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Loss, Grief, and Mourning

By: **Barbara Meyers**, Certified Grief Therapist, Animal Behaviorist
Human-Animal Bond Consultant, Animal Advocate

When our companion animals die, reactions of others are often insensitive and painful. We are told, "Get hold of yourself; move on, it's *only* a dog. You can get another one." *Only* a dog? *Just* an old cat! *Only* the singular experience in life that offers what we all need and want...complete acceptance, unconditional love, deep and everlasting friendship and trust.

It is natural and normal to experience a wide range of emotions after the loss of a beloved friend. These include but are not limited to pain, anguish, anger and loneliness, a depth of sadness never before experienced with other kinds of loss and even physical pain.

What can I do to help myself?

There is no single recipe or absolute guideline that is suitable for everyone. In general, it's helpful to understand that what you are feeling or *not* feeling, though it may be painful, is probably normal.

Consider a ritual or memorial that is in keeping with your personal belief system. This may include a memorial held in your home, garden or other special place. Be creative and make it right for *you*.

You may wish to write prose, poetry, or create a narrative about you and your beloved. You may also want to create a memory book or memorial video.

Avoid the concepts of "seeking closure" or "getting over it." These are over-used, somewhat mythical terms that set unrealistic goals. We do not "get over" our losses; we get through them. The implication of closure is that there is a precise close or end to it. There is, of course, a softening that comes with time, but death ends a life, not a relationship.

Take care of yourself in every way possible. Grieving is different for each of us. You may want to create some quiet time, avoid difficult situations or people for a time, take some time off work, if possible, and seek comfort in your belief system or by surrounding yourself with social and physical comforts.

Don't be misled by the cold comfort of bad advice and insensitive comments such as:

- "Stay busy. It'll get your mind off it."
- "Big boys/girls don't cry."
- "No sense dwelling in the past."
- "You have to move on."
- "You have to be strong now."
- "Grief therapy is for weaklings."
- "S/he was old."
- "S/he had a good life."
- "Think of all your good memories."
- "You still have other animal companions."
- "Count your blessings and be grateful for what you have."
- "Heaven needs her/him more than you do."
- "If you look around, you'll find plenty of people who are worse off than you."

Coping with people who do not honor your loss

You may need to manage or avoid people who are insensitive and show little understanding or respect for your loss. Pain and grief should *not* have to be complicated by the need to defend oneself. You have the right and the responsibility to yourself and to the memory of your treasured companion animal, be s/he cat or dog, bunny or bird, hamster or horse, to stop people who are intruding on your grief with thoughtless comments or questions. You do not have to defend yourself to them. You may simply say, "I understand that you probably mean well, but what you are doing/saying is not helpful, and I want you to stop."

Stages of grief

We are all familiar with the various stages or states of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The concept was first formed to describe the dying experience, but was later applied to grief. This early model is not to be taken literally; it is very general in nature and though these states or stages may exist, they are not experienced by everyone. When they are experienced, it is common to move among them in no particular order and to return to any phases already experienced as well as those not described at all in this narrow framework. *There is no "right" way to grieve.*

Helping children cope with death

Generally, by about the age of six, children develop the ability to understand death. Simple, honest answers to their questions are best. They should not be "protected" from the truth and should be encouraged (not coerced) to participate in the mourning and memorialization process. The phrases "going to sleep" or "put to sleep" should not be used; children can take that quite literally and might develop sleep phobias.

Every loss is unique. For this reason, not every loss requires the same kind of support or therapy. Some require nothing but the "tincture of time" and the support of the immediate circle of people close to us.

Free grief support services

For those people who just want someone to talk with and may not have critical needs associated with a severe, crushing, or an extended and undiminished grief that interferes with function, there are a variety of free hotlines offered by various institutions.

It is important to remember that if you choose to explore this avenue, it is likely that the person you speak with will not be a formally trained psychotherapist specializing in animal related loss and grief. He or she may be a veterinary student, staff or community volunteer. This is not to say that they cannot be, and often are helpful, kind, and might make a difference.

The following list of resources is as current as possible, but please note that they change frequently and without notice. I have no formal association or contact with any of these institutions and offer them to you only as a possible resource that might prove helpful to you. Their usefulness must be determined by you and your experience with them.

