

Helping a Child Cope -- the Death of a Pet

For children, the death of a pet
is an opportunity to learn
how to cope successfully
with grief.

If the death is handled well,
it can give a point of reference
for the child when faced
with grief later in life.



WinterSpring

We're not afraid to be with loss.

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A United Way Agency

PET BEREAVEMENT

The death of a beloved pet is commonly the first loss we experience in life. Although we know it is inevitable many of us are unprepared for the loss, and don't know how to help others, or ourselves when a pet loss occurs. Friends and relatives may offer support and understanding much more freely when a loved one dies, and may fail to recognize the importance of bereavement over a non-human companion. This can make the death of a pet the hardest loss some will ever face.

In insensitive remarks often heard when a death occurs:

It's just a dog (cat, bird, etc.)
No sense dwelling on the past.
Support groups are for weaklings.
He had a good life
You still have other pets
God needs her more than you
You can get another pet

Don't cry
You must be strong
Be glad he's out of pain
Think of the good times
Count your blessings
Others have it worse
Try to stay busy

These responses suggest to us that we should not feel badly about our losses. They encourage us to avoid our feelings and put pressure on us to get over the loss as soon as possible. While well meaning, these comments minimize the griever's pain and don't acknowledge the loss. They also suggest we have no right to be upset or distressed, and that grieving is wrong.

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is one of the most normal and natural emotions that we can feel: yet it is one of the most misunderstood. People may feel ashamed of their bereft state, as if it is something to be embarrassed about. Yet grief is a very healthy psychological response that requires expression and acknowledgement. Our society may reward the stoic, strong avoidance technique. However, attempts to suppress feelings of grief can actually prolong the healing process. With expression and acceptance, we can move through the process of grief, and know that it is a necessary and unavoidable part of life. Grieving takes time. It is a process, not an event. There is no specific time frame for this process. In fact, grief may last for weeks, months, or even years. Healthy grief, however, gradually lessens in intensity over time.

Many do not understand the overwhelming feelings of grief prompted by the illness or death of a companion animal. During the grieving process, it's common to experience sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, helplessness, shock, or depression. Physical sensations may include crying, hollowness in the stomach, sighing, tightness in the chest and throat, weak muscles, a dry mouth, appetite and sleep disturbances, and fatigue.

After the loss of an animal, preoccupation with memories may occur. A person may imagine the pet is still alive. All of these are common, healthy reactions to the normal grief process. Remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Expecting grief to disappear on a certain time schedule is unrealistic, and only creates more stress for the bereaved.



Helping a Child Cope with the Death of a Pet

1. Set time aside to talk to your child. Explain without much detail and in a simple manner what has occurred. Encourage questions.
2. When answering questions, it's okay to say, "I don't know, but let's try to find out." Call us at WinterSpring for suggestions.
3. Use the correct language. Say, "dead" not "sleeping," "gone to Heaven," "went to God," or other confusing messages.
4. Keep in mind that grieving is a natural process, and that with your support, your child has the natural ability to cope.
5. Be aware that children are more likely than adults to move rapidly between expressions of grief, happiness, and play.
6. Know that a child's choice not to talk about grief feelings does not indicate the lack of grief. Children often express feelings non-verbally, or may withdraw into silence about grief in a desire to "protect" parents.
7. Ask the child about his feelings. Listen. Don't judge. Talk about each of them –sad, angry, guilty, scared, etc.
8. Explain your feelings too, especially when you're crying. Give yourself permission to cry. It's appropriate behavior to model for our children and encourages them not to be ashamed.
9. Use the pet's name. Don't be afraid to "go there."
10. Read a book together. Many wonderful books on grief are available for different age levels. Take time to discuss the book and how it pertains to your loss. Comfort your child with loving, touching support.
11. Allow your child to memorialize the pet her own way with art writing, or a ceremony. Let her chose what will comfort her.
12. Talk about memories, both and the bad.
13. Watch out for bad dreams. Are they occurring often? Talk about dreams and listen to your child recount them.
14. Watch for behavioral changes at home and at school. Signals that your child needs outside help may include prolonged withdrawal, angry acting-out, or a mention of suicide. Talk to your child, and consider a support group or counseling if you feel it is warranted.



