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Loss of a Pet

By Linda R. Harper, Ph.D., clinical psychologist

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It is so hard to say goodbye to our faithful animal companions. Grief over the loss of a pet is very real, and coping with the loss of a pet can be a challenge.

The human-animal bond

Here are some of the reasons why the loss of a pet can be especially heartbreaking:

- Our relationships with our pets are unique and special bonds; they are like no other relationship we have in our lives. Our pets offer us unconditional love and support. They are always there for us, no matter what kind of mood we are in.
- Our pets see us through the many different transitions of our lives: childhood, graduation from high school or college, a serious illness, a move or job change, loss of friends and family, or even the death of a parent or significant other. Pets are often the one constant, comforting and dependable relationship through difficult and changing times.
- Sometimes we spend more time with our pets than with anyone else. Or we might share more with our pet than with anyone else – our true feelings and moods, crying and talking. This intimacy intensifies the relationship and leaves a big gap when the pet is gone.
- Our animal companions bring out the best in us, so when we lose them, we often feel we have lost part of ourselves.
- They teach us how to become better at giving out love and acceptance. They make it safe for us to love them with all of our hearts so our capacity to give of ourselves expands. So naturally the loss feels larger, too.
- We feel a unique sense of self with our pets. They touch our very souls, so we feel that loss, that emptiness, from our deepest essence.

- Our pets become part of our identity: I was Blackie's mom, Winston's buddy. We like who we are and who we become with them.
- Our pets give us a sense of purpose and meaning because they depend on us to take care of their basic needs. We feel good about ourselves when we are involved in all the demands of caregiving for a seriously ill pet.
- Pets fill our basic need for physical touch and affection. Our arms feel empty when we can no longer hold, cuddle and snuggle with our beloved pets.
- A pet loss can be extra difficult because some of our friends, family, and co-workers may not understand. They might say something like "Get over it ... it's only an animal."

Coping with the loss of a pet

Having very strong and profound feelings of grief after the loss of a pet is normal. Here are some of the common reactions you may have when your pet dies and some strategies to help you get through these painful emotions:

Intense sadness. You feel devastated and broken-hearted. You might cry a lot. You say, "My buddy should be here. I just can't accept that he is gone." Time will help you heal. Allow yourself to feel the feelings, but if that becomes too painful, take a break and distract yourself by doing something altogether different.

Guilt. Guilty feelings keep us from having to accept the reality of the loss. We think, "If only..." This is a normal feeling, but we need to remember the good life we gave to our furry friends and that we did the best we could.

Anger. This emotion can be directed at ourselves or maybe at a vet. We might feel resentment toward our other pets or people who do not seem to understand. Try to remember that anger comes from hurt; you are angry because you must face the painful fact that your beloved companion is no longer with you. When you remind yourself that lashing out or blaming others, or even yourself, will not bring your friend back, your anger will start to dissipate. To let go of the angry feelings and begin to find peace, focus on the feelings of love and acceptance shared in your special bond or reminisce about an especially joyful time together.

Anxiety. You may wonder, "Can I get through this?" The answer is "yes." Give yourself some time and space. Be gentle with yourself. Take it a day at a time. Give yourself what you need: comfort food, naps, quiet time, a day off, time with friends. Talk with people who understand. Talking about your feelings with others who have gone through the same loss can help. There are people who understand! Let others know you are going through a difficult time. Consider joining a support group or calling a pet loss hotline. There are many books, articles, poems, and Internet resources, such as chat rooms and pet loss websites, that can help you cope with your loss.

Waves of grief. Don't be surprised if just when you thought you were feeling better, you feel yourself crash again. This is normal. With pet loss grief, these ups and downs are more common than moving through predictable stages. Allow yourself to go through the grief in your own way and at your own pace. You won't forget your pet, but there will come a time where you will be able to remember your loved one with more smiles and joy rather than tears and sadness.

Other healing strategies

When you're ready, consider how you would like to honor the memory of your beloved companion. A few days or even a few weeks after the loss, I like to write a poem and put it with a picture of my pet. I then share my poetic expression with others who knew my furry friend. You might want to make a scrapbook or tell or write stories. A candlelight ceremony in memory of your pet might help you to accept the loss. Some people remember their pet with a special stone in a garden, a plaque, a brick in an animal sanctuary, or a donation in their loved one's name.

If you have other pets, spend extra time with them. If you do not have other pets, and you are not ready to get another pet, play with somebody else's pet. Consider volunteering at a shelter or fostering a pet. Don't do anything until you feel ready. You need to decide when it is right to open

your heart to another loving animal companion. If you are not ready for the real thing, a stuffed animal may offer some comfort.

Remember that our pets thrive on bringing us joy and happiness. They do not want us to stay sad; it is their desire that we go on and be happy and love again. I believe one of the best tributes we can give to our pets who have passed away is to adopt and love another one, but only when we are ready.

We owe it to our furry friends to carry on the legacy of love, and not just shut down and protect ourselves. Keep yourself open to caring about animals — whether they are your own, or in your foster care, the pets of others, animals you do not even know, or a homeless pet in a shelter. Keep the special connection between human and animal companions going, and keep promoting its value to others. We need to carry on our pets' mission of love.

Finally, remember that you are blessed. After all, you were privileged to be the person who shared that special animal's life. You developed a unique bond that changed who you are for the better, and that can never be taken away. Your furry friend's spirit will live in your heart forever.

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“Look at his gums.” He gently...

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