



Veterinary Wisdom[®]

for pet parents

My Pet Has Died...Why Do I Feel So Sad?

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The relationships we have with our pets are unlike any others in our lives. Our pets are precious companions who give us an unconditional love. Love, like that from our pets, is a love that is rare and difficult to find. It is pure, constant, and unwavering.

Pets cheer us with their charming antics and offer complete forgiveness amidst our mistakes. Pets don't care about how we look, how much money we make, or where we live. They see us at our weakest, most vulnerable moments and love us no matter what. If you have shared such a deep bond with a pet, it's only natural to feel strong emotions of grief upon the death of your beloved friend.

Demystifying the Grief Process

Although society is slow to recognize the death of a companion animal as a valid loss, the grief you feel is very real, and can be overwhelming. It is important for you to know that you are not alone and that you are not crazy. In fact, 75% of pet owners grieving the death of a pet report disruptions in their lives, work roles, and other relationships due to their feelings of grief.

Grief is one of the most natural and normal emotions that we have, yet it is one of the most misunderstood. Because grief often involves very painful and difficult feelings, most of us think that grief is wrong or "crazy" in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth. Grief is a very healthy psychological response that requires expression and acknowledgement. Attempts to suppress feelings of grief can sometimes actually prolong the healing process.

What Should I Expect From My Grief?

There is no set time frame for grieving. Normal grief can last anywhere from weeks and months to years. All people grieve in their own way and in their own time. Normal grief however, does lessen in intensity over time. The old cliché about "*time heals*" is not necessarily as accurate as "*time helps*." The tincture of time never makes the grief go away completely. However, we do find that as time goes on, we do not hurt as much as we used to. We think about our loved ones, but we are also able to recollect happier times and have more balance between our pain and our happy memories.

As you grieve, you may have a variety of reactions. Although grief responses can differ from one person to another, there are many predictable expressions of grief.

These responses can occur on physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and even spiritual levels.

Below is a *brief* list of symptoms you may experience throughout your grieving process:

Typical Responses to Grief

- **Physical:** crying, sobbing, numbness, appetite disturbances or other physical discomforts, dizziness, sleeping disturbances, and sudden illness
- **Emotional:** shock, sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, fear, loneliness, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feeling overwhelmed, feeling hopeless and helpless or a desire to blame others
- **Intellectual:** denial, confusion, an inability to concentrate, erratic thoughts, intellectualizing about the loss, hallucinations (such as hearing the pet in the middle of the night)
- **Social:** wanting to withdraw from others or feeling a need to reach out to others
- **Spiritual:** anger at "God" or a higher power, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, searching for meaning in a loved one's death

What Can I Do to Help Myself?

In this very difficult time of grief, there are some things you can do. The most important is to be patient with yourself and understand that what you are feeling is normal. Unfortunately, there are no "shortcuts" to grief. You need to give yourself permission to express your grief in our own way and let the emotions run their natural course. Putting pressure to "get over it" only makes the situation worse. You need to focus your attention on taking care of yourself and finding ways to express your feelings in ways that are helpful to you. The following is a short list of suggestions to try:

- **Take a personal day(s) off from work.** Many people need time away to take care of themselves but feel embarrassed about missing work. Make your grief a priority. Simply tell your boss or co-workers there was a death in the family.
- **Be around those who understand your relationship with your pet.** Surround yourself with family and friends who know what your pet means to you and can offer non-judgmental support.
- **Consider having a memorial service or funeral.** Studies show that people grieve more "successfully" when they are given a formal opportunity to honor the loved one and say good-bye. Do not hold back simply because you are honoring the life of a pet and not a person.
- **Consider a pet loss support group or other type of assistance.** Many people benefit from being around others who are experiencing similar situations.
- **Take good care of yourself.** When you are grieving, it is essential that you take good care of yourself. Make yourself a priority and remember that you deserve the same love and care that you always provided for your pet.