

Self-Help Remedies for Healing Grief

Laurel Lagoni, M.S.



"I love cats because I enjoy my home; little by little, they become its visible soul."
--writer Jean Cocteau

My cats and dogs provide my home with structure and daily routines. For me, it's the sameness and ritual of caring for my pets that brings me a sense of security, comfort and belonging.

I begin each morning watching my dog scurry outside to greet the day. After work, my cats scold me for making them wait so long for their dinner but, then, purr and wind themselves through my legs as I prepare their meals. Bedtime brings a long-awaited treat for my dog and warm snuggles with my cats as they curl themselves into spaces near my body.

Every day. Always the same. Like Cocteau said, my pets are the soul of my home and my daily life. It's no wonder, then, that my house and my heart seem empty when one of them dies.

The Painful Face of Grief

"The dark night of the soul---between no longer and not yet."
--Joan Borysenko

For me, grief is a period of time when the comforting life I once knew with my pet no longer exists but my new life without my pet hasn't quite come together. This time of accepting and adjusting can be lonely and disorienting. When I'm in the midst of these grieving days, between what Borysenko calls 'no longer' and 'not yet,' I actively look

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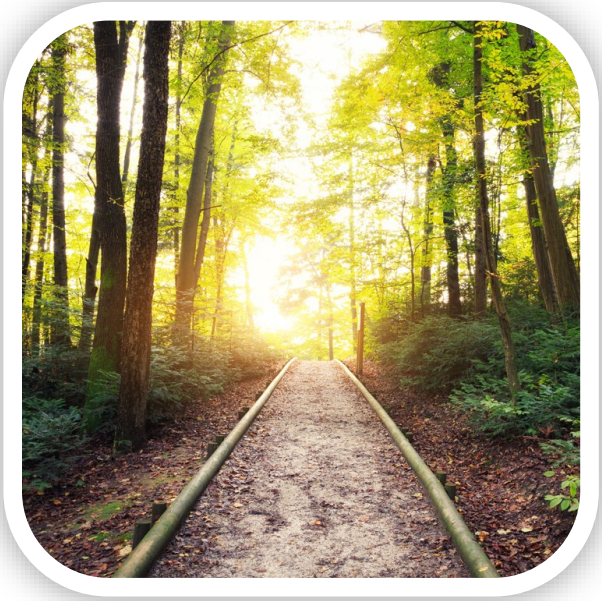
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for ways to get myself to the other side of my pain. In other words, I search out ways to feel better and to heal.

This isn't always easy because I'm comforted by different things at different times. It helps to know that there are many, many ways to walk a healing path through grief. The key for me is being aware of what works and then reminding myself to actively do it! Being an active participant in my own healing, rather than wallowing in sadness and guilt, helps my grief process progress.

Finding Ways to Heal

"Consider every path carefully, testing it in whichever way you feel necessary; then ask yourself, but only yourself, one question, 'Does this path have a heart?' The path that has heart will uplift you, ease your burden and bring you joy."
--Carlos Castenada, author and shaman



When I'm grieving, I usually feel better after I cry. Researchers say tears have an anti-depressant and stress-reducing effect because they send signals about our feelings of vulnerability. Open displays of emotion, like tears, elicit caregiving behaviors from others and feeling attended to and cared for is almost always uplifting.
Yet, to really move my grief into other, more healing emotions, I've learned that I have to do more than cry. I have to find ways to make my grief active so my healing process is more conscious and intentional. Sometimes this process happens through small gestures, like sorting through photos of my pet and choosing my favorite ones to frame. Other times, it requires a grander commitment of my resources and time, like volunteer work at the animal shelter where I adopted my pet. While feelings of deep sadness are normal after the loss of a beloved pet, grief is a wound and, just like a physical wound, it doesn't always heal naturally. Sometimes we need to find ways to honor the memories of our pets by giving our grief more attention.

