

Coping with Grief

PET LOSS EDITION



Introduction

At Colchester East Hants Hospice Society, we recognize that there are many different ways to cope with grief and loss. The death of a pet can bring unique challenges, and the supports available often differ from those offered after the death of a person. We are grateful to have partnered with *Tender Tails* to create this resource and offer strategies that may provide comfort as you navigate your grief.

Pets can offer unconditional love, loyalty, and acceptance, creating a bond that is often free from the types of conflict that can exist in human relationships. The death of a pet can be painful and leave us unsure how to navigate our emotions and daily life. The animal who died may have played an important role in your accessibility — supporting you physically, emotionally, mentally, or even financially. They may have also helped you access certain communities, groups, or locations. This booklet provides information about grieving the loss of your pet and offers practical strategies for coping. While not every suggestion will resonate with everyone, our goal is to offer information and guidance that may be useful to you during this difficult time.

What is Grief?

Grief is the natural response to any type of loss including the death of a person or pet. It is an active and ongoing process that impacts people in a variety of ways. For some people, grief feels overwhelming and consuming; for others, it may show up in quieter, less intense ways. It

is important to understand that everyone grieves differently and there are no linear stages or timeline for your grieving journey.

Pet Loss & Disenfranchised Grief

Grief becomes *disenfranchised* when other people do not view a person's loss or their grief as real or important. Society often makes assumptions about grief based on the type of relationship and judges if the loss is "worthy" of grieving. After the death of your pet, you may find that your grief is disenfranchised and you are not alone.

Society often views pets as "replaceable" or "less important" than humans. Therefore, friends, co-workers, or family members may minimize your grief after losing a pet ("you can just get another one"). Support is limited when experiencing this type of grief compared to the support that is typically offered when grieving the death of a person. Many pet owners identify as their pet's "parent," "best friend," or primary companion and it could feel as if your identity is lost after your pet dies.

Grievors may also feel pressure to "get over" the loss of their pet quickly. The stigma surrounding grief after the loss of a pet may prevent people from taking time off work or engaging in rituals (funerals, ceremonies, etc.) that can help provide a tangible way to honor loss, express emotions, and create a sense of closure and connection during a time of uncertainty.

Common Grief Reactions

Although all grief is unique, being aware of the common reactions people experience after a loss could help you anticipate what may happen and help you feel less alone.

Shock. When you learn that your pet has died, you may feel numb. You may go through a prolonged stage of shock or you may express your emotions immediately. You may also feel a sense of disbelief. These reactions are very common.

Emotional release. There can be many activators for emotional release. The silence of a home without a pet can feel overwhelming and everyday environments (neighborhood walks, dog parks, etc.) can become emotional reminders. Crying is an expression of grief and can be very healing, but in our society experiencing and showing emotion are often discouraged. It's important to be aware of your own emotional reactions and find safe and healthy ways to let those feelings out.

Anger. When grieving you may respond to others with irritability and anger. It's common to feel frustrated when others seem insensitive or do not understand what you're going through. Anger may be directed at multiple places such as:

- Veterinary team for perceived failures, delays, or recommendations.
- Family members for not agreeing to treatments, pushing for euthanasia, or not providing enough support.

- Oneself for perceived mistakes, lack of resources, or “not noticing sooner.”

This anger often masks deeper feelings of guilt, fear, or helplessness.

Sadness or despair. Some people may feel like there is nothing to live for and that nothing they do seems worthwhile anymore. There may be a sense of “what now?” as you adjust to a change in daily routine. Tears, longing, and profound sorrow are normal reactions, even if they feel “too much” compared to society’s expectations.

Guilt. The death of a pet can often involve euthanasia. Pet parents carry the responsibility of deciding “when” and “if” to end a pet’s life. When faced with making this decision, you may think of many things that you could have, or should have, done differently when your pet was alive. Choosing euthanasia for your pet may also feel like it conflicts with your values. When euthanasia is chosen for behavioural reasons, you may feel guilt and shame in a different way. If your pet died as the result of an accident, you may blame yourself. Remember that just because you *feel* guilty, does not mean that you *are* guilty of any wrongdoing. These are common feelings and you are not alone.

