

When your pet passes away: coping with loss

By Peter Lopatin for WebVet



Even the dearest friend, loving spouse, or devoted child sometimes falls short of our expectations or causes us pain. The thoughtless remarks, the angry outburst, the unkindest cut, are part and parcel of human relationships. We are, after all, *only human*.

But unlike people, our animal companions are unfailingly faithful, always devoted and constant, and never judgmental. They have no hidden agendas and no unspoken resentments. They are always happy to see us and don't know what it means to bear a grudge.

It's no wonder then that **when a pet dies** (<http://webvet.com/main/article?id=1367>), we feel a profound sense of loss and grieve deeply.

Coping with that loss (<http://webvet.com/main/article/id/1501/med/0>) can be a challenge and, for some, the challenge may seem overwhelming.

Recognizing the stages of grief

An important first step is to remember that grieving is a process that no two people experience in exactly the same way. However, those who have studied that process recognize that it has characteristic stages. These were first identified by the Swiss psychologist, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*.

Although Kübler-Ross was concerned specifically with the grief experienced by people diagnosed with a terminal illness, others have come to recognize that the stages of grief that she identified can occur among those grieving the loss of a loved one, including a pet.

The stages include:

- Denial
- Anger/Guilt
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

It is important to remember that not everyone experiences *all* of these stages, nor does everyone experience them in the same order or to the same degree. Your particular personality as well as the circumstances of your pet's death -- a protracted illness vs. sudden death; natural causes vs. accident, for example -- will determine which of these stages you will experience and the duration of each stage.

Denial

When told that a pet is terminally ill, some owners, unable to face up to the painful reality, instead deny it: *"This can't be happening. There must be some mistake."* But denying the undeniable usually doesn't last very long. The second stage soon follows.

Anger/Guilt

In this stage, the overwhelming feeling is: *"It's just not fair! How can this be? Who is responsible for this?"* You may feel responsible for your pet's illness or death, certain that something you did or failed to do brought it about: *"How could I have let this happen? Why didn't I catch it sooner?"*

Bargaining

When told that your pet is terminally ill, you may still harbor the hope that, somehow, you will be able to postpone or delay the inevitable. Often, the plea is made to a higher power: *"Oh God, please let him live another year."*

Depression

Once the certainty of your pet's impending death can no longer be denied, you may sink into depression. Tears flow freely, your usual energy and zest for life seem to have drained away, and the normal day-to-day tasks of everyday life seem like an unbearable burden.

Acceptance

Ultimately, you **will** come to terms with what has happened or is soon to happen. Your sorrow doesn't vanish, but it will stop haunting you. Fond memories come to replace the pain of loss and you are no longer burdened by negative emotions.

Accept your feelings; seek support

Grief is a normal reaction to loss. Don't feel obligated to *'keep a stiff upper lip.'* Be patient with yourself and allow yourself to grieve. Friends and family may, with the best of intentions, urge you to *'get over it.'* Thank them for their concern, but explain that you have to grieve in your own way and in your own time and ask them for their patience and support. At times, you will find solace by 'talking through' your feelings; at other times, quiet personal reflection will serve you best. You are the best judge of your own needs.

If religion plays a significant role in your life, seek the support of your congregation and clergyman. Don't assume that they will be dismissive because, after all, it was *'only a pet.'*

There are many **pet loss support groups**. Local animal shelters and humane societies should be able to provide you with a referral. (**See sidebar**)

If you find that your sense of loss is overwhelming your ability to cope, there are **pet loss support hotlines** with trained counselors who can provide support.

Finally, if you feel that you need professional counseling, don't hesitate to seek it. A few sessions with a compassionate professional -- a psychologist or social worker -- can go a long way to setting you back on an even keel.

Grief is not forever

You will always feel some sadness for your loss; that sadness is the price of having loved another creature. But as difficult as it may be to believe while you are suffering so acutely, know this: your grief **will** end and be replaced by loving memories. Give yourself time.

Credit: Reviewed by Amy Attas, VMD