loss. Although very painful, normal grief lessens over time and gradually becomes less painful. One reason why it does not? You guessed it…guilt.

You know what guilt is: the critical inner voice that judges our actions, thoughts, and even feelings. Guilt serves an important function for sure. When experienced within reason, guilt helps us to live with a good moral compass. When we do something wrong, guilt helps us to understand that we've done something wrong and helps us to not do it again. So within reason, guilt is good. It keeps us in line and prevents us from becoming truly awful people. The problem comes when we are grieving. If our guilt is excessive, it becomes insidious, counter-productive, and blocks our ability to grieve a death in the way that we need to. It complicates our grieving because we can get "stuck" on past events-- so much so that we cannot move forward with our grief.

Pets, like children, are seen as totally dependent upon us for their well-being. When we love them, we expect ourselves to control every aspect of their lives and protect them from all harm. In short, we expect ourselves to be perfect. Now unless any of you have run into any supreme beings lately, I personally have never known anyone who is perfect. None of us will ever be perfect for the ones we love and we will *never* have the ability to control things like disease, accidents, and other life events.

Guilt comes in two delightful flavors: justified and unjustified. Justified guilt comes from actions that cause a pet's death (a dog tragically hit by a car while walking off leash). Unjustified guilt comes when we believe that small, unrelated things have somehow caused our pet's death (I once worked with a client who was *convinced* that her dog got bone cancer from sleeping under the bed rather than in the bed). Whether guilt is justified or not, it is important to remember that guilt can haunt us for a long time unless we do something about it.

Ways to Deal with Guilt

The key to dealing with guilt effectively is to get those feelings moving (sort of like emotional aerobics). If you do something active and positive with your guilt, you have a much better shot at working with it. Using my previous example, let's say that a man is stuck in his grief because he feels guilty about his dog's death (the dog was hit by a car while walking off leash). To deal with his guilt, he posts flyers about the dangers of walking dogs off leash, he writes an article in the local newspaper, and gives a presentation to the local elementary school. By taking direct action, he has turned his feelings into positive outcomes rather than just sitting inert and letting the guilt eat him alive. This is essential in working with guilt. The feelings must move in order to change.

I've listed some ideas below for ways to make guilt "active." There are no magic solutions here but some may prove helpful. Regardless of what you're feeling guilty about, remember what I said about never being perfect. You loved your pet and torturing yourself accomplishes very little in the end.

Guilt Strategies

- Write a letter telling your pet all the things that you feel guilty about and want to apologize for. Read the letter aloud or bury the letter where your pet is buried.
- Do something worthwhile in honor of your pet. Donate your time or money to benefit animals with the knowledge that you are apologizing for what you feel guilty about.
- If your pet died accidentally, educate other pet owners about how this accident could be avoided in the future.
- "Ask" your pet for forgiveness. Most people believe that their pet would forgive them and not hold a grudge. If this is the case with you, then you must find a way to forgive *yourself*.
- Do something "difficult," yet positive in honor of your pet. (An example might be giving up smoking in honor of a pet). The act of self-sacrifice may help you "atone" for your actions.
- Keep a balanced perspective. When we feel guilty about something, we forget the good things. Make a conscious choice to remember times when you were there for your pet.
- Give yourself a break. At some point, you have to stop punishing yourself for things you cannot go back and change. Focus on your future actions and invest your energy in how you want to move forward. This will help you get "unstuck" in your grief process.

I Feel as Though I Can't Go On…
Suicidal Thoughts

As I mentioned earlier, it is not that uncommon to have brief thoughts of suicide when you are in the midst of intense grief. However, it is ***not*** normal to think about suicide to the point where you find yourself developing a plan or considering how you might end your life. This is an indication that your depression has exceeded normal limits and it is ***very important*** that you contact professional assistance ***immediately***.

