

NAVIGATING PET LOSS

# A GUIDE TO PET LOSS AND GRIEF SUPPORT



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Dear Pet Owner,

Losing a pet is an experience that can leave a profound impact on our lives. Pets are not just animals; they can become members of our families, offering unconditional love, companionship, and joy. When they leave us, it is only natural to feel a deep sense of loss and grief.

This guide has been thoughtfully created to provide you with support and understanding during this challenging time. As a Veterinary Social Worker and lifelong pet owner, I have seen firsthand the significant emotional bonds that form between pets and their owners. I hope that the information and resources within this guide will help you navigate your grief, honor your pet's memory, and find comfort going forward.

Grief is a unique and personal journey, and there is no right or wrong way to feel. It is important to give yourself permission to mourn in a way that feels authentic to you. Whether you find solace in sharing stories about your pet, creating a memorial, or simply taking time to reflect on the joyful moments you shared, know that your feelings are valid and significant.

In this guide, you will find practical advice on coping with pet loss, understanding the grieving process, and seeking support from friends, family, or professional counselors. Remember, it is okay to reach out for help if you need it.

Talking to someone who understands can make a world of difference. Please be gentle with yourself during this time. Grief is hard work.

With deepest sympathy and support,

*Emmaly Schmidt*

Veterinary Social Worker



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# 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 mean 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.

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# 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 intense feelings of 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 complied 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. You are welcome to be present or not for the procedure. This is a personal decision, and we support you either way. 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, vocalization, eyes that may not close, or the release of bodily functions. These 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 LOSS SUPPORT GROUP

We understand how difficult it is to say goodbye to a beloved, companion animal. We would like to offer you the support and help you may need. We provide a pet loss support group at no charge. A safe environment is provided to discuss and process your feelings of grief and loss. Each group is facilitated in an empathetic and respectful setting by our Veterinary Social Worker.



## 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.



## 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
- Donate pet belongings to a shelter

# 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, feelings 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/endoflifeservices](http://www.dcvetreferral.com/endoflifeservices)



## 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.

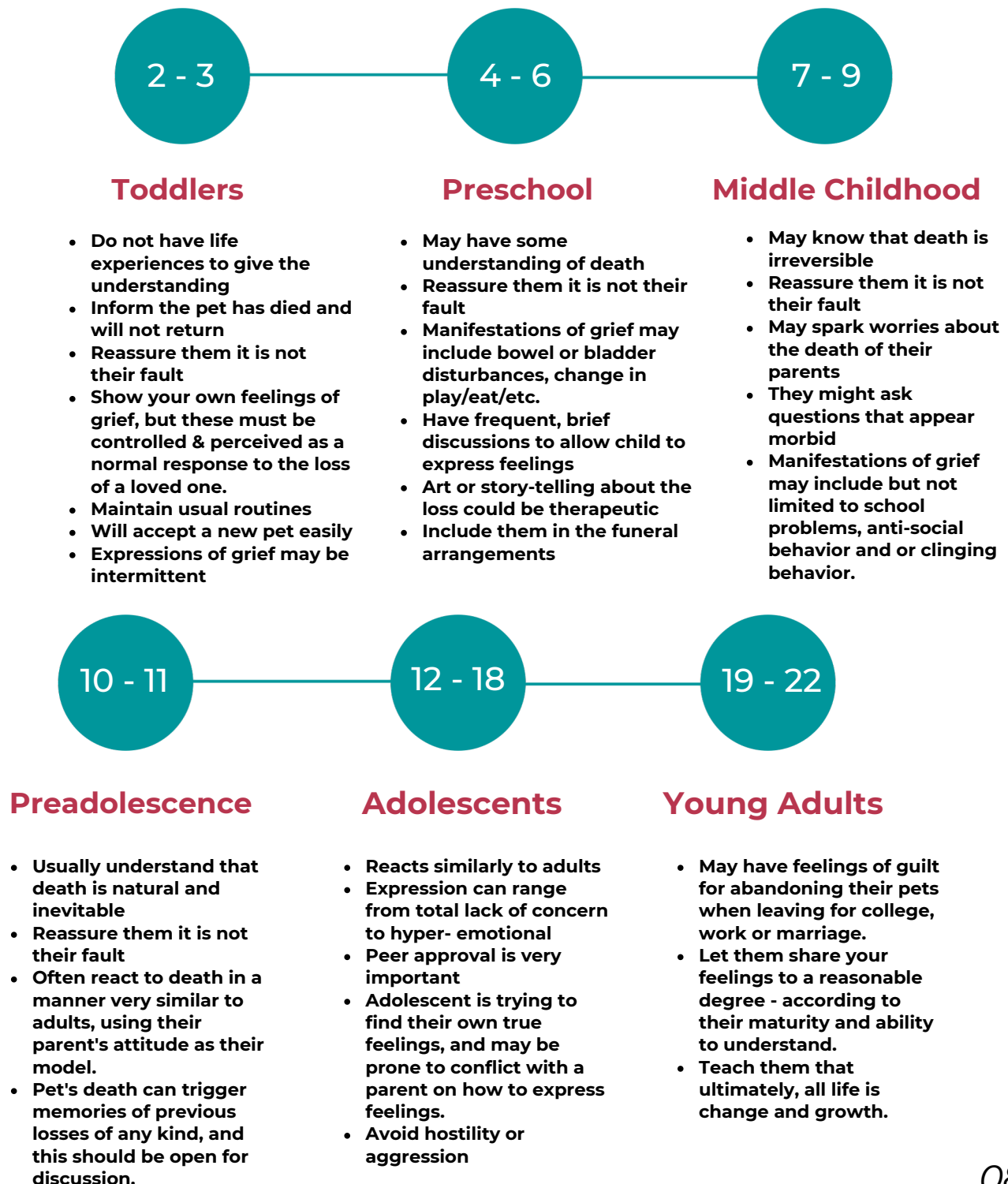


## Children's Books

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/endoflifeservices](http://www.dcvetreferral.com/endoflifeservices)

# Age-Related Developmental Stages

Related To The Death Of A Pet



# Resources



[Dogs and Cats Emergency and Specialty Veterinary Social Worker and Pet Loss Group.](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[Perfect Memorials provides memorial ideas with many options.](#)

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[Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement](#)



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