Helplessness/Powerlessness. Pet parents often describe feeling as though they had “no choice” when medical realities, financial barriers, or the absence of treatment options limited what could be done for their pet. There are times when the treatment does not exist, leaving pet parents with no options. Watching your pet decline

without being able to cure or comfort them can feel helpless. Pet parents may feel conflicted about wanting to keep their pet alive, while also not wanting them to suffer.

Loneliness. Loneliness in grief brings with it a longing to return to a state of normal that no longer exists. Your pet helped shape your days with feeding times, walks, cuddles, and bedtime rituals. Without them, those routines have been disrupted. The quiet without the sound of them in your home may feel overwhelming, and it's natural to notice their absence.

Social withdrawal. When you're grieving, you might feel like withdrawing from social relationships for a while. You may feel an overall sense of disinterest or lack of motivation. The thought of participating in activities, hobbies, or interests you used to enjoy might now seem completely overwhelming. Depending on the type of animal you had, you may have accessed the world with their support, or needed to leave your home to access your pet. It is a normal protective instinct to want to withdraw when in pain, but if this persists for a long period of time, it might be a good idea to reach out for support. This avoidance may disrupt physical activity, self-care, and connection with community, adding another layer of isolation.

Physical distress. Symptoms such as tightness in the throat, shortness of breath or a hollow feeling in the stomach may come in waves. You may find that you feel tense and anxious as well as an increased or decreased appetite. Sleep patterns might become altered – either

having difficulties sleeping, or wanting to sleep all of the time. There are many variations on the physical signs of grief and they are normal responses to loss. However, if you're experiencing any that are of particular concern and have continued for a long period of time, it's best to consult your healthcare provider.

Preoccupation with the deceased. You may try to think of other things but find yourself unable to stop thinking about your pet. It may be difficult to concentrate on anything and certain aspects of their death might play over and over in your mind. These thought patterns are perfectly normal reactions. It takes a while to mentally adjust to losing a pet who was a big part of your life.

Spiritual questioning. You may struggle with large, painful questions like, "Why did this have to happen?", "What is the point of life or death?" When you're grieving, these questions often indicate a search for meaning or trying to make sense of the loss. Some may turn to faith for comfort, others may question their faith as the result of a loss.

Coping and Self Care

When you're grieving, it's understandable that certain aspects of caring for yourself may be harder than others. You may be distracted, dealing with all kinds of change and uncertainty. Therefore, it makes sense that grief can affect your daily habits and routines. Taking care of your sleep and your diet, and keeping a balance between relaxation and activity, is important as you grieve. This might seem like common sense advice, but when your

world gets turned upside down by death, your basic self-care can be the first thing to go.

When you miss your pet, you might ...

- Cry and let your feelings out.
- Share stories with others about good times with your pet. 7
- Plant a tree in their memory or sponsor a bench in your favourite park.
- Write an obituary for your pet and share on social media or with those who knew your pet.
- Look at pictures and make a collage of your favourites to be framed and hung in your home.
- Talk to someone who understands, who will not try to fix your grief, and who will just listen.
- Create a memorial in your home or backyard and talk to your pet about how you are feeling.
- Create a memory book with stories, photos, and other memorabilia.
- Keep a journal of your memories with your pet. Many people worry they'll forget the little details —the look in their pet's eyes, their unique quirks, or the joyful moments they shared. Writing these memories down creates a safe place to return to, offering comfort, reflection, and a way to keep your pet's presence alive in your daily life.
- Write a letter to your pet telling them how much they are missed, offering an apology, telling them about the changes in your life, or, after a time, about how you will move forward.