Basic Truths about Grief

1. Grieving is normal, acceptable and healthy.
2. Grieving is highly individualized.
3. Grieving is painful in proportion to the significance of the person/thing lost.
4. Grieving is painful in proportion to the number of losses having occurred.
5. Grieving has no time limit; it takes longer than is usually recognized.
6. Grieving expresses itself in a host of physical, emotional and psychological ways.
7. Dreams about, looking for, or thinking you see the person you lost are all quite normal.
8. Feeling guilty is normal.
9. Children and pets grieve too.
10. The pain will ease.
11. Grief provides an opportunity for growth.
12. Grief feels lonely and isolated but begins to heal in company.
13. Grievers need to take responsibility for finding a support system.



WHAT CHILDREN THINK ABOUT DEATH

Our knowledge of what is going on in the mind of a child will give us an idea of how to communicate with him. At what level of development is the child? What will the child understand, what will confuse him, and what will satisfy his questions? It's up to us to be cognizant of this so we can present the message in a way that our children can understand. One thing children don't need is to be loaded down with explicit details about the death. Simple explanations are best. Assessing the situation, judging age and maturity will help you know what is appropriate. Please consult the chart enclosed in this packet for guidelines on child development at various ages.

How we deliver the message makes a difference too, especially to the child who has lost a loved one. During a time of crisis, children need to rely on adults who feel confident and in charge of the aftermath. They need to rely on us for information and the support they need.

The Importance of Communication

If the death is handled well, it can give a point of reference for the child when faced with other losses, which will inevitably come at some point in life. If the child is told the simple truth, and is given the opportunity to remember the person through a memorial, by writing poems or stories, art projects, or by participating in simple discussions about feelings and memories, the child will have a starting point for future encounters with death.

Children are very literal thinkers. In addition, their thinking is very much influenced by their surroundings—colored by what is seen and heard. Consider what the average youngster sees on TV. Why do we try to shield them from death and avoid talking with them about death? For fear we will upset them? Children have many visions of death from cartoons, movies, and the news. It is up to us to straighten out the myths and the magic of Hollywood from the truth. This is especially true for kids under six, so they don't expect their loved one to pop up like Wile E. Coyote, after being killed, ready for another go at the Roadrunner.

"Whispers are terrible to a child," says child psychiatrist Hal Fishkin, who works with bereaved children in New York City. "Whispers, secrets, fairy tales...It's really condescending, patronizing to assume children can't deal with the traumas we can. Having experienced some major losses without data in my own life, I can tell you it's a rather mind-maiming experience. It makes you come up with conclusions in your own little head that are not consonant with reality. Something terrible has happened and it's all your fault. The fantasy is always worse than the reality."

Correcting Misconceptions About Death

One way to find out just what your youngster is thinking is by listening to her explanations to another child. "Grandma's walking the earth," one seven-year-old explained. She seemed upset that a ghost may be dropping by. Scary television shows, coupled with the news of Grandma in the spirit world, combined to give this child a scary point of reference.

Once we know what the child believes, we can then explain the hazy points. Active listening will often reward us with clues such as these so that we can ease the child's troubled mind and re-direct thoughts.



Talk like a child when explaining. Stoop down, put him on your lap, look into his eyes, and talk to him in his language. Listen as you would to a good friend going through a crisis, looking beyond words. Listen with your heart. Find out what he knows and what he's experienced.

Remember that each child is an individual. Most of them do think about death and are concerned about it. Studies show that children wrestle with their fears about it without telling their parents, burying their thoughts and feelings just as adults do. Don't assume because your child isn't talking about it, that he isn't thinking about it. After experiencing a death, he may be fearful to be left at home when the parent is out for the evening. Will mom or dad disappear from his life like the family dog did?

Children can misunderstand what is being said. Often, a child makes up the part of the message that's missing. The reasoning gets twisted. Watch for opportunities to set the record straight for your child—by listening and responding honestly to the fears.

TWO TO SIX YEARS OLD

For the young child, the world is a magical place, centered on the family, his world. Concepts of time and death are not fully developed in his mind—he simply can't grasp them. What is understood are the day-to-day things in life, and the feelings of security of his family around him.

This child will draw on what is known. He imitates adults, wears their shoes and holds their keys, all while trying to see how a grown-up feels. Young children are sensitive to our attitudes. He can pick up on feelings and act just like us. If we are open, honest, warm and loving, he will get the message that's the way to be.