If you are having suicidal thoughts, you are probably very frightened and feeling completely overwhelmed. Do not isolate yourself. Talk to people who care about you and let them know how serious your depression has become. Once you've brought these frightening thoughts out into the open, they are more likely to become manageable and less overwhelming. Suicidal thoughts are not rational because they are distorted by intense depression. Utilize any and all resources available to you so that you can help yourself as soon as possible.

Situations that can give rise to complicated grief are also risk factors for someone considering suicide. If any of this applies to you, **seek support now. Do not delay.**

Taking Heart…Memorializing a Pet

As mentioned earlier, an important step in the grief process is memorialization. Memorialization refers to the act of honoring and commemorating a loved one. This act not only helps to celebrate the life that was lived, but it gives people a positive outlet for their emotions. Memorialization allows people to use their creativity and unique talents in remembering their pet. It also enables the griever to garner additional support. In all my years as a grief counselor, I have ***never*** known a time when memorializing did not *significantly* help a griever! It is that important and helpful! The other wonderful thing about memorializing is that it gives you a chance to "reconnect" with your pet as you create ways to honor his/her life. After all, that's one of the biggest challenges we face with grief…we must somehow accept the physical death and find ways to make new connections with our loved ones in death. Creating memorials is an ideal way to do that.

As you think of ways to remember your pet, keep in mind that the sky is the limit! This is your special time to use your own talents, creativity and unique abilities to honor your pet. This is when you get to put forth all that love you have inside to create something truly lasting and very meaningful. World by the Tail, Inc. has an entire online catalog of wonderful products that can make this easy and special for you. Simply log on to their products section. Below I've listed some things that other people have tried just to get you started. You can do the rest!

- Collect photos or videotapes of your pet and create a special scrapbook or "living tribute" of your pet's life. Grief can be eased by being able to "see and hear" your pet through the magic of photos and videotapes.
- Plant a tree, flowers, or a bush in special memory of your pet. Plant this in a location that holds special meaning, or is where your pet's body or ashes are buried. It is very helpful to have a special place to go to when you need to feel close to your pet.
- Make a clay imprint of your pet's paw as a special keepsake. (see www.veterinarywisdom.com for ClayPaws® prints.)

- Keep whiskers or tufts of fur from a special spot on your pet's body and place them in a locket.
- Write a story or make a tribute of your pet's life. Write about funny times or special antics about your pet that made you laugh and gave you pleasure. Write a poem that expresses your love for your pet.
- Make a financial donation to a worthy animal organization in memory of your pet. In lieu of a financial contribution, donate some of your time, energy, or creativity to a worthy organization.
- Look for special memorials available through your veterinarian or other animal related organizations. Many veterinarians have memorial plaques or other tributes that clients can utilize.
- Keep your pet's ID tags on your key ring.
- Have a professional portrait or sculpture done of your pet. Many artists will do these after the pet's death using a photograph. You can also use a photograph to make a T-shirt, clock, button, coffee mug, etc.
- Place a bench with an engraved nameplate where your pet's body or ashes are buried.
- Place ashes in a potted houseplant.
- Ask your veterinarian if you can donate any needed items (such as blankets, bowls, toys, children's books, etc) in honor of your pet.
- If your pet is not buried near you, take pictures of the grave and keep these in a special place where you can "visit" when you want to.

What If I Loved a Horse?

The bond you shared with your horse was likely just as strong as though you may have shared with smaller animals but may have taken on additional depth because your bond was grounded in mutual respect and trust. Horse owners pledge to take care of their horse and in return, rely on the horse to always take care of them. The owner's physical safety depends upon this sacred trust. Additionally, your horse may have lived for 25 years or more and this longevity could have created a tremendous bond. You might have owned your horse for the majority of your life (since childhood) or you may have had your horse for your entire life. If this is the case with you, it is important for you to realize what a tremendous loss this is for you and to normalize your emotions.

