

Grieving the Loss of Your Pet

The loss of an animal companion, whether due to death, being lost or stolen, or placement in a new home, may be one of the most devastating and painful experiences we ever face. For many, such a loss is as traumatic as losing a family member or a dear friend and can trigger an intense grieving process.

Grieving for a loved animal is a natural and normal reaction and will vary from person to person.

Shock, denial and feelings of anger and guilt are frequently felt upon learning our pet is terminally ill, injured or dead; these feelings may last minutes to weeks. Typically there is a sense of numbness, disorientation or unreality. As we struggle to come to terms with the reality of the loss, many of us will experience waves of grief and intense painful awareness, alternating with periods of exhaustion and automatic functioning.

A sense of disorganization often represents the lowest point of the grief process. We frequently feel aimless, hopeless and depressed because of the void left by the loss. Reorganization and resolution of the grief may occur days, weeks or even years later as we work through our feelings and begin to rediscover and reconnect with life. As time passes, we can focus more on fond memories and less on the pain of separation.

We may experience all, some or none of the above reactions and the timing and intensity of these feelings varies among individuals. It is important to acknowledge our feelings, whatever they may be, and give ourselves permission to grieve.

When our animal companion is lost, a significant inner bond is broken. We become separate once again. The work of pet loss support groups is to create a safe environment for sharing our stories about that part of us that has died and to learn to reclaim a sense of wholeness within ourselves.

Since its establishment in 1988, the Pet Loss Support Group of the [Human Animal Bond Trust](#) has provided a weekly gathering for individuals grieving the loss of a pet companion. The support group has received local media attention in the Rocky Mountain News, The Denver Post, KMGH News and KUSA News, as well as in a three-part news feature "Healing the Heart." Each group is facilitated by a licensed therapist and is available at no cost to the participants. The Trust offers referrals for individual grief counseling and music, art or movement therapy. The [Human Animal Bond Trust](#) also provides educational seminars for veterinary professionals and the public.

The Pet Loss Support Group meets every Thursday evening from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. at the Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society office at 191 Yuma Street in Denver, 303-318-0447. There is no cost to attend one or many meetings and no need to call before attending. Please bring a picture of your pet if possible.

The Pet Loss Support Group is Sponsored by: The Denver Area Veterinary Medical Society and The Annual Putting For Pets Golf Tournament.

Self-Care measures for the bereaved

- Attend a support group.
- Don't be afraid of your feelings; be open to sharing them.
- Exercise, eat right and get plenty of rest.
- Involve yourself in activities that are comforting or enjoyable.
- Avoid alcohol and other drugs that can intensify feelings of depression.
- Manage one day at a time.

How to support a friend in grief

- As soon as you learn of the loss, get in touch; it is never too late to offer concern and support.
- Silence is OK. There is comfort in quiet company.
- Instead of cliches that might minimize the loss, simply say "I'm sorry" or "How can I help." It is helpful to talk openly about the loss.
- Be accepting of your friend's feelings, whatever they may be.
- Try not to be upset or uncomfortable if your friend cries. Remember that tears can be healing.
- Don't be afraid to offer a hug to your friend.
- Try to plan activities you can do together. If one offer is declined, don't be hurt and don't give up.
- Be patient; grief is an individual process and resolution comes at different times for different people.
- Remember your friend on special days such as birthdays and holidays, as well as the anniversary date of the loss, times when the loss will be more acutely felt.

Pet loss support hotline numbers

- Staffed by University of Florida veterinary students
Weekdays, 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., EST
(352) 392-2213 then 1 and 4080
- Staffed by Michigan State University veterinary students
Tuesday - Thursday, 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., EST
(517) 432-2696
- Staffed by Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine
Tuesday and Thursday, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., EST
(540) 231-8038
- The Ohio State University Companion Animal Listening Line
(614) 292-1823
M-F 6:30 pm - 9:30 pm EST
Sat-Sun 10 am - 4 pm EST
(Most hotline volunteers are veterinary students, therefore hours are dependant on volunteer availability and may be more limited during summer months.)
- Staffed by Tufts University veterinary students
Tuesday and Thursday, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., EST
(508) 839-7966
- Staffed by Iowa State University veterinary students
Weekdays, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., CST
(888) 478-7574
- Staffed by Cornell University veterinary students
Tuesday to Thursday, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m., EST
(607) 253-3932
- Iams Pet Loss Support Resource Center
(888) 332-7738
- The American Society for The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
24 hours Stephanie LaFarge, Ph.D.
(800) 946-4646 pin #140-7211 and leave your number
Fax (212) 860-3435

Helpful reading on pet loss

Especially for Children...

Rogers, F., *When a Pet Dies*, Putnam Publishing, 1988

Rylant, C., **Dog Heaven**, Scholastic, Inc., Blue Sky Press, 1995
Viorst, J., **The Tenth Good Thing About Barney**, Atheneum, 1972
White, E., **Charlottes's Web**, Harper and Row, 1952

Reading for Adults...

Anderson, M., **Coping With Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet**, Peregrine Press, 1987
Fitzgerald, H., **The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide**, Fireside, (1992)
Kay, T., **To Dance With the White Dog**, Washington Square Press, 1990
Kay, W., et al, **Pet Loss and Human Bereavement**, Iowa State University Press, 1984
McElroy, S., **Animals as Teachers & Healers**, NewSage Press, 1996
Montgomery, M. and Montgomery, H., **A Final Act of Caring: Ending the Life of An Animal Friend**, Montgomery Press, 1993
Neiburg, H., et al, **Pet Loss: A Thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children**, Harper and Row, 1982
Quintana, M.L., Veleba, S.L., & King, H., **It's Okay to Cry: Warm, Compassionate Stories that Help You Find Hope and Healing After the Death of a Beloved Pet**, K & K Communications, (1998)
Schaffer, D. & Lyons, C., **How Do You Tell the Children: A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children Two to Teen Cope When Someone Dies**, Newmarket Press, (1993)
Sife, Wallace, **The Loss of a Pet: A Guide to Coping With The Grieving Process When a Pet Dies**, MacMillan Pub. Howell Book House, (1998)
Traisman, E., **My Personal Pet Remembrance Journal**, Direct Book Services, (800) 776-2665, 1996