Home Remedies for Healing Grief

If I break a bone, I seek treatment from a doctor. Likewise, when my heart is broken, I seek the support of a qualified grief counselor. Yet, sometimes I truly don't need professional help. I simply need to practice some self-help techniques and take care of myself.

Just as there is folklore about how to heal a variety of physical ailments at home, there are also "home remedies" that can help us heal grief. Here are a few ideas to try if you've recently lost a beloved pet.

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Create a Tree Memorial

"Humans have always had a deeply spiritual relationship with trees. The Tree of Life is mentioned in several spiritual traditions and many cultures believe trees contain spirits or a noble presence worthy of being honored and preserved."
--Daniel Butler, How to Plant a Tree: A Simple Celebration of Trees and Tree-Planting Ceremonies



When trees are used for memorials, they can provide meaning and comfort for years and years. Here are two suggestions for combining trees and memories of your beloved pet.

According to author Daniel Butler, ashes (your pet's cremains) contain minerals like carbon and potassium. When you line a pit with these ashes, your pet's physical essence will be incorporated into the cells of the tree you plant there and will live on within that tree as it grows. Butler suggests you match your pet's personality with the characteristics of the tree you choose to plant. For instance, you might plant an evergreen to symbolize your pet's constant companionship and undying devotion. If you live in an apartment, you might combine your pet's ashes with an indoor evergreen, like a Norfolk pine.

Another idea is to make use of a tree that has died to create a memorial work of art. One couple hired a chainsaw artist to carve their dog's name and full body image into an old tree stump in their backyard. Since the stump leaned to one side, so did the image of their dog. The couple found comfort in this because their dog liked to sit or stand as close to them as possible and then lean into them with his full body weight. They always thought of his "leaning" as his version of hugging. Now, each time they see this tree, they smile at the memory.

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Carry a Touchstone or Keep a Symbolic Talisman

"If you truly hold a stone, you can feel the mountain it came from."
–Mark Nepo



I like to start my day with a bold cup of black coffee and readings from a collection of daily meditations. One of the daybooks I turn to over and over is The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have by poet Mark Nepo. His entry for March 15 really strikes a chord because it's about the power of symbols.

Mark says, "symbols are living mirrors of the deepest understandings that have no words." These words remind me that all I have to do is look at or touch an object that has symbolic meaning for me and the feelings and times that are long gone come back into my mind and heart. These objects may not be imbued with any real magic because the feelings and memories are already there, deep within me. Rather, the objects are touchstones that serve as guideposts, directing my thoughts to the happy, loving memories that are always there, but not always in the forefront of my mind.

My home is filled with symbols, or talismans, that remind me of the pets who have touched my life. There is the heart-shaped night light made of red glass that I turn on every evening to remind me of my first cat, Chelsea. I also have a pocket-size piece of amethyst that I carried with me after my little cockapoo, Sam, died. Some believe that certain gemstones, like amethyst or smoky quartz and even volcanic lava, are imbued with healing qualities and can assist us with releasing feelings of grief. I know that each time I hold the amethyst, I think of the joy Sam brought into my life and feel grateful instead of guilty.

Of course, I have several ClayPaws® prints of my pets. As Mark's opening quote reminds me, when I hold one of my pet's paw prints, I once again feel the essence of the pet it came from and find comfort in that healing connection.

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Listen to Nostalgic Music

"All that we love deeply becomes a part of us."
–Helen Keller



Religions use hymns, chants, and sacred melodies to center and attune the soul. Nature offers its own version through the songs of birds, the rush of water, and the rustling of leaves in the wind. If you're like me, music is a language that goes beyond words to touch what your soul experiences.

On a weekend drive through the mountains on our way to Steamboat Springs, my family listened to " '60s" and " '70s" music on XM radio. Scientists say some music seems to create pathways through our brains that grant us access to information we've all but forgotten. It's true for me! I had so many memories flood back to me that were triggered by those old songs!

As I listened to and sang along with each one, I remembered events in my life that I hadn't thought of in decades! And, around the edges of those memories were the sweet, familiar faces of our former animal companions.

