

NAVIGATING PET LOSS

A GUIDE TO PET LOSS AND GRIEF SUPPORT



For Immediate Support:
(855) 245-8214

6700 Laurel Bowie Road,
Bowie, MD 20910

Supporting You Through Pet Loss

At Dogs and Cats Emergency & Specialty, we recognize that pets are family. The bonds we share with them run deep, and when we lose them, the grief can feel overwhelming. While no words can ease that pain, we hope this guide offers comfort, perspective, and support during an emotional time.

In every stage of care, including the most difficult, our mission remains the same: to provide each pet with individualized, quality care through collaboration, education, integrity, and compassion.

As veterinary professionals, pet owners, and advocates, we walk this path with you, from the first exam to the most difficult decisions. We are committed to giving pets the best quality of life, and we recognize the emotional weight that comes with saying goodbye. It is a privilege to care for your pet, and we hope this guide helps support you through the grieving process.

Sincerely,

The DCES Team
Dogs and Cats Emergency & Specialty

Table of Contents

Introduction to Grief	01
Bill of Rights for Grieving Animal Lovers	02
Experiencing Grief Before the Actual Loss	03
Guide through the Euthanasia Procedure	04
Navigating Loss	05
Getting the Conversation Started with your Family	06
Children and Pet Loss	07
Age-Related Developmental Stages	08
Pet Loss Resources	09

GRIEF



UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is the response we have to loss, and can be particularly profound when a strong bond is present, such as with an animal. This response is not only emotional, but it can also be physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual and/or philosophical in nature.

TYPES OF GRIEF

- Anticipatory: feelings of bereavement that occur prior to the physical loss.
- Disenfranchised: Also known as “hidden grief”. Refers to any grief that is often invalidated or unacknowledged by social norms, such as pet loss.
- Cumulative: Also known as “re-grief”, the theory that we feel all our past losses with new losses; it can come up suddenly and feel very intense. Pet loss, for instance can bring up previous pets, but other losses within the family.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL MANIFESTATIONS OF GRIEF

- Shock or Numbness
- Denial
- Anger
- Guilt
- Relief
- Anxiety or Panic
- Depression, Sadness or Loneliness
- Confusion or Difficulty Concentrating
- Sleep Disturbances
- Appetite Changes
- Muscle Tension
- Headaches or Stomach Aches

BILL OF RIGHTS FOR GRIEVING ANIMAL LOVERS

You have the right to:

Feel the pain of grief when the bonds with our pets are broken. The bonds we have with our companion animals are deep and strong; the pain we feel when those bonds are broken is real and worthy of our grief.

To feel shocked and overwhelmed by the intensity of our grief. The grief we feel at this loss can be far more intense than we ever expected, no different from that of losing another special family member or cherished friend.

To understand our grief reactions, feelings and behaviors as normal. Grief is a natural, spontaneous response to the loss of a significant relationship.

To express our grief in our own unique way, within our own time frame. How we express our grief will vary among individuals, but we all get through it in personally meaningful ways.

To have our grief recognized by others as significant and legitimate. We're not grieving "just an animal." Since we're the only ones who know how much our animals meant to us, when they're gone, we're the only ones who can measure how very much we've lost.

To feel supported by others in our grief. We must find someone with whom we can openly acknowledge our feelings, express and work through our pain, and come to terms with our loss.

To honor the memory of our pets in whatever way we see fit. To memorialize our beloved companion animals is to honor and acknowledge the important role they played in our lives, to bring comfort to ourselves and to help us keep their love and presence in our hearts.

Copyright © 2003 by Marty Tousley, CNS-BC, FT, DCC



Experiencing Grief Before the Actual Loss

Anticipatory Grief happens when you know you will lose your pet, but the physical loss has not yet occurred. This form of grief is not often talked about but commonly experienced. Keep in mind that letting go doesn't mean you have to stop loving your companion animal; even after they die. During this stage, some people find a safe place in their hearts to hold memories and focus on creating new memories in the time their pet has left. Others make a bucket list and do things that they have always wanted to with their pet, as well as activities their pet loves to do more often. The emotions that accompany anticipatory grief are similar to those which occur after a loss but can sometimes feel like an emotional roller coaster. Some days may be challenging; other days, you may not experience grief at all.