Children in this age group do not generally think that death is final; death is reversible in their minds. A youngster has yet to recognize that she is a separate person from her parents, that without them she can still exist. Older children can grasp this, but a youngster can't. It's partly because of the magical world she creates that she gets the courage to deal with the problems of life. In her imagination, the child fashions a set of powers that counter the disquieting facts seen all around.

That's why it is so important to not allow a child's thinking to distort an incident out of proportion. When we say Grandma just went to sleep and died, the child may wonder if she will meet the same awful fate, and she may balk at bedtime. For parents to help their children, they must be aware that things like this may be going on in their child's head. The experience of death is probably new and strange, and the feelings of confusion and guilt when experiencing death may be overwhelming.

Be prepared for your child to read emotions around him, respond to body language, overhear conversations, and question events either directly or indirectly. Control the message, avoiding the inevitable misinformation he is likely to formulate. Give him accurate information, geared for his age and maturity, in language he can understand. Keep it simple. Acknowledge feelings and let him know it's okay to be sad. Tell him all he is feeling is how a person is supposed to feel when a loved one dies. Use clear language, listen for feedback, and respond sensitively.

Check out the grief response sheet included in this packet for symptoms of distress that may go beyond normal grief. If needed, consult WinterSpring for help or referrals.



Age	Developmental Stage/Task	Concept of death	Grief response	Signs of distress	Possible interventions
2-4	Egocentric. Believe world centers around them. Narcissistic. No cognitive understanding. Pre-conceptual; unable to grasp concepts.	Seen as abandonment. Seen as reversible, not permanent. Common statements: "Did you know my daddy died? When will he be home?"	Intensive response but brief. Very present oriented. Most aware of altered patterns of care. Repeated questions.	Regression: changes in eating and sleeping patterns, bedwetting, general irritability and confusion.	Short and honest interactions, frequent repetition, comforting, reassurance, nurturing. Consistent routine.
4-7	Gaining sense of autonomy. Exploring world outside of self. Gaining language. Fantasy thinking and wishing. Initiative phase seeing self as initiator. Concerns of guilt.	Death still seen as reversible. Great personification of death. Feeling of responsibility because of wishes and thoughts. Common statements: "It's my fault. I was mad at her and wished she'd die."	Verbalization. Great concern with process. How? Why? Repetitive questioning. May act as though has happened. General distress and confusion.	Regression: nightmares, sleeping and eating disturbances. Violent play. Attempts to take on role of person who died.	Symbolic play using drawings and stories. Allow and encourage expression of energy and feelings through physical outlets. Talk about it.
7-11	Concrete thinking. Self-confidence develops. Beginning of socialization. Development of cognitive agility. Beginning of logical thinking.	Death as punishment. Fear of bodily harm and mutilation. This is a difficult transition period, still wanting to see death as reversible but beginning to see it as final.	Specific questioning. Desire for complete detail. Concerned with how others are responding. What is the right way? How should they be responding? Starting to have ability to mourn and understand mourning.	Regression: problems in school, withdrawal from friends. Acting out. Sleeping and eating disturbances. Overwhelming concern with body. Suicidal thoughts (desire to join one who died). Role confusion.	Answer questions. Encourage expression of range of feelings. Encourage and allow control. Be available but allow alone time. Symbolic play. Allow for physical outlets. TALK ABOUT IT!
11-18	Formal operational problem solving. Abstract thinking. Integration of one's own personality	"ADULT" approach. Ability to abstract. Beginning to truly conceptualize death. Work at making sense of teachings.	Depression. Denial. Repression. More often willing to talk to people outside the family. Traditional mourning.	Depression. Anger. Anger towards parents. Non-compliance. Rejection of former teaching. Role confusing acting out.	Encourage verbalization. Do not take control. Encourage self-motivation. Listen. Be available. Do not attempt to take grief away.

PUTTING YOUR PET TO REST

Even when a pet's death is expected, People may avoid dealing with the inevitable decision on what arrangements should be made. Hasty decisions made at the last minute often leave us without the benefit of choosing a method that leaves us without regrets.

Children especially benefit from taking part in the decision process. Knowing that his beloved pet is comfortable in their special resting place is extremely important to him.

Keep in mind while deciding, what is best for you and your family.

Burial

If a suitable place is available, you may choose a burial on your own property, or the property of a compassionate friend. Your decision will need to take into account the availability of land, the local laws governing interment in undesignated areas, the accessibility of a pet cemetery and the expense of these different methods.

