

Coping with Losing a Pet

Grieving the Loss of a Dog, Cat, or Other Beloved Pet



Most of us share an intense love and bond with our animal companions, so it's natural to feel devastated by feelings of grief and sadness when a cherished pet dies. The pain of loss can often feel overwhelming and trigger all sorts of painful and difficult emotions. While some people may not understand the depth of feeling you had for your pet, you should never feel guilty or ashamed about grieving for an animal friend. Instead, use these healthy ways to cope with your loss, comfort yourself and others, and begin the process of moving on.

Why does losing a pet hurt so much?

For many of us, a pet is not “just a dog” or “just a cat,” but rather a beloved member of our family, bringing companionship, fun, and joy to our lives. A pet can add structure to your day, keep you active and social, help you to overcome setbacks and challenges in life, and even provide a sense of meaning or purpose. So, when a beloved pet dies, it's normal to feel a painful sense of grief and loss.

While we all respond to loss differently, the level of grief you experience will often depend on factors such as your age and personality, the age of your pet, and the circumstances of their death. Generally, the more significant your pet was to you, the more intense the emotional pain you'll feel. The role the animal played in your life can also have an impact. For example, if your pet was a working dog, service animal, or therapy animal, then you'll not only be grieving the loss of a companion but also the loss of a coworker, the loss of your independence, or the loss of emotional support. If you lived alone and the pet was

your only companion, coming to terms with their loss can be even harder. And if you were unable to afford expensive veterinary treatment to prolong your pet's life, you may even feel a profound sense of guilt.

Whatever the circumstances of your loss, remember that grief is personal to you, so you shouldn't be ashamed about how you feel, or believe that it's somehow not appropriate to grieve for an animal friend. While experiencing loss is an inevitable part of owning a pet, there are healthy ways to cope with the pain, come to terms with your grief, and when the time is right, perhaps even open your heart to another animal companion.

The grieving process after losing a pet

Grieving is a highly individual experience. Some people find grief following the loss of a pet comes in stages, where they experience different feelings such as denial, anger, guilt, depression, and eventually acceptance and resolution. Others find that their grief is more cyclical, coming in waves, or a series of highs and lows. The lows are likely to be deeper and longer at the beginning and then gradually become shorter and less intense as time goes by. Still, even years after a loss, a sight, a sound, or a special anniversary can spark memories that trigger a strong sense of grief.

The grieving process happens only gradually. It can't be forced or hurried—and there is no “normal” timetable for grieving. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years. Whatever your grief experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.

Feeling sad, shocked, or lonely is a normal reaction to the loss of a beloved pet. Exhibiting these feelings doesn't mean you are weak or your feelings are somehow misplaced. It just means that you're mourning the loss of an animal you loved, so you shouldn't feel ashamed.

Trying to ignore your pain or keep it from surfacing will only make it worse in the long run. For real healing, it is necessary to face your grief and actively deal with it. By expressing your grief, you'll likely need less time to heal than if you withhold or “bottle up” your feelings. Write about your feelings and talk about them with others who are sympathetic to your loss.

Coping with the grief of pet loss

Sorrow and grief are normal and natural responses to death. Like grief for our friends and loved ones, grief for our animal companions can only be dealt with over time, but there are healthy ways to cope with the pain. Here are some suggestions:

Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either. Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.

Reach out to others who have lost pets. Check out online message boards, pet loss hotlines, and pet loss support groups—see the Resources section below for details. If your own friends and family members are not sympathetic about pet loss, find someone who is. Often, another person who has also experienced the loss of a beloved pet may better understand what you're going through.

Seek professional help if you need it. If your grief is persistent and interferes with your ability to function, your doctor or a mental health professional can evaluate you for [depression](/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm) (/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm).

Rituals can help healing. A funeral can help you and your family members openly express your feelings. Ignore people who think it's inappropriate to hold a funeral for a pet, and do what feels right for you.

Create a legacy. Preparing a memorial, planting a tree in memory of your pet, compiling a photo album or scrapbook, or otherwise sharing the memories you enjoyed with your pet, can create a legacy to celebrate the life of your animal companion. Remembering the fun and love you shared with your pet can help you to eventually move on.