There was our first dog, Bear, a huge, barrel-chested golden retriever who hiked with me in the mountains when we lived near Georgetown, Colorado. And Chelsea, the first cat my husband and I adopted together soon after we were married. There was our female Chesapeake Bay Retriever, Coco, who licked my tears when I was devastated by the death of my sister and cats who warmed my lap on lazy Sunday afternoons (back when there was such a thing in my life!)

Driving over Cameron Pass, listening to an Eagles tune and remembering Bear, I felt the same lightness I used to feel each time I looked into his happy eyes and listened to him panting contentedly after a long walk together through the pines. The true revelation was the way the music opened my senses to the point where I could feel, actually feel, the love these pets had for me then as if it were present in my life right now. I realized that my beloved, but long-gone pets didn't have to be physically present in order for me to feel the joy and love they always brought me.

Sure, I miss those pets. Yet, I know they are always there, waiting for me to turn on the radio and use the healing power of music to call them to the forefront of my mind for a wonderful, loving visit.

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Try Journaling and Writing

"I don't feel like I'm the same person I was. Now, I own my life, my loss, my story, because I know what it means."
–Trina, in Writing as a Way of Healing



Research shows that opening up about deeply troubling and emotionally difficult events can cause positive changes in brain and immune function. In other words, there seems to be a relationship between illness and suppressing emotions, as well as one between increased health and opening up about sad experiences.

When people write about their traumatic experiences and the feelings that accompany them, there is often a cathartic discharge of the complex, pent-up feelings they have been harboring for years. After writing, people tend to say that, even though the actual writing was draining and painful, their outlook on life is much more positive. They also report that the issue they focused on feels much more resolved.

I've found that this same principle applies to grief. Like writing, if I'm willing to endure deep, painful feelings in the short-term, as they occur, there's a better chance that I can release them and, ultimately, improve my mood and sense of well-being. If I ignore my grief and "stuff" my feelings, they fester and affect the quality of my life, like a low-grade infection that is never really cured.

There have been long periods in my life where I've spent a lot of energy trying to block out painful feelings. During those times, there have also been days when I could calm myself enough to sit down and write about my losses. That's when I've discovered that I can face my grief and work through the painful feelings. Writing about grief and the emotions I feel allows me to be the one in control. This sense of control makes my memories far less powerful. Writing and releasing my feelings helps me shift my perspective from feelings of loss and grief to acceptance, authenticity, depth, serenity, and wisdom, which is the hallmark of genuine healing.

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Breathe and Sit or Stand Up Straight

The practice is simply this: keep coming back to your breath during the day. Just take a moment. This will give your mind a steadiness and your breath a gracefulness...There's so much to let go of, isn't there? Your nostalgia and your regrets. Your fantasies and your fears. What you think you want instead of what is happening right now. Breathe."
--Rodney Yee



Breathing properly, which means slowly and deeply, fully expanding my lungs as I breathe in and emptying them completely as I breathe out, is calming and centering. In the midst of grieving, when I can remember to stop for a moment and simply breathe, I always feel better. A deep breath is relaxing. It clears my mind and helps me feel more confident about my ability to face whatever challenge is before me.

Along with deep breathing, I've also found that adjusting my posture is helpful. Sitting or standing up straight perks me up and seems to reflect and determine whether I feel energetic or exhausted. Studies show that standing and walking tall helps people breathe deeper and more fully, which increases their blood flow and endorphin levels. This increase in heart rate is a natural rejuvenator.

Psychologist Erik Peper says how people carry their frames affects their hormones and oxygen levels and it can also affect their attitudes and moods. He says practicing good posture while standing – feet apart, knees slightly bent, lower belly pulled in, shoulders back and down, head held high with your ears lined up with your shoulders – fuels confidence. This is called the "high power" pose and it means the body is taking up the maximum amount of space that is socially acceptable. Studies have found that, when people are in this posture, their levels of cortisol, a stress hormone, plummets and testosterone, the hormone associated with feeling more in control, increases.

