

The Emotions of Pet Loss

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A POEM FOR THE GRIEVING...

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow,

I am the diamond glints on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain,

I am the gentle autumn's rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush,

I am the swift uplifting rush

of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry,

I am not there, I did not die...

-Anonymous

The Emotions of Pet Loss

"It was the most tragic, traumatic, and emotionally devastating experience I had ever been through. I didn't know what to do. I cried day and night." (Dorothy R., Alabama)

"I felt like someone had ripped out my insides." (Karen A., Illinois)

"I never knew anything could hurt so bad. I cried a whole ocean of tears. I went through self-hatred for putting my pet to sleep, to depression, to acceptance. For a long time I couldn't even watch a dog food commercial." (Cheryl T., Alabama)

Do these reactions to the loss of a pet touch a familiar chord in your heart? Grief, confusion, anger, guilt and depression are all typical responses to the death of a loved one. Only recently, however, have researchers come to realize that a pet may also be considered a loved one and a family member, and that its death may evoke similar and often equally intense emotions.

This excerpt will discuss some of the most typical reactions to the loss of a pet, as well as methods to cope with these feelings. Keep in mind, however, that there is no absolute pattern for grief. Your own reactions will depend on a variety of factors. These include your personality, your upbringing, the type of relationship you had with your pet, your personal situation at the time of the pet's death, and your cultural and religious beliefs. Your reactions may be different from those of another pet owner, or even from those of other members of your household. They may include some or all of the emotions listed above, in different combinations and intensities.

For example, if your dog died peacefully at the age of 16—a ripe old age for most dogs—the shock and grief you feel may be less than if it died of an unexpected illness at age 2. If your cat is hit by a car or your dog chokes on a bone, however, you will probably feel more guilt than you would if either pet had died of old age. You may feel the absence of a beloved companion more keenly and painfully if it was your only pet than if you shared your love with several animals. You may mourn the death of a particular pet more strongly than you mourned pets in the past, due to some special qualities of that pet or of that particular relationship.

The length of time grief lasts also varies from person to person, and may be affected by the level of attachment one feels to an individual pet. "My personal experience was an intense grieving process that left me emotionally devastated for several weeks," wrote Roanne H. of New Jersey. "I am still surprised by the ongoing feelings of love for the departed pet that I am experiencing. The length of time it takes to begin accepting the loss of your pet will vary."



You can't begin to cope with your emotions until you let them out. If you feel guilt, you can't address the cause of the guilt or find a solution to it if you are busily saying "What, me, guilt? No—everything's great!" For decades psychologists and psychiatrists have been pointing out the dangers of repressing, ignoring or denying emotions. Repressed emotions don't go away simply because you don't want to admit they are there—instead, when denied an outlet, emotions churn around inside you until they find their own outlet—often when you least expect it and are least prepared to handle it. If you deny your anger over the death of your dog, it doesn't go away: Instead, you may flare up and shout at your child or your husband for no reason, causing more hurt and misunderstanding. Since that outlet still doesn't bring what's really bothering you into the open, the cause of the anger or other emotion isn't resolved, so it continues to churn inside you. I have heard from pet owners whose unresolved emotions have kept them bitter and hurting for years.

Acknowledging your emotions may hurt—these emotions are painful, after all—but it provides you with the opportunity to control their outlet. You may decide, for example, that you need to take a day off from work and simply cry your heart out, scream your anger to the skies, or pound out your guilt on the floor. Far from being childish, this action lets you get your feelings into the open. There you can look at them and begin to understand them, which is a healthy start on releasing them once and for all. Only by looking at your reactions honestly can you begin the process of working through them and come out whole and happy on the other side.

"Grief consists of several steps, which ought to be taken one at a time," Yarden says. "It is also an experience that will recur over and over after a loss, and through that repetition comes the slow easing of pain. Each time, one experiences a little more consolation, a little more healing. Some of the stages one goes through are shock, denial, anger, loneliness, self-pity, guilt, and regret—to name a few. Everyone who has lost a loved relative or close friend experiences loneliness and the feeling that no one can fill the emptiness that person left behind. One may suffer from guilt, thinking that one 'should have' or 'could have' or 'might have' done certain things while the lost friend was still alive. The feeling of anger is at ourselves for not having noticed that something was amiss, for not having sought medical help sooner—or it is sometimes redirected at the deceased for dying and leaving us."