As you grieve, it may be helpful to talk with other horse owners who can understand and appreciate your unique feelings. You may have had additional issues surrounding your horse's euthanasia or death that may make your feelings more complicated. When grieving the death of your horse, it is important to consider the following:

- If you were not present at euthanasia, take the time to say good-bye to your companion (perhaps by writing your horse a letter). Tell your horse all the things that you are feeling including any regrets, special messages, or thank-yous. Don't hold back on anything that you feel needs to be said.

- Make a clay imprint of your horse's hoof as a special keepsake. (see www.veterinarywisdom.com for ClayPaws ® hoof prints.)

- Make sure to memorialize your horse. There are numerous ways you might do this and I encourage you to be as creative as possible.

- Many equine veterinarians have special memorials for horse owners and you may wish to contribute or include your horse.

What If I Loved an Exotic Pet?

Exotic animals, including rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs, hedgehogs, ferrets, rats, birds, and even reptiles can all become treasured pets. The diversity of such animals makes for a wide range of lifespan and health issues. In turn, the bond developed between owner and pet is just as varied. Some pets live just a few years, while others (such as parrots and turtles) can easily outlive the person. For example, it is not uncommon for an entire generation of a family to own a parrot.

Because exotic pets are more rare, owners of such pets often must deal with ridicule when facing the death of their loved one. If you are grieving the death of a non-traditional pet, know that your feelings of grief are just as normal, and just as important as someone grieving the death of a dog or cat. When grieving the loss of your exotic pet, consider the following:

- If you were not present at euthanasia give yourself time to say good-bye (perhaps by writing a letter). Include all the things you feel need to be said.

- Make a clay imprint of your pet's paw as a special keepsake. (see www.veterinarywisdom.com for ClayPaws ® prints.)

- If your exotic pet was buried somewhere near you (such as your back yard) visit your pet and talk to him/her. Share your feelings and don't hold back for fear of appearing silly or foolish. You are not and your feelings are not.

- Children can become very attached to the exotic animals known as "pocket pets" (hamsters, gerbils, rats, etc.) When assisting a child with the death of this type of pet, there are many special issues to consider. There is a wealth of information provided in the ebook- "Helping Children Through Pet Loss" (available through www.veterinarywisdom.com).

What If I Loved a Farm Animal?

Animals traditionally viewed as “farm animals” (goats, llamas, pigs and even cows), can become family pets. People who develop attachments to these animals often feel embarrassed about their feelings, yet their emotions are just as normal as loving a more traditional pet. The intensity of grief is determined by the closeness of the relationship, not by the kind of animal involved.

If your special companion was a “farm” animal, it is important that you treat this situation just as you would with any other pet. Your feelings of grief and loss do not change simply because you feel attached to a pig instead of a dog. Allow yourself the same considerations and support including saying good-bye, taking mementos, and asking for assistance. Just as with exotic pets, society may not support you as well, but your feelings of grief are normal and need to be acknowledged.

Children who belong to 4-H clubs and have raised “farm” animals as part of a 4-H project become highly attached to these animals. Children in these situations need special acknowledgement and support. Refer to the booklet “Helping Children Through Pet Loss.”

The Rest of the Family…
What About my Surviving Pets?

Many people worry about how their remaining pet (s) will react to the death of a member of their pack or social group. It is well known that animals can form attachments to other animals and can respond with unusual behavior when separation occurs. A specific animal's reaction depends upon a multitude of factors including the animals involved, the species, age, and the nature of the attachment itself.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that animals can become very attached (as is the case with littermates) and the separation resulting from death can cause strong grief responses. These responses have been described as mimicking human grief responses (anxiety, restlessness, appetite and sleeping disturbances, and even depression). If you are concerned about your surviving pets, it is important to consider the following:

- If you have more than one remaining pet, understand that the social hierarchy in your home might change. Whenever possible, let your animals work through these changes by themselves.
- Be careful not to "reward" undesirable behaviors such as whining, restlessness or not eating. While it may be tempting to give your pet extra love, comfort, or special treats, you do not want to inadvertently reinforce the negative behavior. Instead encourage positive behaviors such as going for walks, playing with toys, and eating healthy food. These things are good for you as well!
- Preserve your daily routines as much as possible. A predictable, familiar environment provides the most stability and comfort during this difficult time for you and your pets.
- It is controversial as to whether or not remaining pets benefit from seeing or even smelling the body of the deceased pet. While no research provides a clear answer, it may be important to do if you feel comforted by it.