Many find it extremely satisfying to bury a pet in a familiar yard or field, wrapped in its blanket, accompanied by a favorite ball or plaything. Placing the pet under a flowering shrub or tree, where the dog used to lay, has special meaning.

After choosing a site, contact the city clerk or police to learn what is legal, and whether A permit is required. The grave should be a minimum of three feet deep. Consider whether the property will change hands, and whether the spot chosen will remain undisturbed.

Should you choose a pet cemetery, which may seem like a financial indulgence to some, know that these establishments have a wide range of costs and services. Check to see what is offered and what works for you. One of the most comforting aspects of choosing burial in a pet cemetery is that the owner can make periodic visits to the gravesite.

For those who cannot afford the cost of a private interment, some cemeteries or shelters will perform a communal burial. While the treatment is obviously not as personal, the arrangement satisfies many owners. Wherever you choose, remember the best place to bury a dog is in the heart of his master.

Cremation

An alternative to burial, cremation now accounts for nearly forty-five percent of pet disposals. It is quick, clean and generally less expensive than burial at a pet cemetery. Options exist for budgetary concerns, and whether you want to retain your pet's ashes. Most pet cemeteries have facilities for performing individual cremation, and will bury the ashes on the grounds or scatter them in special memorial gardens. Retaining the ashes is a good choice for pet lovers who move from place to place, as a small urn is easily transported. It is a source of satisfaction for many owners to be able to keep this memorial in their possession.

If costs are prohibitive for you, veterinarians and animal shelters may perform communal cremation. Keep in mind the loss of the pet's individual ashes will occur through this method.

While you may choose to have your veterinarian or animal shelter hold the pet's body in a vault until you feel ready to proceed, this long-drawn-out process presents a problem for many people. It does allow you to take the time to make the right decision for you.

Euthanasia

If you have children at home, be as honest as possible about what is happening, and allow them to express their feelings.

Use simple language geared toward their age and understanding.

Allow yourself to deal with the fact that you exercised your best judgment.

The decision to end an animal's life through euthanasia is probably the most difficult one we face as responsible pet owners.

And one our pet depends on us to make.

Feelings of guilt are often associated with euthanasia. There are many valid reasons for bringing about a pet's death. Most often pet owner's choices are influenced by a pet's prolonged suffering.

Remember to be good to yourself during this time and forgive yourself a painful and justified decision.

*In helpless tears we watched you
as you slowly slipped downhill
You had suffered long in silence
We couldn't make you stay*

*You faced your task with courage
your spirit did not bend
We couldn't let you suffer on
Until the very end*

*I saw you getting tired old friend
When a cure was not to be
However sad the thought was
I had to set you free*

*As you drifted off to sleep
So peaceful and free from pain
I could not wish you back again
to suffer that again*

*So goodbye old friend, my hero
My comfort to the end
I know you'll come to meet me
When I come around the bend*



Suggested Eulogies to be Read at Your Pet Memorial

Lonely House

*No more cat tracks on the floor
Muddy scratches on the door*

*Puff of hair upon the stair
Lacy fretwork on the chairs*

*Indentations on my bed
Markings where she laid her head*

*Smudges on the window pane
Showing where she watched in vain*

*Haunts where she is wont to lay
Remind us that she is away*

*My house is neater, that is true
But, oh, so still and empty, too*

Four Feet In Heaven

Your favorite chair is vacant now
No eager purrs to greet me
No softly padded paws to run
Ecstatically to meet me

No coaxing rubs, no plaintive cry
Will say it's time for feeding
I've put away your bowl

And all the things
You won't be needing
But I will miss you, little friend
For I could never measure
The happiness you brought to me
The comfort and the pleasure

And since God put you here to share
In earthly joy and sorrow
I'm sure there'll be a place for you
In Heaven's bright tomorrow.

Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog

Near this spot are deposited the remains of one who possessed Beauty without Vanity, Strength without Insolence, Courage without Ferocity, and all the Virtues of Man, without his Vices. This Praise, which would be unmeaning Flattery if inscribed over human ashes, is but a just tribute to the Memory of Boatswain, a dog.

Written by Lord Byron

And now we lay you down to sleep
You're finally at rest

Our love for you we'll always keep
You were the very best

You gave us joy for ___ years
A memory for each new day

Then came the day of all my fears
The day you passed away
A part of us you took with you
And I can't stand the pain

But when this life on earth is through
I know we'll meet again