Of the complex jumble of emotions that may follow the death of a pet, four stand out as being particularly difficult to acknowledge or understand, and therefore to work through: anger, guilt, denial and depression. A pet owner who "sticks" at one of these reactions faces a major obstacle in the grief swamp. If you find yourself dwelling on one of these emotions, or spending an inordinate amount of time "denying" the emotion, it is important to work on a more realistic understanding of the situation. Otherwise, your feelings may distort your entire perspective on the loss of your pet and your role in its death, and seriously hinder your recovery.

Anger

When a person is hurt, a natural response is to look around for the person or thing that is causing that hurt. Pain is something one often sees as being inflicted from outside, rather than something that just happens. Historically, when no obvious cause for trouble is found, people have made scapegoats out of strangers, supernatural forces, or even God. Finding something or someone to blame for one's pain enables one to "strike back," if only by declaring, "It's your fault, you did it."

Focusing anger on a target of blame is a distraction. On her national radio talk show, psychologist Toni Grant often noted that a person can focus on only one strong emotion at a time; thus, if you have focused all your energy into anger, you have little time to feel your pain. Striking back can be gratifying; you may get a surge of satisfaction from telling off your “persecutor.” But acknowledging your pain is an essential part of the grieving process, so while the distraction of anger may temporarily seem to ease your feelings, in the long run it only serves to prolong an already difficult situation.

Whom can you blame for the death of a pet? Pet owners have come up with a surprising number of possibilities. They may blame pet deaths on veterinarians, animal shelters, the person who caused a fatal accident or injury, the illness that was responsible for the death, and even the pet itself.

Veterinarians frequently come under fire for the loss of a pet, because a vet is often the last person to be responsible for a sick or injured pet. Instead of asking the logical question, “Why couldn’t you save my pet?” a grieving pet owner may ask, “Why *didn’t* you save my pet?” as though the veterinarian had a choice. Since so many treatments seem virtual miracles, why couldn’t the vet have pulled off the final miracle needed to keep a beloved pet alive? To some, this failure may seem deliberate, neglectful or uncaring.

Susan G. of Nebraska blamed her veterinarian bitterly for the death of her St. Bernard, Junior. “Was surgery the only alternative?” she wrote. “At the time it seemed that we could trust this vet. Now I feel he couldn’t have cared less about my baby! We thought he would save Junior’s life. Instead I felt like he murdered him and put him through torture by that surgery... If he felt his surgery might kill my dog, why did he decide on it in the end? Do they do this just so they can practice on helpless animals?”

To read Susan’s letter is to read the story of a dog with virtually no chance of survival—but to Susan, the dog’s killer is the tangible, accessible veterinarian who had the final responsibility for her pet, not the mysterious disease that brought the dog to the hospital in the first place. Two years after her original letter, Susan wrote to me again, and her anger and pain still simmered beneath the surface: “I feel I will always be bitter about what happened and I could never trust any professional (medical or other) again!”

An assumption of negligence, ignorance, cruelty or lack of care on the part of a veterinarian makes the death of a loved one easier to understand than if one had to write it off to fate or an incomprehensible act of God. It makes the question of “why did this have to happen to me?” or “why did my pet have to die?” easier to answer, enabling one to say, “Well, it wouldn’t have happened if only...”

When Laura P. of California lost her pit bull puppy to parvovirus only a few days after she adopted it from an animal shelter, she felt considerable anger toward the shelter. “They were so concerned about whether I had a secure yard that they didn’t even notice the pup was losing weight and getting dehydrated,” she wrote. Yvonne M. of New Jersey had a similar experience, and demanded, “Why does the state allow such places to exist?” She was infuriated by the shelter’s promise to replace a pet if anything went wrong. “How can you develop a love for an animal and then replace it awhile later?” she asks.