Loving Again…Should I Get Another Pet?

I know what you're thinking—how could I ever go through this again? Deciding if and when to get another pet is a highly personal choice. I know of some people who can simultaneously grieve for one pet while bonding with a new one quite successfully. Other people need time and cannot start a new relationship in the midst of intense grief. There are no right or wrong answers for you here. The decision must come from your own heart and gut instincts. However, when deciding to get another pet, I urge you to consider the following:

- If you are thinking about adopting a new puppy or kitten, consider the demands of a young animal. Are you ready to deal with potty training, behavior training, and destruction of furniture? Remember that if you are used to an older, more predictable and sedentary pet, a puppy or kitten will be a dramatic lifestyle change!
- If you enjoyed a very close bond with your previous pet, your grief will be just as intense. Remember that grieving takes a lot of energy. Are you up for the physical demands of taking care of a new pet and starting a new relationship? If you adopt a new pet and are not ready, you may end up feeling worse because now, on top of everything else, you also feel guilty for not liking or wanting this new pet.
- Think carefully about your motivations for wanting a new pet. Do you subconsciously think that you can somehow "replace" the pet that has died? Are you hoping that a new pet will behave and interact with you in the same way your other pet did? If you are having these thoughts and expectations, you are setting yourself up. Pets each have their own unique personalities and the reality is you can never replace the pet that has died.
- Some people simply need a pet around to make life more comforting. If having a new pet helps you grieve and gives you security and comfort, then you should adopt a new pet whenever you feel the time is right.
- Some children want to adopt a new pet before the parents are ready to accept a new one into their hearts. Make sure the decision is mutual and that everyone in the family is ready.

Last Thoughts… Take Care of Yourself

Grieving is one of the hardest things you will ever do in life. It is tough work and very exhausting. No one will ever really know what you're feeling in your grief but if you were very attached to your pet, this loss has likely brought some of the worst pain you've ever experienced. I cannot stress enough how important it is to take care of yourself! Grief can absolutely knock us out and we often underestimate how difficult it is.

With everything that's going on, taking care of yourself may feel like the last thing you want to do (if you're feeling guilty about your pet's death, you may actually want to "punish" yourself as a result). Please do not neglect yourself! You're hurting and you need the care necessary to survive this loss. One strategy to try is to design a list of self-nurturing activities (little activities that you find replenishing and comforting). This list can be as simple or elaborate as you want, but it is a way of reminding you to take good care of yourself. If you're struggling to find ideas, check out the local library or bookstore. There are thousands of books out there dedicated to nurturing oneself.

Reach out to others. You do not need to go this alone. There are so many resources out there and you need only to find the ones most helpful to you. Be kind, patient, and gentle with yourself, you deserve it. I wish you well.*

* Much of the material in this booklet was adapted from Lagoni, L., Butler, C. and Hetts, S. The Human-Animal Bond and Grief, Philadelphia, PA. W.B.Saunders Co., 1994.

Between You and Me

Do you want to know what the secret to managing grief is? I'll tell you… you shouldn't "manage" it; you should experience it. There is no real way to avoid it or put it on the shelf. I'm here to tell you that there are no shortcuts to grief. If there were, we'd all take the expressway and be done with it. My best counsel to you is to experience and embrace it. Though just the mere thought of it may seem like jumping off a cliff, it is truly the way to survive it. So many people who are grieving get trapped into believing that if they "manage" their grief, it will not hurt as much and it will simply go away. They feel that if they are cleverer, more resourceful, or just stronger they can somehow avoid the pain and despair of loss. The reality is that you cannot circumvent grief because you are not supposed to. Grief is the normal and completely natural response to loss. It's an inevitable part of life and we are meant to experience it. Trying to avoid it usually gets us into trouble.

