

# Helping Your Family Cope When a Pet Dies

*by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.*

A pet is often a member of the family. In fact, surveys show some interesting facts about pet owners: 84% consider their animals family members; 99% talk to their pets and 54% celebrate their pet's birthday.

The term "man's best friend" brings to mind the unconditional love, constant companionship and acceptance we feel for our pets. And why not? Your pet can take you for a walk, listen when you need someone to talk to or even guard your house. A pet can also lower your blood pressure, change your heart rate or alleviate feelings of chronic loneliness.

With your capacity to love your pet comes the necessity to grieve when that "best friend" dies. The death of a pet is, without a doubt, a traumatic experience. This article is intended to help you and your family acknowledge the need to grieve at this time and to do so in a healthy way.

## **A Pet's Death is Significant**

No, it's not "just a dog" or "just a cat." The animal is a family member. With the death of that pet, the family experiences a significant loss. A difficult problem, however, is that society often denies you the need to grieve for your pet. You may even be chastised for openly and honestly expressing your feelings. As a result, your grief may be hidden, buried or ignored. Although denied understanding and support, your family needs to grieve the death of your pet. Grieving means to express your feelings, no matter how painful, outside of yourselves.

## **Clichés Don't Help You Heal**

Your family will probably be greeted with many clichés when your pet dies. Clichés are trite comments intended to diminish the loss by providing simple solutions to difficult realities. Comments like, "It was just a dog," or "You can always get another one," or "Be glad you don't have to take care of him anymore" are not constructive. Instead they hurt and make your family's journey through grief more difficult.

## **Memories are the Best Legacies**

Memories are one of the best legacies after the death of a pet. Talk about and embrace these memories. Your pet entertained, comforted, frustrated but always loved you. Remember those times. If your memories bring laughter, smile. If they bring sadness, cry. Remember, though, memories made in love can never be taken away.

## **Your Emotions Will Vary**

When your pet dies, you will probably experience a variety of emotions: confusion, disorganization, sadness, explosive emotions or guilt. Don't repress these feelings and ignore anyone who tells you that you should. Don't over-analyze your response. Just allow your feelings to find expression. As strange as some of these feelings may seem, they are normal and healthy.

Each family member probably had a unique relationship with the pet. Allow for different emotional responses within the family, and be careful to respect each person's need to grieve in his or her own way.

## **Should You Choose Euthanasia?**

When you love your pet, no question is more difficult than whether or not to euthanize. Yet this difficult choice is often the right one, particularly if your pet is in agonizing pain or the quality of life has deteriorated. Sometimes the cost of the treatment for a particular disease has also become prohibitive.

Talk to your veterinarian about euthanasia. Fortunately, humane procedures can end needless suffering for both you and your pet. The intravenous drug used for euthanasia does not cause pain. After visiting with your vet, make your decision based on your own good judgment. If you have always treated your pet with gentleness and love, you will probably make a wise choice based upon the reality of the situation. Some owners want to be present when their pets are euthanized. Some do not. Whichever choice you make, you may still want to spend some special time saying "goodbye" to your pet.

## **Rituals Can be Helpful**

Allowing and encouraging your family to have a funeral for the pet that has died can be helpful. It provides a time to acknowledge the loss, share memories of the pet and create a focus for the family to openly express emotions. While some friends or even family members may think having a funeral for your pet is foolish, don't let them take this special time away. Design a ritual that best meets your needs as you gather to pay tribute to a pet who was and always will be loved.

## **Children Need to be Involved**

The death of a pet is often the first opportunity parents have to help children during times of grief. Unfortunately, parents often don't want to talk about the death assuming that by doing so the children will be spared some of the pain and sadness.

Children, however, are entitled to grieve for their pets. Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve. And many children love their pets with all their hearts. As an adult, if you are open, honest and loving, experiencing the death of a pet can be a chance for children to learn about both the joy- and the pain- that comes from caring deeply for pets or for people.

You may not experience the same depth of loss as your children when a family pet dies. You must still respect their grief and allow them to express it without feeling abandoned. Your response during this time can make the difference whether children's first exposure to death will be a positive or a negative part of their personal growth and development.

### **Older Adults have Special Needs**

For older adults, the relationship with a pet is often the most meaningful relationship they have in their lives. The death of the pet can have a significant impact, particularly if the older adult is isolated from human contact. Under these circumstances, the pet becomes a "very best friend."

When the pet dies, the experience may trigger old griefs from losses encountered throughout life. It is imperative that family and friends are sensitive to the older adult's needs during this time. Respond with warmth and understanding and let them "teach you" about the special relationship with their beloved pet.

### **Premature Replacement Can Cause Problems**

The temptation after the death of a pet may be to run out and get another one right away. In fact, you are often encouraged to do so by family and friends. Although it may sound like a good idea, you should be careful about premature replacement. You need time to grieve and to heal when your pet dies. A new pet demands your energy and attention which at some point you may be ready and willing to give. Right now, however, you should first attend to your grief.

Be especially careful about premature replacement of pets with children. It sends a message to a child that says when something is lost all that you have to do is buy another one. In reality, that is often not the case. It also devalues the significance of the pet that just died. While there is no specific timetable for when to get a new pet, when in doubt-wait. Allow for additional healing to occur. When the family is ready for a new pet, involve the children in the discussion and selection so they can feel a part of the decision.

### **Some Closing Thoughts About the Death of a Pet**

Hopefully, this brochure has helped you understand why your family grieves so deeply when a beloved pet dies. Pets don't criticize or judge you. They just love and accept you unconditionally. When a pet dies, you and your family must accept the need to grieve. Even though others around you may attempt to minimize your grief, the hurt must be embraced to be lessened. Be patient and tolerant as you slowly move toward healing.

### **About the Author**

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and practicing grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and

presents dozens of grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his books are *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* and *The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens*. For more information, write or call The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit their website, [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).

### **Related Resources**

- [Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas](#) (book)

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