

Coping With Loss & Grief

The loss of a pet is something that every pet owner dreads. Just as the bond between every pet and their human is unique, the way you might respond to the loss of your pet is also unique. The most important thing to remember is that grief is a normal response, and we know it can be just as intense as the grief that follows the loss of a human friend or family member. Allow yourself time to acknowledge and find your way through your feelings.

Whilst we can't relieve your grief entirely, this bereavement guidance is here to help you understand how you feel, and provide methods and sources of support and information that can help you through it.

Understanding grief

Each pet is different, each bond is different, and each person is different when it comes to grief. Some people are pragmatic and are able to process it quickly. Others experience more prolonged feelings which can affect their everyday lives. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and you should never feel pressured to 'move on'.

However you tend to respond to loss, there are often some shared features. You might feel

- *Sadness*, which is often most intense immediately after your pet's passing, but usually begins to ease after a few days. For some people, however, deep sadness can persist for weeks or months
- *Anger*, which could be directed at yourself, your pet, your veterinary team, God, disease, or your family or friends. This feeling is usually not rational, so patiently try to let it go if you can
- *Shock*, especially if your pet's death was sudden or you didn't get a chance to say goodbye
- *Guilt*, which is extremely common with pet loss, perhaps because you feel guilty for making the decision to euthanase, or because you worry you left it too long before euthanasing. If you lost your pet in an accident, you might feel guilty for not having prevented it. Be forgiving with yourself, we do the best we can with what information and circumstances we have at the time. More than likely, your pet would not want you to feel guilty
- *Denial*, which may start very soon after your pet's death. You may suppress the pain of loss by keeping busy, rushing to get another pet, or telling yourself the loss is insignificant and you need to get on with it. But if you refuse to acknowledge these feelings, you may simply prolong the grieving process. Try to open up to yourself or a family member, friend, or counsellor

Don't worry if your experience of loss isn't exactly as above, a person can feel all, some, or none of these things. You may even feel other things you can't define or categorise, but just remember that whatever you feel is valid and real, and other people will be feeling the same way.

Physical and behavioural responses to grief

Your body and mind are closely connected, and the feelings you have about losing your pet might be reflected in your physical wellbeing and the way you act. You may find yourself struggling to sleep, losing your appetite or finding yourself comfort-eating, or lacking energy. You might struggle with daily activities or withdraw from friends and family.

Some people find it difficult to put away their pet's belongings, and you don't have to. It can take some time to adjust to new routines too, for example if your day used to include playing with your cat, walking your dog, or tending to your rabbits or chickens.

Ways to cope with grief

How you navigate the grieving process, and what will make your journey easier, is unique to you. What works for one person may not always work for another, so be patient with yourself as you try to find what helps you. Some things to try might include

Talking to others

Sometimes, people who have not owned or lost a pet themselves may struggle to understand the gravity of what you are going through. In these situations, it can help to find someone who can relate, to talk to about how you are feeling. This might be

- A friend or family member
- A forum for pet loss support, such as the Ralph Site
- A charity, such as the Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service, or the Samaritans
- A pet bereavement counselor

Memorialising your pet

Taking time to create memorials for your pet can help you focus on happy memories and let you honour the importance of your pet in your life. Some ideas are

- Creating a memory box with photos, pet's belongings, a favourite toy, and a lock of fur
- Making a dedicated Christmas decoration such as a bauble, to celebrate them each year
- Planting a small bush, tree, or flower in your garden in their favourite spot or their burial site
- Having ashes or a lock of fur cast in resin or made into jewellery
- Having a portrait of your pet drawn or painted, or drawing one yourself

You might even wish to hold a small remembrance ceremony for your pet, where you light a candle, read a verse or poem, or plant your tree/flower. You might like friends or family to be there, too.

Writing your thoughts down

For some people, keeping a grief diary or journal can give them an outlet for their emotions. It may also help you to document your journey and reflect on the progress you have made. Alternatively, you could express yourself in the form of a poem for your pet, or write a letter to them.

Taking care of yourself

Grief is exhausting, and takes its toll on your emotions and body. Be kind to yourself and prioritise your wellbeing so that you have the best opportunity to heal. Adequate hydration, regular nutritious meals, regular gentle exercise, and trying to get enough sleep can help.

Seeking professional help

For some people, prolonged and profound grief can develop into depression. If you continue to struggle with daily life following the loss of your pet, it may be worth seeking the help of a doctor such as your GP. This is also worthwhile if your inability to sleep is prolonged or affecting your ability to function.

Bereavement counselling can be very beneficial, even for those who are not experiencing depression. There are dedicated Pet Bereavement Counselors who deal specifically with the complex and nuanced grief process that follows pet loss.

Where to find further support

The Ralph Site <https://www.theralphsite.com/> who provide forums and communities, grief advice and support, memorial advice, and a counselor directory.

The Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss> who provide free and confidential support via phone and email. You can talk to them any day from 8.30am-8.30pm on 0800 096 6606

Cats Protection Paws to Listen Grief Support Service <https://www.cats.org.uk/what-we-do/grief/paws-to-listen> who provide grief advice, a memory wall, and a free confidential phone line. You can talk to them from 9am-5pm Mon-Fri on 0800 024 9494

Compassion Understood <https://compassionunderstood.com/> provides a wealth of resources on every step of pet loss from end of life and euthanasia guidance to bereavement support

Samaritans <https://www.samaritans.org/> are there to listen at any time of the day or night if you are struggling, via phone, email, letter, or in-person. You can call them 24/7 on 116 123

You are not alone in your grief, and it is normal to feel this way after such a profound loss. Do not be ashamed of your feelings, or feel pressurised to move on. Reach out for help, be patient with yourself, and do what feels right for you.