

SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING

Many of the suggestions below can be applied to children to the extent that their age and development allows.

1. First, find out what makes you feel better and do it.

If it makes you feel better to walk along the routes you took your dog every day — then do it. If leaving your cat's toys out helps you — then do it. Don't give in to pressure for others to "get over it" or "move on." Take the time to do the things you need to do. As long as you aren't hurting anyone else, what does it matter if you do these things?

2. Take care of yourself. It may be difficult at first, but try to get enough sleep, eat well and exercise as you normally would.

Socialize when you feel ready. Grief often manifests as illness. Illness will only make matters worse, so maintaining your health is an important step to take to address your grief.

3. Seek out people who understand and support how you feel.

Being around people who minimize your feelings is just going to make you feel worse. Many people may never understand how you are feeling about the loss of your pet, even if you try to help them understand. If there is no one close to you, there may be community groups or websites and chat rooms on the internet where people experiencing the same feelings congregate.

Death is the end of a life but not the end of a relationship.

People don't "get over" a loss, they integrate it. We accept the reality of a loss — the absence of a pet and eventually we are prepared to invest in loving again.

4. Don't give in to the timetables of others.

If it takes you longer than they expect to feel better — they will have to deal with that. You may wish to make it clear that you do not want anyone to show up with a new puppy or cat that looks "just like yours." This decision needs to rest with you and you should consider it carefully. Many people find that a new pet too soon can be more rather than less painful.

5. Observe ritual.

Rituals such as funerals and memorials are basic ways that humans cope with grief. There are few formal rituals for the loss of a pet in our culture, so you may have to create your own. Something as simple as having a picture framed or visiting your pet's favourite outdoor spots may suffice. Consider planting a tree or creating a scrapbook. If others don't want to participate, then do it yourself. Some people have found that putting their feelings into action helps them in their grief. Writing in support of animal cruelty legislation or helping out animals in need in honour of your pet can be a comfort.

GRIEVING THE LOSS OF A PET



DEALING WITH LOSS

You have lost something dear to you, and you are feeling pain. What you are likely feeling is grief. Grief is the normal reaction to a significant loss or losses.

Grief does not only occur with an animal's death — if you have had to give your pet up, for whatever reason, you may also experience grief.

STAGES OF GRIEF

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described stages of grief: shock; denial; depression; anger; bargaining and acceptance. In reality, grief can take many forms. It is very individual — no two people experience it in the same way. It certainly does not follow an orderly path; experiences may occur in any order — some not at all. It is important to recognize that these stages are all normal. Problems occur when we are not permitted to experience them as we need to.

Though you will never forget your friend, the pain will become less acute over time.

WHY DON'T PEOPLE UNDERSTAND HOW I FEEL?

The loss of a pet may be in some ways more difficult to face than a human loss because those around you may not be able to understand the pain you feel. They may believe that you have “just” lost a dog, cat or rabbit, minimizing your feelings. A companion animal is loved and usually considered a part of the family. Your pain is every bit as real as that felt by someone who has lost a friend or family member.

HOW GRIEF MAKES YOU FEEL

You may experience grief more acutely if you have had to make a painful decision about euthanasia or if your pet's death was unexpected or violent. Your grief may be linked to feelings of guilt if you feel that you could have avoided your pet's death.

Grief can manifest itself physically — you may experience shortness of breath, irritability, fatigue, stomach problems or a host of other symptoms. These are generally normal, but if they persist, you should consult a physician to ensure that there is no other underlying problem.

Grief often results in behavioural changes.

You may feel restless, absentminded, or have difficulty concentrating. This is normal. You may become preoccupied by thoughts of your pet, dream or even hallucinate. These too are common grief responses.



GRIEF AND YOUR FAMILY

Your companion animal was an important part of your family — a focus for family discussions or concern. When that is gone, your family needs to redirect itself to new goals, which may, eventually, include welcoming a new pet into your home. Until then, respect how each family member feels and allow one another to grieve for your lost pet in your own way.

Women and men usually experience grief differently. Women often manifest grief more outwardly, while men tend to be silent. Remember that just because those around you don't look like they are grieving does not mean that they are not. Grief can be hard on a relationship. Try to support one another in the way that the other wants.

Children have their own way of grieving. Loss of a pet may be a child's first experience with death. Young children may not grieve, as grieving in children is often delayed. Older children may act out their grief through difficult behaviour. They may blame themselves, the veterinarian or even you for the loss they feel. They may be frightened that others they love may be taken away. Be honest with your child: trying to protect him by saying that his pet has gone away will likely cause the child to expect the pet's return and to feel betrayed once he knows the truth.

Don't forget about other companion animals in your family — they may be profoundly affected by the loss of an animal they have known for years. Remaining pets may act despondant or nervous, may spend time searching for the lost pet or might even ignore you or act as though they don't like you anymore. They may even act hostile or aggressive for a time — all are normal symptoms of grieving. Try to keep your other pets to their regular routine. Provide them with comfort and attention, but also respect their space if they seem to want to be left alone. If your pets become ill or refuse to eat, consult your veterinarian.

Programs and services provided by the Ottawa Humane Society are made possible thanks to your financial support.

Please support the animals in our community.



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