COMMON SIGNS OF ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

- Sadness & tearfulness
- Fear
- Irritability
- Loneliness
- A desire to talk about what is happening
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Intense concern for your pet



Guide through the Euthanasia Procedure

What Can I Do To Prepare

Deciding when it's time to say goodbye to your pet can be a challenging decision. Your pet's quality of life, any age-related difficulties, and pain levels should be your top concern. To assist you in making the best decision, we have compiled the following resources:



[Defining "Quality of Life"](#)



[Quality-of-Life Assessment](#)



[Assessing Quality of Life](#)

What Should I Expect

One of our medical team members will guide you through the euthanasia procedure and address any questions or concerns you may have. When you have decided to proceed with euthanasia, your pet will have a drug administered that is intended to induce deep sedation to keep them calm and comfortable. If you wish, you and your family can stay with your pet as they enter this relaxed state.

Once your pet is comfortably sedated, our team will administer the medication that will allow your pet to transition painlessly. During the euthanasia process, a pet's body may respond with muscle twitches, breathing motions, or the release of bodily functions, which are common responses and do not reflect discomfort.

NAVIGATING LOSS

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Self-care is always an important practice to follow, but perhaps even more imperative during this trying time. Take care of yourself by following good nutrition, practicing a healthy sleep schedule, moving your body, and finding ways to relax that you enjoy. Be kind to yourself during this time. Honor your feelings. Allow sadness and joy to occur at the same time. Reach out to any friends or family that understand your bond and grief.



PET MEMORIAL

Pet loss is real loss. Be gentle with yourself and allow intentional time to release emotions. Finding ways to memorialize and honor your pet provides your family important closure and dignifies the meaning they held in your family. Some find it helpful to hold a ceremony or funeral service aligned with their cultural beliefs. Others prefer to write an obituary for their pet, create a photo album, or plant a memorial tree. Personalize your pet's memorial to reflect their unique personality and preferences, your cultural beliefs, and the role they played in your family. Here are a few suggestions to consider for honoring your pet and getting the conversation started with your family.

Getting the Conversation Started with your Family

- Share your favorite memory with your pet.
- Where were some of your pet's favorite places?
- What were some of your pet's favorite toys?
- What were some of your pet's favorite treats?
- What were some of your pet's favorite activities?
- How did your pet like to show their love?
- Share your favorite picture of your pet.



MEMORIALIZATION IDEAS

- Hold a funeral or memorial
- Write a eulogy, obituary, or biography
- Celebrate anniversaries (donate, visit favorite places)
- Create a photo album or slideshow
- Host a music-based ceremony (bell ringing)
- Plant flowers, herbs, or a tree
- Place a decorated rock in your garden/home
- Hang a flag in their honor
- Make a toy for a shelter pet with a message
- Incorporate pet tags into accessories (jewelry)
- Host a family campfire (share stories, toss rosemary)
- Decorate the candle holder
- Paint a memorial rock or garden stone
- Decorate a pot with their collar or items
- Get a tattoo
- Incorporate cremated remains or prints into jewelry/decor
- Make holiday ornaments with pet's picture
- Create a memory box (collar, leash, toys)
- Donate to an animal shelter (time or money)
- Journal about the loss
- Write letters to/from your pet
- Make a windchime with their picture
- Create a headstone
- Decorate a birdhouse
- Frame a picture

This resource is adapted from materials by Moira Allen, 2001.

Children and Pet Loss

Bereavement in children has too often been trivialized or given inadequate attention. Children do not respond to death as adults do. Their normal reactions are much more natural, curious and varied, until that is changed by the adult. To help you navigate the challenges that may arise due to pet loss, we have compiled questions children may ask, age-related developmental stages (see the back of this handout), tips on how to incorporate children in memorializing their pets.



Age-Related Developmental Stages

How a child responds will depend on the strength of the bond with the pet, as well as the child's age and developmental stage. Always keep in mind that the parent is the model here for almost everything. Although the general subject of death is not unknown to children, you may be surprised at how much your child does know. For recommendations for specific age groups, please see the backside of this handout.



