

Pet Loss Support Page



“Pre-Loss Bereavement” and the Power of Bargaining

by Moira Anderson Allen, M.Ed.

There is a stage of grief that one hears very little, if anything, about. It’s the hidden stage, a stage that friends and family may have difficulty understanding. It’s a stage when people are most likely to ask why you are grieving—because your pet hasn’t even died yet!

It’s the stage I call “pre-loss bereavement.” It begins when you realize, with absolutely no wiggle-room for argument, that your pet is going to die. You don’t know when, but you know loss is coming. It may not even be coming soon; your pet may have weeks, months, even a year or more of life ahead. But you know that you have reached “the beginning of the end.”

It may begin with a diagnosis of a final, incurable disease or condition. When an older cat is diagnosed with borderline kidney failure, for example, you know that you may be able to take steps to manage the problem and keep “full failure” at bay for a time—but you’re never going to be able to accomplish a “cure.” Or, it may begin when you look at your pet with “newly opened eyes,” and notice changes in its health or condition that have been taking place slowly over time. When a pet gradually loses weight, for example, it’s easy to overlook subtle, ongoing changes to its appearance, because you never see a sudden, dramatic alteration. Then, one day, you look at your pet and realize that you can see every rib, every bump of its spine.

Whatever the trigger, pre-loss bereavement begins when you realize not just intellectually, but emotionally, that you are going to lose your pet. It is something you have always “known,” from the day you brought your pet home—but now it is not simply known, but *felt*, deeply, keenly, painfully. Now, you may find yourself in something of a “pet loss limbo”—you begin to grieve the loss that is coming, but there is no “closure” to your grief. You can’t “get over it” because the loss hasn’t actually happened yet. And you know that things are only going to get worse before they get better.

This is the period in which you are likely to experience all the classic Kubler-Ross “stages” of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. Denial may have preceded this stage, vanishing like a toxic bubble the day you accept and acknowledge the diagnosis or changes in your pet—or, it may resurface from time to time, as you try to convince yourself that your pet’s condition isn’t really *that* bad. Anger can come at odd times—when, for example, you think you are taking your pet to the vet for the last time, and manage to psyche yourself up to make the most painful decision, only to have an unexpected “reprieve.” Yes, of course you are glad to bring your pet home again—but you may feel a twinge of irrational anger at having had to go through all that for “nothing”, only to have to go through it again. Depression comes and goes as you contemplate a future without your pet. But the most common reaction to this stage is likely to be bargaining—bargaining with your

pet, your vet, yourself, or your higher power for *anything* that will extend (or improve) the life of your pet.

I know this stage well. Several years ago, my 15-year-old cat, Nani, was diagnosed with borderline kidney disease. At the time, she seemed to be deteriorating rapidly; I doubted she had more than a few months to live. And so I entered the “bargaining” stage (or, for some of us, the “begging” stage).

But what could I bargain *for*? I knew I could not hope for a cure. We weren’t sure how old Nani was, as she was a young adult when we adopted her, but we knew she was at least 15 and possibly 16. While cats occasionally live to 20 or longer, such lifespans are rare, and not likely in a cat already suffering from kidney disease. So what could I ask (and pray) for that might have some chance of success?

I chose to ask for “time.” I realized, looking at my wasting-thin kitty, that Nani had been suffering from a certain amount of “attention neglect” over the previous year. We had undergone a stressful move and job change, cramming ourselves, our goods and three cats into a very small duplex. Nani had not been getting the same amount of lap time, cuddle time, and sleep-on-your-face time that she had enjoyed previously. I felt a surge of guilt; if only I could have some *time* to make that up to her. Give me time, I asked, to make sure that in her final days, she feels loved; give me time to give her the attention and cuddling that means so much to her. My part of the “bargain,” of course, was to provide those things!