If someone causes the death of your pet through a malicious act or through carelessness, it’s certainly natural to feel anger toward that person. When Vivian R.’s dog was shot near its New Hampshire home, “all my husband and I could think of was to go home and find whoever did this terrible thing,” she wrote. Vivian’s situation demonstrates the need to maintain a level of common sense along with one’s anger. She and her husband did locate the shooter, a neighbor, who was eventually required to pay damages. She stopped short, however, of having the man arrested because of her concern for the suffering this would cause the man’s wife and two young children, who had nothing to do with the incident.

In this case, Vivian's anger was channeled into a constructive action that eventually cleared the way for her grief and for sympathy toward others. But Vivian was fortunate: She and her husband were able to track down the person responsible and had the legal resources to achieve a certain amount of justice, though no amount of money can ever replace a lost pet. All too often, the person who caused the death of a pet cannot be found, or no legal means of retaliation may be open to you. You may cause yourself far more suffering if you try to retaliate by taking the law into your own hands. If you are spending an inordinate amount of time concentrating on rage and hatred toward the faceless, untraceable driver of the speeding car that struck down your pet, you may be seriously impeding your recovery from your loss.

Some people feel anger toward the illness that kills a pet. It isn't fair; why did it have to happen to *this* pet? One person wrote that she felt fate had played a cruel trick on her: Her dog died of coronavirus just weeks before she read a magazine article about the disease and the new vaccine that had been developed for it.

It is even possible to feel anger toward the dead pet itself. "The only time she ever hurt me was when she left me," wrote one pet owner. You may feel angry at it for dying and leaving you, thus causing you pain, or for doing something that caused its own death. For example, if your pet escaped from the yard and ran into the road, or ate a poisonous plant, or provoked a fight with another animal, you may blame the pet for the "stupidity" that took it from you.

One pet owner felt a certain amount of anger toward her dog for appearing perfectly healthy on the morning of its death. This pet owner felt that if only the dog had shown, somehow, that something was wrong, the owner would not have left it home alone but would have taken it to the vet, who might have been able to save it. If no other target is available, the pet may become the focus of blame for the anger and hurt you're feeling at this time.

You may also feel anger toward yourself, perhaps seeing yourself as the cause of the pet's death. Anger turned inward, into self-blame, becomes guilt.

Guilt

By becoming the caretaker of an animal, one may come to feel responsible for everything that happens to that animal, including events beyond one's control. Thus, if something goes wrong, whether the owner has anything to do with or not, he is likely to feel responsible—and therefore guilty.

I heard from several owners who blamed themselves for some "terrible mistake," real or imagined, that caused a pet's death. Kathy D. of Oklahoma wrote, "Cause of death: It was my fault. She died of distemper and had never been vaccinated." Shirley O. of California said, "I had a terrible time adjusting to the loss of my dog; the underlying factor was my guilt. I had ignorantly fed my dog soft pork chop bones, not knowing they'd cause intestinal hemorrhage."

If you must make the decision to euthanize a sick or injured pet, this can cause a tremendous amount of guilt. Susan G., who felt such anger toward her veterinarian over the death of her dog, offers a heart-wrenching example of the guilt euthanasia can evoke: "How could I have been so ignorant with something I loved? I felt it was wrong to leave him there from the first day; now I hold it against them and myself... I'm the one who took him there. Every day is a living hell when I think about what I put Junior through... I feel like he trusted me and I let him down."

Sue K. also felt considerable guilt when she had her cat Titsie euthanized, but as she discovered, that guilt extended far beyond the act of ending her cat's life. "I doubted my decision," she wrote. "Maybe I could have managed him at home. Maybe I should have tried. Maybe I shouldn't have taken him to the vet college. I'm a nurse; I should have noticed his failing condition. Why didn't I pay more attention? I shouldn't have gotten the new kitten; he tired Titsie so. And the dog! Titsie had hated Katie so much toward the end, and Katie had taken up so much of my attention because dogs demand more by their very nature. Maybe God was punishing me for something by taking Titsie away; Lord knows I'm no saint. That was probably it. I should be kinder. I should try harder to be better. I should watch what I say. I should have lived a better life. It was all my fault. I had killed my cat by not being what I should be."