One word of caution about the word "closure". In my opinion, closure is a very general term used to describe situations when people are experiencing the pain of grief and are integrating that loss into their lives. However, it seems that the term "closure" often implies that a person no longer feels the pain of loss and has somehow "gotten over it", (i.e. "Bob, have you achieved closure over your wife's death?") It almost sounds like achieving closure is a measure of success over how well we really grieve (if you reach closure you've passed the grief test, and if you didn't, you failed). The reality is that we never "get over grief". We learn to accept it. The pain of loss lessens over time, and we find ways to move on with our lives, but we never stop missing that loved one. That loss is always there as it should be. For your own sake, please do not put unrealistic pressure on yourself to get beyond your grief by using inaccurate concepts such as "closure". Allow yourself to survive your grief in the way that works for you.

Inside the Veterinary Hospital

Your veterinarian has likely been an important part of your relationship with your pet. If your veterinarian was there to euthanize your pet, you've probably already shared some of your feelings. If for some reason your veterinarian was not involved with your pet's death, it is important to contact him/her at some point. He/she cared about your pet too!

Veterinarians and their staff are just like you when it comes to pet loss and grief. Most of them are pet owners themselves and they grapple with the same feelings when they are grieving. Although trained to focus on medical information, they are still people who carry with them all the same emotions. When your pet dies, they feel a sense of loss too and struggle with many of the same feelings especially guilt. Don't hesitate to talk with your veterinarian about your feelings of loss for fear of looking foolish. Your veterinarian understands better than most people how much your pet meant to you and how difficult this may be for you. Be open with your feelings and don't be afraid to ask how you can receive the best support. When it comes to grief, most veterinarians are extremely supportive and can be a terrific sounding board. Your veterinarian may also have access to support or other resources that may be of help to you. You may be surprised what a comfort your veterinarian is to you during this time.

If you had a very close relationship with your veterinarian and do not have other pets, you may be feeling a sense of loss because you do not see your veterinarian anymore. In essence, you're also grieving the loss of that special relationship. If this fits for you, I encourage you to contact your veterinarian and tell him/her how you feel. Chances are good that he/she feels the same way! Veterinarians become very attached to their patients and their clients. They experience grief when a special patient dies and miss the relationships formed over the years.

It may benefit both of you to talk about this in an open, honest way. Veterinarians often derive support from talking with their clients especially if they feel guilty about a pet's death or worry that they have let the client down somehow.

When memorializing your pet, consider involving your veterinarian in some way. Many veterinarians really appreciate this and not only enjoy the contact with you, but it helps them with their own grief about your pet's death.

About the Author

Dana Durrance is a veterinary grief specialist/consultant. She is the former director of the nationally renowned Changes Program at the CSU Veterinary Teaching Hospital and has over a decade of experience as a grief counselor, educator and trainer within the veterinary profession.

She is also the co-owner and grief counselor at Mountain Shadows Pet Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colorado (which she owns with her husband--a small animal veterinarian). She hold a Masters degree in clinical psychology and has a wealth of experience working with hundreds of pet owners as well as training veterinary professionals at national veterinary conferences, veterinary hospitals and schools. She has published in multiple veterinary-related books, journals and textbooks. She has presented at over 45 conferences, seminars, and workshops and is a regular speaker at Alameda East Veterinary Hospital (home of Animals Planet's Emergency Vets).

She lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado with her husband Steve, their daughter Erin, son Noah, and their three dogs.

About the ePublisher

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A Personal Note from Us to You

If you are reading this book, you will probably be saying a final good-bye to your beloved pet in the very near future. At World by the Tail, Inc., we understand that this is an emotionally difficult time. Each of us has experienced the grief of pet loss, too.

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Linda and Ron F., Pet Owners