



How to Support a Grieving Pet

When a family member dies (or moves away), it's a major life experience for everyone close to them, two and four-footed alike. Because our pets are sensitive to subtle nuances in our exchanges with them, they are also affected by the stress of the loss (along with our reactions to it), because pets grieve too.

In addition, if the deceased family member is also a beloved pet, other companion animals in the home will usually suffer visibly from this loss, especially if they shared a strong attachment.

Heartbreak is Not Exclusive to Humans

It's fair to say that as with humans, the closer the bond that pets share, the deeper the grief. Heartbreak is heartbreak is heartbreak...

Yet, the full truth is that grief is complex and unpredictable because it encompasses much more than sadness; plus, it evolves over time. Like humans, pets exhibit a broad range of distress signals. While common grieving patterns do exist, let's keep in mind that each animal is an individual; in response, it helps to attune to their unique character, expressions and tendencies. In honoring these differences, and this may be surprising, some pets show minimal indications of grief. Let's also put to rest a false dichotomy – while it's true that dogs are far more inclined to engage in pack behavior, cats can also be deeply impacted by the loss of a loved one.

How Can You Tell They're Struggling?

The key is to look for changes in their habits. Consider these pet variations on characteristics we typically associate with human grief:

Behavioral/Physical

Insomnia or lethargy; restlessness (can include nightmare spasms) and inability to settle; loss of or insatiable appetite; rashes or hair loss (can include overgrooming, e.g., licking their paws or stomach bald); more or different vocalizations (e.g., whining, whimpering, howling, meowing

or barking); withdrawing or avoiding social contact (e.g., hiding or not getting up to greet you); clinginess (this can be hard to distinguish if your pal tended to stay nearby already); anhedonia (loss of interest in favorite activities like walks, cuddles and playing); pacing and wandering; nausea/gas/diarrhea/constipation; tremors or stiffness; changes in breathing (an example would be excessive panting)

Emotional/Psychological

Lack of enthusiasm, moodiness, agitation, despair, anguish, boredom, confusion, loneliness, anxiety, worry, irritability or short temper (including destructive acts and aggression)

Timing Matters

If the death of a pet is anticipated and they're senior, terminally ill, or seriously injured, some surviving pets will make a concerted effort to keep the dying pet company, much like people will conduct an end-of-life vigil. Pet parents and veterinarians may arrange for them to be physically present for the final moments, including euthanasia (and burial if one occurs). When we consider that a cat's sense of smell is believed to be 14 times stronger than ours, and a dog's is 40 times stronger, by allowing them to see and sniff their buddy's body, the surviving pets can better understand what is happening.

Following the death, especially if it's a sudden separation or occurs without warning and out of



sight, surviving pets may wander around searching for their missing sibling, waiting at the door or window, or near a favorite spot the deceased frequented. Some will continue to carry around their playmate's toys looking for them, or will leave space in their shared bed or food in a shared bowl, anticipating their return. Such behaviors are very poignant to witness.

What Can You Do to Help Them Cope?

When a companion animal is at the end of its life, pet parents are often focused on making final plans, communicating with other people in the pet's circle, and making adjustments to the demands of daily life. But we also have a responsibility to give special attention to our companion animals who share in the collective grief experience.

Start by relying on a trusted veterinarian for guidance – particularly one specializing in hospice and palliative care like IAAHPC members (<https://community.iaahpc.org>). This is a wonderful community resource for guidance on how to provide support for your particular pet. It's especially helpful to reach out because acute grief can mimic medical conditions and thereby cause confusion, inadvertently delaying diagnosis of a serious clinical problem. Above all, trust your intuition – you know your pet best, so watch them closely for changes – big and small. The loss of a strong social connection will likely challenge their ability to cope and function so they'll benefit from your loving attention as they find their way through their grief.

If there are multiple surviving pets in the home, allow for distinctively different reactions, much like those exhibited by humans, especially children of various ages.

Here are a few general guidelines that tend to be beneficial for all grieving pets:

- Keep routines as consistent as possible. This can be harder than it sounds at first. For example, if you walked your dogs together and now one is gone, the rhythms of this pastime will feel strange. Some pet parents will find it's easier to keep with the same route; while others will vary it as they struggle to face the new absence.
- Maintain your pet's diet and mealtimes. If your pet has lost interest in eating following the death, it's tempting to indulge them with table scraps and fancy treats to cheer them up. However, be careful because if pets learn that not eating results in these high-value rewards, they may decline nutritious meals. If loss of appetite persists, medication can help to restore it.
- Although it's human nature (and also vital) to give comfort to our pets, it's best to keep the contact soothing rather than smothering. Of course, especially since you're going through a difficult time together, providing plenty of quality time when they seem unhappy is encouraged; just keep a close watch for adverse associations that might result from the extra attention. For pets that seem to really miss the deceased, providing them with an item that still has the scent of their friend can help them feel better.
- Recognize that the relationships between your surviving pets will likely shift. When several animals live together, they share unique dynamics. When one dies, the group may become unstable and these shifts can cause hostile exchanges as they work out a new social balance. Your veterinarian or behaviorist/trainer can provide helpful techniques for restoring a peaceful household.
- Create a meaningful ritual for saying goodbye. Planning a special memorial experience that honors and celebrates the pet's life will help the pet's community as you begin to heal. There are a host of ways to pay tribute to this important relationship. For ideas about this aspect of the mourning process, please take a look at the related resource, "How Can I Memorialize My Beloved Pet?"
- Accept that you are having a difficult time too. Be patient and gentle with yourself as you reel from the effects of this significant loss. Do your best to maintain your own normal, supportive routines and supplement them with extra care, social supports, and therapeutic interventions as suit your needs. You deserve to heal and be happy too!

A Final Note of Compassion

Some pet lovers hope to ease the family heartbreak by introducing another pet into the family soon after the death. Because this is such a BIG decision – and no pet can be "replaced" (this tends to cause unfair comparisons with the dearly departed) – it's usually best to avoid this well-intentioned impulse and instead postpone a new addition until the "funk and fog" of early grief subsides and you're thinking clearly again. Allow yourselves – including your companion animals – the opportunity to regain your bearings. The newfound sense of security will mean the world to all of you and free up the loving energy needed to welcome a new member. When you can view and appreciate the new animal for who they are with their own identity, without comparing them to your pet that has passed, that is likely a good indication you're feeling more ready