

## **Mourning the Death of Your Pet**

Having a beloved pet die is traumatic and painful, and the most natural thing in the world is to have intense feelings of grief and sadness. Our pets give us unconditional love, are always there to patiently listen to us when we need to talk, and are often our best friend.

Even though psychologists have long maintained the grief that pet owners experience after the death of their pet is comparable to the grief suffered after the death of a family member, society doesn't offer a grieving pet owner much sympathy or compassion. Consequently, pet owners often feel isolated in their grief, and are without the support they so desperately need.

When a person dies, friends and relatives show their support by attending the funeral or memorial service. Even in weeks following the funeral, people usually continue to provide comfort to the bereaved person in a number of different ways. Usually when a pet dies there is no funeral, no memorial service; often friends and family members don't understand the depth of the loss that is felt.

### Stages of Grief

The emotions that you may experience after the death of a pet often go through various stages, such as denial, anger, depression, and finally, acceptance. Don't be surprised at the overwhelming grief that you feel; when you love profoundly, you will mourn profoundly. The intensity and length of the grieving process depends on many factors, but a lack of support prolongs your feelings of anguish. You may want to seek the help of a counselor or a pet loss support group, which are often sponsored by local Humane Societies and/or veterinarians. As time passes, your pain will subside as you focus more on the good times and wonderful memories of your pet, and not on the death. Even though the grief and pain may be intense right now, don't rule out someday having another pet. A new pet could never replace your dearly loved companion, but will fulfill your need to nurture and care for a pet -- once again providing you with that treasured unconditional love.

## Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Pet

Although children tend to grieve for shorter periods of time, they can be as initially devastated as an adult can by the death of a pet, if not more so. Although each will react differently, some things can prove helpful to a child:

- Encourage your child to talk openly about their pet. Include your child in all family discussions and talk about death and dying honestly. If you can be honest and open about your own grief, your child won't be as likely to hold back their emotions or feel alone.
- Give your child plenty of comfort and hugs.
- Make sure to inform their teacher about the death of their pet.
- Never tell your child that the pet was "put to sleep," or that "God took your pet." Your child may start to have fears that God will "take" them, their siblings, or you; and your child also may become frightened of going to sleep.
- Encourage your child to cherish the happy memories of their pet, and help them say good-bye in whatever way they choose.

## Can Other Family Pets Grieve?

Animals can become very attached to each other when they coexist in the same household, and can display intense symptoms of stress when they are separated. They may become depressed, nervous, or restless, or they may begin having disturbances in their sleeping and eating patterns. They may also wander around, seeking their companion, or they may become more needy and desire undivided attention from you. If your pet displays any of these symptoms, the following guide may be helpful:

- Don't overdo when it comes to giving your pet extra attention; it may lead to problems with separation anxiety.
- Don't let your pet's normal routine be interrupted; continue all the regular activities you usually do with him/her.
- Do be flexible and patient. If your pet doesn't seem to have an appetite, don't try changing food or feeding times. Allow your pet

to go at their own pace; however, consult your veterinarian if there is a drastic change in eating patterns for any extended period of time.

- Don't get a new pet immediately. Give your surviving pet (and yourself) time to mourn.

### Helping the Healing Process

As time passes, healing will occur, but there are several things you can do for yourself in the meantime:

- Give yourself permission to mourn, and consider avoiding others who don't understand.
- Take time to heal. Don't let anyone tell you how long a "normal" grieving period should be.
- Lean on friends and family. Don't be afraid to ask for help; you may want to take advantage of support groups for grieving pet owners.
- Remember to get plenty of rest, eat sensibly and exercise.
- Memorialize your pet in whatever way you feel comfortable. You will find closure and, at the same time, pay meaningful tribute to your beloved pet.

Grief is more than likely the most difficult emotion a person can experience, especially when someone is mourning the death of his or her precious pet. However, more and more resources are becoming available to help us recognize that feelings of grief are completely natural, and above all, that we are not alone.