Sitting properly – feet flat on floor, knees slightly below hips, torso stacked over the pelvis and the ears aligned with the shoulders – can also help people stay positive. Slumped sitting has been found to activate memory networks associated with bad moods, while an upright position fired up more happy memories. Scientists have also found that sitting upright helps people manage emotional pain better than rolling up into a ball or lying in a fetal position because they feel less helpless when their bodies are less constricted.

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Visualize

"Ranchers have a trick to deal with a corral of skittish horses: they place a mule in their midst. Mules are generally more relaxed and laid-back than horses, and they exert a calming influence on high-strung equines."
–Alan Cohen in A Daily Dose of Sanity



Are you a horse or a mule? Normally, I flip back and forth between the two but, when I'm in the midst of grieving, I'm definitely the skittish, anxious equine.

Now, don't misunderstand. The mule I'm referring to isn't the stubborn, obnoxiously loud farm donkey you may know from children's books and stereotypes. The mule Cohen refers to in the quotation above is the kind I want to be. She's of the peaceful, grass-chomping variety. Relaxed and laid-back. This mule simply watches the chaos created by others as it swirls around her, calmly flicking an ear or a tail once in a while if a fly gets to close for comfort. You know, like Eeyore, but without the glum personality.

When my painful, anxious thoughts and feelings about grief start to stampede within me like a herd of spooked horses, I call forth my inner mule. The peaceful, sweet image of my mule-self, grazing on luscious green grass with the warm sun beating down on my back helps me feel less fearful and frantic. I remember that I have choices about how I want to feel and who I want to hang out with in the pasture. I can choose to NOT listen to the other horses or fight for my place at the feed trough.

I am the mule. I have everything I need and I am fine.

When I'm feeling like a high-strung equine, I seek out other "mules" to help me feel calmer. And, when I'm in mule-mode, my calm demeanor has a soothing effect on all those around me.

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Letting Go

"The only way I can truly get him back is to be happy; I can feel peace in my heart, live the way he showed me to live, and make use of the gifts he gave me. Then, he's right here, in my heart."
--Unknown



Several years ago, I found these wise words scribbled on a piece of scrap paper when I was sorting through a pile of papers on my desk. The words were surrounded by quotation marks, which usually means I wrote them down while talking to a grieving client on the telephone. This time, though, I forgot to make note of the speaker. And I regret that because whoever spoke these profound words deserves credit for understanding the key to healing our feelings of grief.

Grieving doesn't mean replaying hurtful memories over and over again in our minds. And it also doesn't mean that we continue to relive the painful feelings we associate with loss. Yet, that's what many of us believe grief to be—Constantly feeling lousy. Staying with the sadness. Living less than whole lives.

I used to believe that continuing to grieve, even on a subconscious level, kept me connected to my loved ones who had died. I even thought it would be disloyal to my loved ones if I felt anything else! It was as if I had been targeted or picked to bear the pain of losing someone and now had to "honor" my fate by never feeling happy again.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Grieving means staying connected to the love that remains even though great loss has occurred. Now, I know that the process of grieving is simply another name for the process of healing.

When I focus my mind on what my loved ones taught me and gave me and then incorporate those lessons into who I am now, I find meaning in both their earthy presence and their passing. I grow personally.

I know now that my loved ones who died, especially my pets who loved me unconditionally, don't want me to feel lousy due to some misunderstood concept of loyalty! They loved me! And anyone who truly loved me would want me to be happy, right?

If you're feeling sad and depressed because you've been grieving for a long time, please slow down and allow yourself to truly FEEL your feelings, all of them, down to the tips of your toes. Then, release them and allow the feelings of love to remain. Feel peace in your heart and make use of the gifts your pet gave you.

Allow yourself to heal.

"Some people think it's holding on that makes one strong. Sometimes it's letting go."
--Sylvia Robinson

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