Look after yourself. The stress of losing a pet can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time. Eat a healthy diet, get plenty of sleep, and exercise regularly to release endorphins and help boost your mood.

If you have other pets, try to maintain your normal routine. Surviving pets can also experience loss when a pet dies, or they may become distressed by your sorrow. Maintaining their daily routines, or even increasing exercise and play times, will not only benefit the surviving pets but can also help to elevate your outlook too.

[Dealing with the loss of a pet when others devalue your loss](#)

One aspect that can make grieving for the loss of a pet so difficult is that pet loss is not appreciated by everyone. Some friends and family may say, "What's the big deal? It's just a pet!" Some people assume that pet loss shouldn't hurt as much as human

loss, or that it is somehow inappropriate to grieve for an animal. They may not understand because they don't have a pet of their own, or because they are unable to appreciate the companionship and love that a pet can provide.

- Don't argue with others about whether your grief is appropriate or not.
- Accept the fact that the best support for your grief may come from outside your usual circle of friends and family members.
- Seek out others who have lost pets; those who can appreciate the magnitude of your loss, and may be able to suggest ways of getting through the grieving process.

Tips for seniors grieving the death of a pet

As we age, we experience an increasing number of major life changes, including the loss of beloved friends, family members, and pets. The death of a pet can hit retired seniors even harder than younger adults who may be able to draw on the comfort of a close family, or distract themselves with the routine of work. If you're an older adult living alone, your pet was probably your sole companion, and taking care of the animal provided you with a sense of purpose and self-worth.

Try to find new meaning and joy in life. Caring for a pet previously occupied your time and boosted your morale and optimism. Try to fill that time by volunteering, picking up a long-neglected hobby, taking a class, helping friends or homeless shelters care for their pets, or even by getting another pet when the time feels right.

Stay connected with friends. Pets, dogs especially, can help seniors meet new people or regularly connect with friends and neighbors while out on a walk or in the dog park. Having lost your pet, it's important that you don't now spend day after day alone. Try to spend time with at least one person every day. Regular face-to-face contact can help you ward off depression and stay positive. Call up an old friend or neighbor for a lunch date or join a club.

Boost your vitality with exercise. Pets help many [older adults stay active and playful](/articles/healthy-living/exercise-and-fitness-as-you-age.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/exercise-and-fitness-as-you-age.htm), which can boost your immune system and increase your energy. It's important to keep up your activity levels after the loss of your pet. Check with your doctor before starting an exercise program and then find an activity that you enjoy. Exercising in a group—by playing a sport such as tennis or golf, or taking an exercise or swimming class—can also help you connect with others.

Helping children grieve the loss of a pet

The loss of a pet may be your child's first experience of death—and your first opportunity to teach them about coping with the grief and pain that inevitably accompanies the joy of loving another living creature. Losing a pet can be a traumatic experience for any child. Many kids love their pets very deeply and some may not even remember a time in their life when the pet wasn't around. A child may feel angry and blame themselves—or you—for the pet's death. A child may feel scared that other people or animals they love may also leave them. How you handle the grieving process can determine whether the experience has a positive or negative effect on your child's personal development.

Some parents feel they should try to shield their children from the sadness of losing a pet by either not talking about the pet's death, or by not being honest about what's happened. Pretending the animal ran away, or “went to sleep,” for example, can leave a child feeling even more confused, frightened, and betrayed when they finally learn the truth. It's far better to be honest with children and allow them the opportunity to grieve in their own way.

Tips for a helping a child cope with the loss of a pet

Let your child see you express your own grief at the loss of the pet. If you don't experience the same sense of loss as your child, respect their grief and let them express their feelings openly, without making them feel ashamed or guilty. Children should feel proud that they have so much compassion and care deeply about their animal companions.

Reassure your child that they weren't responsible for the pet's death. The death of a pet can raise a lot of questions and fears in a child. You may need to reassure your child that you, their parents, are not also likely to die. It's important to talk about all their feelings and concerns.

Involve your child in the dying process. If you've chosen euthanasia for your pet, be honest with your child. Explain why the choice is necessary and give the child chance to spend some special time with the pet and say goodbye in their own way.