Miraculously, time was given. In 1999, I doubted Nani would survive six months; she survived for more than four years. Each time she seemed to slip toward the edge, a change of diet would bring about an amazing rally. Even though she lost nearly 1/6 of her original weight, and underwent surgery for a lymphoma, she has hung in there.

More importantly, she had “time” to enjoy renewed attention. She had more years to curl up on whomever was resting (or sleeping) in the recliner (and if you were “resting,” a curled-up, purring Nani was almost certain to put you to sleep). She had time to play with the other cats, and even to chase 18-pound Brisco down the hall if he forgot his manners. She had time to watch the birds at the bird-feeder, and the squirrels at the squirrel-feeder. Her one disappointment was that we no longer allowed her on the top shelf of the closet, for fear she might jump down and injure herself.

Eventually we looked at Nani and come to the conclusion that “time” was running out. Her weight loss had accelerated, and a reaction to a prescribed medication made her seriously ill. Though she managed yet another rally, we could see that she was slower, stiffer, weaker, thinner. The time was coming to make that final decision.

We faced this prospect with acceptance, however. We had a peace in our hearts about what must come, because we had a chance to make sure that Nani’s last days were as happy and comfortable as we could make them. Despite the grief of the “pet loss limbo” period, we had the comfort of knowing that death didn’t take us by surprise; we weren’t left regretting the things we hadn’t done, or wishing that we’d had a chance to do things differently. We kept the first half of our bargain (making life better for Nani), and now we faced the second half: Letting Nani go.

While some psychologists consider bargaining to be nothing more than a mental game we play to avoid or ignore grief, I believe it can be genuinely helpful—provided one is realistic about the process. If you find yourself in “pet loss limbo,” you may find that “bargaining” is an effective way to ease your passage from grief to acceptance. Here are some tips on “healthy” bargaining:

1) Be realistic about your pet’s condition. Don’t expect a complete, miraculous cure; you’ll only be disappointed. Instead, look for ways to work within and around that condition to extend and improve your pet’s life.

2) Focus your efforts on your pet's well-being, not your own. Don't try to make a "bargain" with God or the universe just to keep yourself from feeling pain, or to postpone that pain. Instead, use this time to seek ways to improve your pet's life and comfort level. By doing so, you'll enhance your own ability to accept the inevitable.

3) Use whatever time your pet has left to take care of "unfinished business." If you haven't spent as much time with your pet as you'd like, spend it now. If there are special treats or experiences that your pet particularly enjoys, use this time to provide them. The best way to spend this time is to ensure that, when your pet dies, you aren't left with regrets and self-recriminations.

4) Seek a balance between your pet's health and its general comfort and happiness. Often, for example, a pet may loathe the "special diet" that is prolonging its life. If your pet starts losing weight because it refuses to eat a prescription diet, you may not be doing it any favors by withholding its preferred foods. Similarly, if life-prolonging treatments are more stressful or painful than the disease they're designed to cure, you may need to make a decision about "quality" of life vs. "length" of life.

5) Keep your side of the "bargain." If you've asked for "time" to give your pet extra love and attention, and you miraculously *receive* that time, use it! It may, indeed, be a miracle.

6) Be prepared to take "no" for an answer. I firmly believe in the power of prayer, but not all prayers are answered as we would wish. If you seek to "bargain" in the last days of your pet's life, you must accept the possibility that you won't get what you're asking for. If and when that occurs, don't waste time and emotional energy blaming yourself or the universe for failing to respond to your wishes.

7) Understand that a "bargain" isn't going to change the final outcome. If your pet has a terminal illness, you may gain the gift of time—but it is a temporary gift. Use that time, not only to improve your pet's quality of life, but to come to terms with the inevitability of loss. You may find that this precious gift of time is just what you need to work through many of the other emotions of grief, so that you can face the final loss of your pet with a measure of acceptance and peace.

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If you're grieving the loss of a pet, you'll find more helpful tips in Moira Allen's book, *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, available from Amazon.com