



Coping with Pet Loss

The loss of a pet or farm animal can be devastating. Cope with the grief by memorializing your pet's life.

If your child loses his pet, help him grieve by talking with him about how he feels and setting up a way to memorialize the pet.

Three months prior to writing this article, two of my best friends died. Year after year, even as advancing age took its toll, they cheered me with their unconditional acceptance and joie de vivre. Their names were Baasha and Dodger. They were sheep.

We who love animals deeply enough to grieve their loss are not alone. Consider these statistics from Colorado State University's Argus Institute website: Sixty-three percent of U.S. households have at least one pet. Ninety-nine percent of these households consider their pets members of the family. Eighty-three percent of America's pet owners refer to themselves as their pet's mom or dad. Fifty-two percent believe their pet listens to them better than anyone else. Fifty-seven percent would prefer their pet as their only companion if they were stranded on a desert island.

When You Lose a Pet

Naturally, when we lose a pet—be it to death or parting due to relocation, divorce, money troubles, allergies or any other reason—we grieve. People who surround themselves with animals are always saying goodbye. No matter the species, loss can leave a gaping crater in your heart. As an animal rescuer, I've said goodbye many times. Here are some things I've learned that help me cope.

Don't grieve your loss on the inside.

The death of a special pet may be one of the most significant losses of a person's life, and grief is a natural response to loss. Heart-wrenching sadness, tear bursts, numbness, anger, frustration and sometimes guilt are all parts of the package that comes with pet loss. Cry. Pound a pillow with your fists. Roll up your car windows and scream. Don't try to be brave, stoic or tough. Releasing despair through an appropriate channel helps, and tears are cathartic. Don't worry if someone is uncomfortable with your tears.

Talk about your pet loss.

Don't share your pain with those who think (much less say), "It was only an animal," or, "You can get another one." Choose your sounding board wisely. Seek others who will listen with an open heart and without passing judgment. If you don't have empathic family or friends, try a pet-bereavement hotline; their services are usually confidential and free (though long-distance charges may apply). University phone lines are good bets because they're staffed by veterinary students who understand your love of animals and recognize your pain. Check them out online to find their available hours and to see how they handle calls. (Some field emails, too.)

Hundreds of additional pet-loss hotlines staffed by trained volunteers are ready to lend a kind word and a sympathetic ear. To find them, download the Delta Society's comprehensive Pet Loss and Bereavement Directory or investigate one of the many online pet-bereavement support forums. Run a search for "pet bereavement forum" or search for an email version at YahooGroups.

Stay busy.

Don't retreat from the rest of your life. Combat the blahs through exercise. Moving your body helps ease bottled-up blues. Walk, run, ride or dance around the house if you have to, but move.

Don't do things you'll regret later.

Appreciate that your capacity for decision-making is impaired. If you can't stand the sight of your horse's bridle hanging in the breezeway or your pet's dishes and toys on the kitchen floor, don't give or throw them away. Later, when your grief subsides a bit, your pet's things may bring you comfort.

There is no specific time frame for grief. Your loss is significant, and grief doesn't quickly pass away. If, however, months after your loss, you still feel isolated, unfocused, lethargic or unable to cope, or if you still lack interest in old passions or joys, please seek treatment for depression.

When a Friend Loses a Pet

It's hard to know what to say or do when tragedy affects the people we care for because each of us grieves in our own



way. But if a friend loses a cherished pet, horse or livestock friend, there are steps you can take to help her cope.

Acknowledge the pet loss.

Call, email or send a sympathy card, but also pay your respects in person as soon as you can. Don't stay away because you don't know what to say. "I'm sorry" is adequate. Your friend needs your comforting presence, not elaborate words of condolence.

Help out when you can.

Pet bereavement is physically and emotionally exhausting, so don't ask, "What can I do?" In her benumbed grief, your friend is likely to say, "Nothing." Instead, suggest options. Carry in meals, clean up around the house, babysit, run errands, clean stalls or feed the livestock. Do what needs to be done.

Listen about your friend's pet loss..

When your friend wants to talk about her pet, focus on what's being said. Don't fidget, daydream, interrupt or change the subject, even if the conversation seems to go in circles. If she chooses to be silent, that's OK, too. The grieving heart needs time to heal; don't try to distract with chatter.

When Your Child Grieves a Pet Loss

Sometimes the loss of a pet is a child's first experience with death, so it's important to handle this difficult task with great care.

Tell your child the animal died, and if necessary, explain death in a way she can understand. Don't say, "Blaze was put to sleep," or, "Max ran away from home." Hearing these common phrases, she may be afraid she'll go to sleep like Blaze and not wake up again, or wonder if Max ran away because she pulled his tail. Then she might reason his loss is her fault. Taking your child's age and comprehension level into consideration, be as open and honest as you can.

Keep in mind that when parents don't express their own sadness or grief, children can interpret their stoicism to mean that showing grief is wrong. Don't hold back. Discuss your shared loss, listening carefully to your child's thoughts and concerns, and include her in important decisions, like how and when to memorialize your lost pet and when it's time to get another pet.