Despite such intense feelings of guilt and self-hate, Sue was able to work her way back to solid ground; her letter was a testimonial to the powers of recovery that lie within us. "It's been only three months since Titsie died," she concluded, "and it was difficult at times to see the typewriter through my tears. But these were honest tears—tears of missing Titsie and of remembering his death and how alone I felt—not the distorted tears of self-blame, guilt, and hopelessness."

Even if a pet owner can't pinpoint something about the pet's death to feel guilty about, he may find something else to focus on—just as Sue focused on her supposed inadequacies. He may decide that he didn't take good enough care of the pet while it was alive, or pay enough attention to it. This is part of the "if only" syndrome: "If only I had known you wouldn't be here tomorrow, I would have been nicer to you yesterday."

Laura P. of California, who lost two dogs she had owned since age 7, expressed this type of guilt in her letter: "I felt sad and heartbroken, but mostly I felt guilty for any and all bad things I had done to Tiny and Pebbles over their lifetimes. When I was younger I just didn't respect my pets and was mean. I remembered the times I ignored them or forgot to give them water. I cried remembering the times I would just say 'hi' through the back screen instead of petting their little heads or scratching their tummies. I cried thinking of the times they needed brushing or a walk but had the gate closed in their faces. I cried thinking of how little they asked in return for their loyalty and love. I will never again shun any dog for getting old; in fact, I want to devote my life to dogs, training them and telling others how to care for them."

Just as anger can make you unable to recover from grief because it diverts your attention from your deeper, more painful reactions, guilt can be an equally dangerous distraction. Guilt causes you to focus on your supposed inadequacies and failings rather than on the reality of your loss. Though anger can distract from your pain, guilt adds to it by convincing you that, since you are at fault, you “deserve” to suffer. Guilt distorts your self-image, destroying your self-confidence and undermining your strength. Instead of focusing on the positive aspects of your relationship with your pet and on the happy memories, you focus upon the negative memories (real or imagined), the pet’s illness or death and your “bad guy” role in it.

Even if you *did* make some tragic mistake or decision that caused the death of your pet, clinging to guilt not only prevents you from recovering from your grief, it prevents you from moving on to a better and wiser relationship with future pets. Guilt does not help your departed pet, it does not help you, and it does not help any pets you may own in the future. Instead of helping you learn and grow from the experience of your mistakes, guilt drags you deeper into pain and, if carried to extremes, can block your route out of the grief-swamp.

Denial

Like anger, denial can be a way of focusing your mind away from pain. Denial is not so much a distraction, however, as a mechanism of ignoring reality, of hoping that if you don’t feel the pain, it will go away. Unfortunately, this rarely works; instead, pain is likely to wait until you let your defense mechanism slip, and then lash out at you when you are least prepared to cope with it.

Denial has been described in detail by researchers who study the terminally ill. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her landmark book *On Death and Dying*, noted that dying patients would often insist that they were not ill or that they were getting better. The reality of impending death is, understandably, often too painful to accept on a conscious level. Denial is a way of avoiding the mental anguish that comes with the realization that death is inevitable.

Pet owners often practice a similar type of denial. C. Miriam Yarden wrote of a woman whose dog was diagnosed as being terminally ill. Whenever Yarden asked the woman about the dog, the woman insisted that the dog was fine, that it was getting better, that nothing was wrong with it. In a few months the dog died, and the woman was devastated. In a case such as this, denial robs a pet owner of vital time in which he could be preparing himself emotionally for the inevitable loss and trauma that is to come.

Carried to extremes, denial can even be physically harmful to a pet. Just as a human patient may fearfully deny the seriousness of his symptoms and postpone visiting a doctor until it is too late to halt the course of an illness, so might a pet owner deny the seriousness of a pet’s symptoms until it is too late for a veterinarian to help. Even when one does take the pet to the vet, ignoring the seriousness of the illness can lead to significant problems in coping later, as Celia P. of New York discovered.

