

Grief Support for Pet Owners

As pet owners, we must accept the reality that for every pet we love, we must ultimately face loss.

The death of a beloved pet often results in significant feelings of grief. However, there is no right way to grieve.

Pet owners may experience various emotions while grieving, including sadness, guilt, anger, denial, confusion, fear and even relief. All of these are considered “normal” reactions to loss.

Other symptoms of grief following the death of a pet may include:

* Crying
* Numbness
* Fatigue
* Depression
* Loneliness
* Irritability
* Anxiety
* Withdrawal
* Inability to concentrate
* Difficulty eating or sleeping
* Dreaming about the pet

**How can I help myself cope?**

While everyone copes with death differently, these suggestions may be helpful to you during the grieving process:

* Get out of the house. Go somewhere, even if it’s just for a little while.
* Exercise. This will help you feel better physically and emotionally.
* Eat well. Try not to eat too much or too little.
* If you cannot fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something else. Return to bed when you feel sleepy.
* Meditate or take a mindful walk.
* Break the routine that you had with your pet. For example, if you fed your pet or walked with them at a certain time every day, purposely choose a different activity for that time.
* Schedule time for your grief. Spend a certain amount of time each day focused on your loss. The time you spend on this could be five minutes or one hour. After the time is up, however, intentionally shift your thoughts and activities to something else (preferably something you enjoy).
* Talk to someone who understands your loss. This could be a friend, family member, veterinarian, counselor or support group.
* Talk or write about what you miss about your pet. For example, what has the experience of knowing this animal brought into your life? What have you learned from him/her?
* Accept your grief. Know that there is no easy way through grief — it will hurt.
* Recognize that this is a very vulnerable time for you. It is best to postpone major decisions, if possible, until your grief has subsided.
* For some, intense grief can also trigger substance abuse issues. Avoid self-medicating with drugs or alcohol.
* For the time being, put away remembrances of your pet that may upset you. Bring them out slowly as you start to feel better.
* Use your experience to help others cope with a similar situation.

**Dealing with guilt**

*“You can’t always control circumstances. But you can control your own thoughts.”*

*— Charles Popplestone*

Guilt is a powerful and common response to pet loss. In fact, it is often the biggest emotional hurdle owners encounter after a beloved pet dies.

Guilt is a reaction to the perception that we somehow failed our pet. Many owners who elect **euthanasia** experience some degree of guilt. While most owners say the ideal death for a pet would be for him/her to die peacefully and comfortably in their arms, we know this is very rare. Instead, we are faced with having to make difficult decisions on our pet’s behalf.

Often, the time prior to a pet’s death is very difficult and exhausting. Many owners feel relief when their pet is no longer suffering; however, they may also harbor unnecessary guilt about these feelings.

Knowing that small amounts of guilt can be a normal part of the grieving process can make these feelings easier to bear.

Remember the 90/10 rule: Ten percent of life is made up of what happens to you. Ninety percent of life is determined by how you react to what happens to you.

This means we have no control over 10 percent of what happens in our lives. For example, we cannot control a malignant tumor that will not respond to chemotherapy or a driver who seemingly comes out of nowhere and hits our pet. These are events we simply cannot influence.

The other 90 percent is different. While we may not be able to control the death of a pet, we can control our reaction to it. This does not mean that feelings of grief are not legitimate, normal or healthy. It simply means that we have the ability to change the way we think and control our reactions. Using this skill can help you through the grief process, especially when experiencing feelings of guilt.

**Memorializing your pet**

Throughout history, humans have commemorated the death of their pets. This is seen in the history of the ancient Egyptians and early Chinese emperors to the modern day existence of pet cemeteries and private crematoriums. For many, memorializing a pet is a critical part of grieving.

This can be done in many different ways:

* Hold a service for your pet. Invite anyone to attend who may have loved him/her. During the service, you may choose to read a poem or say a prayer. You may use a photo of your pet for the ceremony; it is not necessary to have the body or ashes present.
* Light a candle for your pet at a certain time each day or a certain day each week.
* Make something that reminds you of your pet, such as a scrapbook.
* Place mementos of your pet in a special place, such as a decorative box.
* Make a donation in memory of your pet.
* If you have your pet’s ashes, you can place them in an urn or scatter them in a place that was special to your pet.
* Plant a tree or bush in honor of your pet.
* Consider writing about how the life and/or loss of your pet has affected you. People in a similar situation may appreciate knowing that they are not alone in their grief.
* Attend a pet loss support group.

**Resources**

This handout was based on the book, [“Saying Good-Bye to the Pet You Love: A Complete Resource to Help You Heal”](https://www.amazon.com/Saying-Good-Bye-Pet-You-Love/dp/1572243074) by Lorri A. Greene, Ph.D., and Jacquelyn Landis. We encourage anyone seeking additional information about these or other pet loss topics to refer to this guide.

Other helpful books include:

* [“The Loss of a Pet: A Guide to Coping with the Grieving Process When a Pet Dies”](https://www.amazon.com/The-Loss-Pet-Grieving-Process/dp/1630260797) by Wallace Sife, Ph.D.
* [“Goodbye, Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet”](https://www.amazon.com/Goodbye-Friend-Healing-Wisdom-Anyone/dp/160868086X) by Gary Kowalski
* [“When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remembering and Healing”](https://www.amazon.com/When-Your-Pet-Dies-Remembering/dp/187965136X) by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.
* [“The Pet Loss Companion: Healing Advice from Family Therapists who Lead Pet Loss Groups”](https://www.amazon.com/The-Pet-Loss-Companion-Therapists/dp/1484918266) by Ken Dolan-Del Vecchio and Nancy Saxton-Lopez
* [“Grieving the Death of a Pet”](https://www.amazon.com/Grieving-Death-Pet-Betty-Carmack/dp/080664348X) by Betty J. Carmack
* [“Angel Pawprints: Reflections on Loving and Losing a Canine Companion”](https://www.amazon.com/Angel-Pawprints-Reflections-Companion-Anthology/dp/0786865776) by Laurel E. Hunt
* [“Angel Whiskers: Reflections on Loving and Losing a Feline Companion”](https://www.amazon.com/Angel-Whiskers-Reflections-Loving-Companion/dp/0786865784) by Laurel E. Hunt