Self-talk & being kind to ourselves– Here are some things you can say to yourself that are gentle and comforting that also acknowledge the reality of what you may be feeling:

- *I feel really bad today, but it won't always be like this.*
- *I loved _____ so much and their death has created a huge hole in my life.*
- *My grief and feelings of loss are normal.*
- *Feeling angry and lost is a normal part of grief.*
- *Remembering _____ is painful, but I want to because they were important to me.*
- *Just because I feel guilty, does not mean that I am guilty of wrongdoing.*
- *I made the decision to have _____ euthanized because I wanted them to have a dignified death.*

You may not be accustomed to talking to yourself in this way and it might feel odd or uncomfortable, especially at first. Some people find it helpful to write down their self-talk. Putting your negative thoughts on paper can help get them out of your head and make them easier to challenge.

Belonging to a caring community – Connecting with others in your community, with a group of family, friends, or neighbours, can sometimes help bring some comfort. Connecting with others who have experienced the loss of a pet may also be useful.

Giving yourself permission – You may need to intentionally seek permission from yourself every day to

grieve. In many ways, we live in a world that pretends there is no sickness and death, no sadness and no pain. We are constantly exposed to the idea that having feelings is bad – an indication of personal weakness – rather than a normal and essential part of being human. As a result, you might be convinced that you shouldn't be sad when your pet dies, or that you're allowed to feel a little bit sad, but not too much or for too long. There is no magic potion or shortcut through grief. In fact, the most direct way through grief is to address it head-on rather than finding ways to avoid it. One way to do this is to give ourselves permission to feel as bad as we do.

Grief Changes Over Time

Grieving the loss of a pet takes time and in the early days, grief can feel overwhelming. As time goes on, most people notice that the intensity slowly softens. Grief often shifts from being constant to coming in waves—sometimes brought on by a memory, a favorite toy, or an anniversary. These moments can still feel painful, but they usually do not last as long as they once did.

Many people wonder if there is a finish line to the grieving journey but the idea of an endpoint may be misleading. Grief most certainly changes and shifts with time and reflection but it might be something you always carry with you. Grief is deeply individual, shaped by your bond with your pet, the circumstances of their death, your support system, and personal history. As time goes on, you may be able to draw some comfort from knowing that your memories and grief are necessary and

important. They are, in fact, a profound tribute to how your pet touched your life.

Recognizing When More Help is Needed

It is normal for grief to be intense, painful, and all-consuming for a period of time. If these reactions persist and/or pose a danger to your own health and safety, it is recommended that you consult with a counsellor or healthcare professional.

Tender Tails, based out of Carnegy Animal Hospital, is a compassionate space for pet parents grieving their companion animals. The program offers empathy, caring, and a community where pet parents can express their most difficult feelings, thoughts, or experiences. The following supports are available:

- Individual grief counseling is available in person at Carnegy Animal Hospital, virtually, or by phone.
- Eight-week pet loss virtual support group for adults mourning their pets. This group provides information on grief-related subjects through informal discussions and sharing stories. Topics such as guilt, emptiness, and regret are covered.
- Services are eligible for most benefits plans.

For additional information, please visit their website <https://www.carnegyanimalhospital.com/services/tender-tails-program> or contact Tender Tails via email tendertailscare@gmail.com or phone (902) 399-5896.

Additional Resources & Information

The following resources are available online at no cost:

The **Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center** has many supports and resources for pet owners, including:

- Tips for helping children cope with a pet's illness or death 11
- Online support groups and chat rooms for people grieving the loss of a pet
- A reading list with books and articles about pet loss

<https://vmc.vet.osu.edu/services/honoring-the-bond>

Veterinary Wisdom: Support for Pet Parents provides:

- Information to help you prepare for end-of-life care and make arrangements for your pet
- Memorial ideas and helpful resources for coping with pet loss

<https://www.veterinarywisdom.com/resource-center/support-for-pet-parents/>

Losing Lulu: Grieving Behavioural Euthanasia Together

You may want to visit this website if your pet was euthanized because of behaviour issues and you want to learn more about grief within this context

<https://www.losinglulu.com/>



Hope & Understanding for the Grieving

89 Queen Street
Truro, Nova Scotia
902.893.3265
info@cehhospice.org

Follow us ...

Facebook: cehhospice
Instagram: @cehhospice
LinkedIn: cehhospice

www.cehhospice.org