If possible, give the child an opportunity to create a memento of the pet. This could be a special photograph, or a plaster cast of the animal's paw print, for example.

Allow the child to be involved in any memorial service, if they desire. Holding a funeral or creating a memorial for the pet can help your child express their feelings openly and help process the loss.

Do not rush out to get the child a “replacement pet” before they have had chance to grieve the loss they feel. Your child may feel disloyal, or you could send the message that the grief and sadness felt when something dies can simply be overcome by buying a replacement.

Making the decision to put a pet to sleep

Deciding to put your animal companion to sleep is one of the most difficult decisions you will ever have to make for your pet. As a loving pet owner, though, the time may come when you need to help your pet make the transition from life to death, with the help of your veterinarian, in as painless and peaceful a way as possible.

Knowing when it's time to put a pet to sleep

Euthanasia for a beloved pet is highly personal decision and usually comes after a diagnosis of a terminal illness and with the knowledge that the animal is suffering badly. Your choices for your pet should be informed by the care and love you feel for the animal. Important things to consider include:

Activity level. Does your pet still enjoy previously loved activities or is he/she able to be active at all?

Response to care and affection. Does your pet still interact and respond to love and care in the usual ways?

Amount of pain and suffering. Is your pet experiencing pain and suffering which outweigh any pleasure and enjoyment in life?

Terminal illness or critical injury. Have illness or injury prohibited your pet from enjoying life? Is your pet facing certain death from the injury or illness?

Your family's feelings. Is your family unanimous in the decision? If not, and you still feel it is the best thing for your pet, can you live with the decision that you have to make?

If you do decide that ending the suffering is in your pet's best interest, take your time to create a process that is as peaceful as possible for you, your pet, and your family. You may want to have a last day at home with the pet in order to say goodbye, or to visit the pet at the animal hospital. You can also choose to be present during your pet's euthanasia, or to say goodbye beforehand and remain in the veterinary waiting room or at home. This is an individual decision for each member of the family.

What to expect when putting your pet to sleep

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, euthanasia for a pet is most often achieved by injection of a death-inducing drug. The veterinarian may administer a tranquilizer first to relax your pet. Following the injection of the euthanasia drug, your pet will immediately become unconscious. Death is quick and painless. Your pet may move its legs or breathe deeply several times after the drug is given, but these are reflexes and don't mean that your pet is in pain or is suffering.

How to explain pet euthanasia to a child

Be honest. Start by explaining that your pet is ill, suffering badly, and that you have the ability to end that suffering in a very humane and gentle way. The injection is a very peaceful and painless process for your pet. Sometimes, when you really love a pet, you have to make these kinds of difficult decisions to spare the animal from more pain and suffering.

- Children tend to feed off of how their parents react. If you're hysterical or feel it's the wrong decision, your child will likely react in a similar way. If you're sad, and deal with that sadness in a healthy way, your child will follow your example.
- As long as you're putting your beloved pet to sleep for the right reasons, tell your children that it is OK to feel sad, but there's no need to feel guilty. You should feel sad, and your children can feel the sadness, but don't mix guilt in with the sadness. One emotion is healthy, the other terribly burdensome.

Getting another dog or cat after pet loss

There are many wonderful reasons to once again [share your life with a companion animal \(/articles/mental-health/mood-boosting-power-of-dogs.htm\)](#), but the decision of when to do so is a very personal one. It may be tempting to rush out and fill the void left by your pet's death by immediately getting another pet. In most cases, it's best to mourn the old pet first, and wait until you're emotionally ready to open your heart and your home to a new animal. You may want to start by volunteering at a shelter or rescue group. Spending time caring for pets in need is not only great for the animals, but can help you decide if you're ready to own a new pet.

Some retired seniors living alone may find it hardest to adjust to life without a pet. If taking care of an animal provided you with a sense of purpose and self-worth as well as companionship, you may want to consider getting another pet at an earlier stage. Of

course, seniors also need to consider their own health and life expectancy when deciding on a new pet. Again, volunteering to help pets in need can be a good way to decide if you're ready to become a pet owner again.

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