“You must be realistic,” wrote Celia. “Cam had blood in his urine periodically for a long time. We convinced ourselves that it was the same old urinary problem that he’d had before. Not smart. Pretending that an aging animal is going on forever just makes it harder to accept the final outcome. We just ‘tuned out’ any suggestion from the vet that this could be something more serious (it was cancer) and stuck to the old ‘he’s got a bladder problem—probably passed a stone again’ assumption. Please don’t do this; it just makes the shock a hundred times worse.”

Denial can also take place on a subconscious level. You may know, intellectually, that your pet is dead, but at a gut level be unable to accept that fact. You may still believe that somehow you will see your pet again; you might fear, for example, that your pet was not actually euthanized and is still alive somewhere. (That's why many pet owners recommend that you stay with your pet during euthanasia.) I experienced this feeling upon the death of my cat; even though I had held his body in my arms and said good-bye to him, I still found myself watching the streets for him at night as I drove home from work. A part of me seemed to have stuck at the memory that he had not come home that night, while refusing to accept the memory of the discovery of his body.

Denial can surface when you contemplate obtaining a new pet. You may find that this decision makes you feel guilty or disloyal, as though you were somehow betraying the deceased pet's memory. This reaction may mean that in a very real sense, you have not let go of the old pet, for it is still alive enough in your mind to be "replaced" by a "usurper." Bringing a new pet into your home can be the ultimate admission that your old pet is gone.

Depression

Though depression can result from a variety of things, including purely physical causes, we often associate this condition with an event or ongoing situation that has caused significant emotional pain or high levels of stress. This type of depression can range from a sense of "feeling low" to what can amount to a state of emotional near-paralysis. It can last for a few hours or a day—or drag on for weeks and months.

The death of a pet is certainly the type of event that one would expect to trigger depression. It is traumatic, painful and stressful; it creates a situation that plunges a person into a whirlpool of emotions, and is an event that one may very well wish to withdraw from rather than confront. But, though depression is a logical result of pet loss, it is also a state of mind that can impede a pet owner's recovery from that loss.

Shirley O., who felt such guilt over feeding her dog the bones that caused its death, also suffered from the classic symptoms of depression. "The sudden death of my dog left me so devastated that I'd walk around the house wringing my hands and crying," she wrote. "I lost my appetite and powers of concentration, and wondered if I was losing my mind." A California pet owner experienced another typical manifestation of depression: She found herself virtually unable to carry on with her day-to-day routines. "Frankly, I didn't get much done and had lost interest in living," she wrote. Even getting out of bed, eating and performing simple tasks was an effort. Severe depression can make living seem intolerable, and rob one of the willpower and strength to put forth even the most minimal of efforts.

Shirley's situation was a little unusual: Three months before the death of her dog, her husband had died of a lengthy illness. She felt considerably more anguish over the death of the dog than of her husband, and wondered if perhaps the dog's death had triggered pent-up feelings that she had not released the first time through. She discounted that possibility, however. "My husband had wanted to die for years," she wrote, "and made himself and those around him so miserable that it was a relief when he didn't suffer anymore."

Despite Shirley's disclaimer, it seems likely that the death of her dog was the proverbial hole in the dike that let a whole flood of painful emotions, perhaps bottled up for years, burst through. It also seems likely that, due to the difficulties in her marital relationship, Shirley developed an unusually strong bond with her dog, who probably provided the love and support that was not forthcoming elsewhere.

This type of situation is not as uncommon as it might sound. If your life is in turmoil—if, for instance, problems are occurring in relationships or careers or family situations—your relationship with your pet may be the only stable thing in your life. No matter how bad things get everywhere else, a pet will continue to offer unconditional love and acceptance.

Even when the trying times or stressful changes are past, you may still feel an intense attachment to that pet. "I couldn't have survived without him," you might say. "He was my good luck charm." You might even fear that your life will fall apart completely without that "anchor," even if the crises that the pet anchored you through have long since resolved themselves. If they haven't been resolved, the loss of the pet can be even more traumatic, because you may then feel completely cut off from any source of love and support.

