

Understanding your feelings of loss when your animal dies

The bond that we form with animals can be very deep and fulfilling, and the loss of a beloved animal can have an impact on us that is as great, or even greater, than the loss of a family member or friend. This bond is what makes our interactions with animals rich and rewarding, but also what makes the grief process so complicated. The greater the love you feel for a person or animal, the deeper the sense of loss when they are gone.

After your animal has died or been lost, it is natural and normal to feel grief and sorrow. The amount of time a person grieves for the loss of their pet may be very different for different people. Although grief is an internal and private response, there are certain stages of grief that most people experience. By understanding the process, you can be better prepared to accept and handle your grief and to help other family members and friends who share your sense of loss. It's hard to think of it this way because the process can seem so painful, but mourning is actually an act of love.

What makes the grief process so complicated?

For more information about the American Veterinary Medical Foundation and how you can make a memorial contribution, visit www.avmf.org



The AVMA and its more than 80,000 member veterinarians are engaged in a wide variety of activities dedicated to advancing the science and art of animal, human and public health.

Visit the AVMA Web site at www.avma.org for more information.



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The stages of grief

There are many stages of grief, but not everyone experiences them all or in the same order. The stages include denial, anger, guilt, depression, acceptance, and resolution. The grief can seem to come in waves, may be brought on more intensely by a sight or sound that sparks your memory, and may seem overwhelming at times.

Your first reaction may be **denial**—an unwillingness to accept the fact that the animal has died or that death is unavoidable. Denial may begin when you first learn the seriousness of your animal's illness or injuries. Often, the more sudden the death, the more difficult the loss is to accept and the stronger the denial.

Anger and guilt often follow denial. Your anger may be directed toward people you normally love and respect, including your family, friends or your veterinarian. People coping with death will often say things that they do not really mean, unintentionally hurting those whom they do not mean to hurt. You may feel guilty or blame others for not recognizing the illness earlier, for not doing something sooner, for not being able to afford other types of or further treatment, or for being careless and allowing the animal to be injured.

Depression is a common experience after the death of a special animal. The tears flow, there are knots in your stomach, and you feel drained of all your energy. Day-to-day tasks can seem impossible to perform and you may feel isolated and alone. Many depressed people will avoid the company of friends and family. It might be hard to get out of bed in the morning, especially if your morning routine involved caring for your pet's needs. Sometimes you may even wonder if you can go on without your pet. The answer is yes, but there are times when special assistance may be helpful in dealing with your loss. If you are suffering from profound depression, seek professional assistance.

Eventually, you will come to terms with your feelings. You can begin to accept your animal's death. Resolution has occurred when you can remember your animal and your time with them without feeling the intense grief and

emotional pain you previously felt. Acceptance and resolution do not mean that you no longer feel a sense of loss, just that you have come to terms with the fact that your animal has died.

Even when you have reached resolution and acceptance, feelings of anger, denial, guilt, and depression may reappear. If this does happen, these feelings will usually be less intense, and with time they will be replaced with fond memories.

Although everyone experiences the stages of grief, grieving is always a very personal process. Some people take longer than others to come to terms with denial, anger, guilt, and depression, and each loss is different. If you understand that these are normal reactions, you will be better prepared to cope with your feelings and to help others face theirs. Family and friends should be reassured that sorrow and grief are normal and natural responses to death.

They may not understand

Sometimes well-meaning family and friends may not realize how important your animal was to you or the intensity of your grief. Comments they make may seem cruel and uncaring although they were not meant to be taken that way. Be honest with yourself and others about how you feel. If despair mounts, talk to someone who will listen to your feelings about the loss of your animal. Talk about your sorrow, but also about the fun times you and the animal spent together, the activities you enjoyed, and the memories that are meaningful to you.

The hurt is so deep

If you or a family member have great difficulty in accepting your animal's death and cannot resolve feelings of grief and sorrow, you may want to discuss these feelings with a person who is trained to understand the grieving process and can support and help you as you mourn your loss. Your veterinarian certainly understands the relationship you have lost and may be able to suggest support groups and hot lines, grief counselors, clergymen, social workers, physicians, or psychologists who can help.

Should I get another animal?

The death of a beloved animal can upset you emotionally, especially when euthanasia is involved. Some people may feel they would never want another animal. For some, the thought of having – and eventually losing – another animal may seem unbearable. These feelings may pass with time. For others, a new animal may help them recover from their loss more quickly. Just as grief is a personal experience, the decision of when, if ever, to bring a new animal into your life is a personal one. If a family member is having difficulty accepting the animal's death, getting a new animal before that person has resolved his or her grief may make them feel that you think the life of the deceased animal was unworthy of the grief that is still being felt. Family members should agree on the appropriate time to bring a new animal in to their lives. Although you can never replace the animal you lost, you can find another to share your life.

Remembering your animal

The period from birth to old age is much shorter for most domestic animals than for people, and death is a normal part of the lifecycle. It cannot be avoided, but understanding and compassion can help you, your family, and your friends manage the grief associated with it.

For some people, a memorial service or ritual (such as releasing balloons or spreading cremated remains) can be therapeutic. You may choose to keep and display reminders of your beloved animal, such as photos or mementos or anything that helps you recall and treasure the good times you spent with your beloved animal. You may also wish to make a memorial contribution to a charity in honor of your animal and the deep bond you shared. Just as the grieving process varies from person to person, so does the method of remembering the animal that shared your life.