Questions That Children May Ask

Children may ask many questions upon the death of a pet. This may include why did they die? Where did they go? Will we see them again? Are they with God? Can they hear us? It is best to answer questions as honestly as possible - but avoid giving too much detail with extra information. But by all means, share your own personal thoughts, feeling and beliefs.



Involving Children in Memorializing Their Pets

Children, as well as adults, need good distractions from fixation of the death of a pet. Please visit our website for a list of ways to creatively memorialize a pet: www.dcvetreferral.com/endofliveservices



Who Else Should Be Informed?

When a child loses a beloved pet it is advisable to inform other caregivers. This includes day care providers and teachers because homework may not get done or participation in class may drop noticeably. Appetite and sleep habits might change as well. These are all signs that may need to be addressed. They will need their adult role models to learn appropriate responses to help them deal with this kind of traumatic loss.



Children's Books

There are many excellent and heartwarming illustrated books for children, on the death of a beloved pet. Please visit our website for a listing of recommended books: www.dcvetreferral.com/endofliveservices

Age-Related Developmental Stages

Related To The Death Of A Pet

This resource is adapted from materials provided by www.alpb.org, 2025.

2 - 3

Toddlers

- Do not have life experiences to give the understanding
- Inform the pet has died and will not return
- Reassure them it is not their fault
- Show your own feelings of grief, but these must be controlled & perceived as a normal response to the loss of a loved one.
- Maintain usual routines
- Will accept a new pet easily
- Expressions of grief may be intermittent

4 - 6

Preschool

- May have some understanding of death
- Reassure them it is not their fault
- Manifestations of grief may include bowel or bladder disturbances, change in play/eat/etc.
- Have frequent, brief discussions to allow child to express feelings
- Art or story-telling about the loss could be therapeutic
- Include them in the funeral arrangements

7 - 9

Middle Childhood

- May know that death is irreversible
- Reassure them it is not their fault
- May spark worries about the death of their parents
- They might ask questions that appear morbid
- Manifestations of grief may include but not limited to school problems, anti-social behavior and or clinging behavior.

10 - 11

Preadolescence

- Usually understand that death is natural and inevitable
- Reassure them it is not their fault
- Often react to death in a manner very similar to adults, using their parent's attitude as their model.
- Pet's death can trigger memories of previous losses of any kind, and this should be open for discussion.

12 - 18

Adolescents

- Reacts similarly to adults
- Expression can range from total lack of concern to hyper- emotional
- Peer approval is very important
- Adolescent is trying to find their own true feelings, and may be prone to conflict with a parent on how to express feelings.
- Avoid hostility or aggression

19 - 22

Young Adults

- May have feelings of guilt for abandoning their pets when leaving for college, work or marriage.
- Let them share your feelings to a reasonable degree - according to their maturity and ability to understand.
- Teach them that ultimately, all life is change and growth.

Resources



[Pet Compassion Resources](#)
[Available 24/7 in English,](#)
[Spanish, and French.](#)



[Agape Pet Services. Pet](#)
[cremation, urns, cremation](#)
[jewelry, and keepsakes.](#)



[University of Tennessee](#)
[Veterinary Social Work](#)
[Pet Loss Support Group](#)



[Lap of Love. A network of vets](#)
[that offer in-home hospice &](#)
[end-of-life care.](#)



[The Ohio State University Pet](#)
[Loss Support & Online](#)
[Resources](#)



[Pet Loss Support Hotline at](#)
[Cornell University College of](#)
[Veterinary Medicine](#)



[The Wendt Center for Loss](#)
[and Healing. Low-cost](#)
[practice for pet bereavement.](#)



[Rainbow Bridge. A virtual grief](#)
[support community with an](#)
[area to post a memorial.](#)



[Baltimore Humane Society](#)
[Memorial Park Pet Cemetery.](#)



[Artful Ashes memorializes](#)
[cremains into beautiful glass](#)
[art.](#)



[National Suicide Prevention](#)
[Lifeline. Free and confidential](#)
[support for people in distress.](#)



[Pet Perennials provides](#)
[memorial ideas with many](#)
[options.](#)



[Association for Pet Loss and](#)
[Bereavement](#)