Thus the loss of a pet should be viewed not just as an independent event, but in the context of your life at the time of the loss. If you find yourself reacting far more severely to the loss than you anticipated—perhaps more severely than you have reacted to deaths of earlier pets—you might wish to examine other possible sources of stress in your life. Was your pet helping you cope with painful emotions arising from some other problem? Has the death of the pet left you not only with your grief over its loss, but with an unpleasant situation or backlog of stress that you must now face alone, without the pet's "moral support"? If you can, try to separate the bereavement trauma from other crises in your life and allot some time to it alone, so that you can view it from a perspective that is not magnified and distorted by external events.

The depression that results from this type of situation, or even from the loss of a pet without outside complications, makes a constructive approach to handling your grief difficult. One of the symptoms of depression is a lack of energy, an inability to focus even on simple things, let alone on the overwhelming problem of your grief. While it is not a good idea to distract yourself from your grief to the point of ignoring or denying its existence, one tried-and-true coping strategy is to focus on outside activities: your work, friends, a change of scene. This type of healthy distraction keeps you in touch with reality, which helps keep your grief and loss in perspective. But depression robs you of the energy or inclination to pursue even trivial activities, creating a spiral effect: If you cannot distract yourself from grief, you tend to dwell upon it, which makes the depression worse, which makes it even more difficult to break out of the cycle, and so forth.

Powerful emotions are an integral part of grief. You won't be able to avoid them, and in some cases, in the right proportions, these emotions can be helpful to you in negotiating the grief-swamp. Constructive anger, for example, can help you resolve the situation that caused your pet's death, giving you a feeling of accomplishment. However, anger that you hold onto because you can't focus it constructively can make you feel helpless, and hinder your progress. Blind anger will simply send you charging off wildly through the swamp or keep you running in circles.

Guilt has few benefits; however, Kathi D.'s guilt over her failure to immunize her dog caused her to be much more careful with subsequent pets. If you are somehow responsible for the death of your pet, your sense of guilt is useful only so far as it prompts you to correct the error—fix the fence, keep your next cat indoors, never feed bones to another dog. But if guilt causes you to focus on your own supposed worthlessness and inadequacies, you trap yourself in the swamp by convincing yourself that you're such a lowlife scum that you belong there.

Denial can help you on a brief, temporary basis by letting you shift your attention away from emotions that are, for the moment, too painful to bear. It's perfectly acceptable, for instance, to say, "I won't think about what just happened right now, because I have to drive home on the freeway, and I'll fall apart and be unable to function if I don't put it out of my mind. I'll fall apart when I get home, instead." But if you try to deny the situation for a longer period of time or altogether, beware: The swamp hasn't gone away just because you have closed your eyes and told yourself that it doesn't exist. You are still in the middle of it, and by walking on blindly you may step in quicksand when you least expect it.

Depression could surely be described as quicksand. It is a natural reaction, and justified by the nature of your loss. But if you feel the symptoms of depression taking hold of you to the extent that they interfere with your day-to-day life, you need to make every possible effort to break out of it before it becomes a trap. This isn't easy to accomplish alone; if you can, enlist the help of friends and relatives to keep you "moving" and distracted. Even if your friends don't understand the cause of your grief, let them know that you need their help and support regardless. It's impossible to even begin to make your way out of the swamp if you're sinking slowly into a patch of quicksand.

"Like all counselors, I am often asked, 'When will I get over this? Will I ever get over this?'" writes Muriel Franzblau of the Bide-A-Wee Home Association. "Though my answer is frequently surprising to clients, I've seen it work well time and time again: 'You won't get over it. I don't believe we ever "get over" the loss of someone we've loved so much. But you'll do something much better. Gradually, and in your own time, you'll make peace with yourself and then you'll make peace with your loss. And you'll go on from there.' "

Coping with sorrow is easier said than done—but it has been done, and you can do it too.



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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



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