Hotlines

D.C./Maryland/Virginia: PAL Pet Loss Hotline can be accessed by calling the PAL office in Washington, D.C., (202) 966-2171, Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. You will be referred to a PAL counselor. <http://www.pet-loss.net/links.shtml>

D.C./Maryland, Virginia: Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, (540) 231-8038. This hotline is staffed by students and is closed during the summers. Normal hours of operation: Tuesday and Thursdays, 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. <http://www.petloss.com>

Illinois: Chicago Veterinary Medical Association, (630) 325-1600. Leave a voice-mail message. Calls are returned between 7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. Long distance calls are returned collect.

Illinois: University of Illinois CARE Pet Loss Helpline, (877) 394-2273 Central Standard Time. Voice mail messages will be returned. Hours of operation: Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays, 7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Indiana: Pet Loss Support Group, (317) 251-4028

Massachusetts: Tufts University, (508) 839-7966. Hours of operation: Monday through Friday, 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. <http://www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss/>

Michigan: Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine, (517) 432-2696. Hours of operation: Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, 6:30 p.m. – 9:30 p.m. Eastern. <http://cvm.msu.edu/alumni-friends/information-for-animal-owners/pet-loss-support>

Minnesota: Social Work Services, University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center, (612) 624-9372. This is an urgent crisis hotline. If they are not available, call: (612) 379-6363

New Jersey: Pet Friends Inc., (856) 234-4688. Toll free if calling from the State of New Jersey (not nationwide): (800) 404-7387. Phones are answered 24 hours a day, seven days per week.

New York City: Bide-A-Wee Foundation, (212) 532-6395

New York State: Cornell University (Ithaca, NY) Pet Loss Support Hotline, (607) 253-3932. Hours of Operation: Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. <http://www.vet.cornell.edu/org/petloss>

Grief support groups

Free grief support groups can be found in many communities throughout the country and others are offered by major teaching veterinary hospitals and private practices, as well. They can be useful in much the same way as the hotlines. An internet search of your local resources will help to locate one in your town or city.

Private specialists

If these resources do not provide the help you need, formal grief therapy with a specialist who will work with you personally and outside of a group atmosphere may be advisable. It can help you to work through the various elements of grief and move toward a place where you can be comforted by tender memories and, if you choose, share your life with other animals, free of a sense of disloyalty. Specialists may not be available in your geographical area, but counseling/therapy can, in many cases, be accomplished by phone. When handled properly, the phone can prove a safe and intimate environment. The goal is to help you discover and uncover your own way through this difficult time.

What *not* to do

While there are exceptions to everything, it is generally unwise to:

- Adopt another animal too quickly. How quick is too quickly? It's difficult to say with absolute precision but certainly weeks to months are usually required. A gentle reminder: adoption is always a better choice than buying, as it saves a life.
- Allow anyone to give you a gift of another animal or continue to suggest that you get another. Our animal friends and family are not to be treated as though they were rusty lawn furniture to be easily replaced.
- Dispose of the possessions of your beloved animal companion immediately.

It is my sincere hope that the information I have provided will serve to inform and bring some level of comfort to you, as well as to deliver concrete answers and choices, so that you can find the help and support you need at this difficult time.

More Information

- [10 Healing Tips for Surviving the Loss of an Extra Super Very Beloved Companion Animal](#)

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[The Animals' Advocate](#)

[Animal Law Update: Recent Developments in the Emerging Field of Animal Law](#)

[How Can Non-Lawyers Get Involved in Animal Law?](#)

[Cruelty-Free Resource Guide](#)

[Advocating For Animals](#)

[Natural Disasters](#)

When Your Companion Animal Has Been Harmed

[What to do in cases where anti-cruelty laws have been broken](#)

[What to do if a companion animal you purchased became sick or died soon afterwards](#)

[What to do when your companion animal has been injured or killed](#)

[Victim Impact Statements in Cases of Animal Cruelty](#)

[Dogs Shot by Cops: Companion Animals and Law Enforcement](#)

[Damages for Death or Injury of an Animal](#)

[What to do when you believe a vet has harmed or killed your companion animal](#)

[How to find an attorney to help you with your animal-related issues](#)

[Animal Cruelty and Domestic Violence](#)

[No Boundaries for Abusers: The Link Between Cruelty to Animals and Violence Toward Humans](#)

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[The Legal Process In The United States](#)

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