

Tips for Coping with the Loss of a Pet

If you think of your pet as a member of the family, you're hardly alone: the majority of pet owners hold their animal companions in the same light. This helps explain why grieving for a lost pet can be so tough.

“Pets are anchors in our lives. They provide nurturing and unconditional love, love that we don't even always receive from other people, says Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD, director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and author of *When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remembering and Healing*. “The loss of a pet is a major life event.”

But after the death of a pet, many owners experience what psychologists call “disenfranchised grief,” or the pain of a loss that's not openly acknowledged or socially supported. Subsequently, that grief can worsen into clinical depression, low self-esteem, and withdrawal, which makes it vitally important to develop healthy strategies for coping with this variety of passing. “While we all feel grief at the loss of a pet, what integrates that loss into our lives and softens the sadness is the act of mourning,” Wolfelt says.

It's important to recognize that the feelings associated with the death of a pet—sadness, anger, disbelief, regret—are all normal and deserve expression. Bottling up intense feelings can lead to deep resentment and is stressful on the body, which can make you more vulnerable to illness.

Below are five ways to say goodbye and cope with the loss of your furry family member:

Do something formal. A memorial service can provide a safe space for you and those close to your pet to share stories and openly express emotions, Wolfelt says. Consider holding a small ceremony at home or contacting a pet funeral home. These funeral homes offer burial and cremation services as well as caskets, urns, and grave markers designed for pets. From lighting candles to donating money to an organization that benefits animals, commemorating your pet's life will help you say goodbye.

Take time off. While about 7 in 10 private sector employees get paid bereavement time, it rarely extends to the loss of a pet. Still, you may need to take a day or two off work to regain your sense of equilibrium, according to Wolfelt, who notes that many people experience lethargy and mental disorientation after a pet's death. If your boss is a fellow pet owner, explain your situation to her, or simply take a sick day. No explanation necessary.

Lean on the right friends. About two-thirds of the people in your life will make you feel worse (or at least not better) about the loss of your pet. Why? Poorly chosen comments, like “You can always get another one,” or “Be glad you don’t have to take care of him any more,” according to Wolfelt. “Surround yourself with the select people who affirm and understand the significance of your pet in your life and support you,” he says. Getting involved in a pet loss support group or visiting a grief counselor can also help you work through your emotions.

Look out for number one. Emotional stressors exact a great deal of energy from your body, causing many people to suffer from weakened immune systems and illnesses during grief, he says. While you may experience a loss of appetite and thirst or have trouble sleeping, giving your body plenty of energy through food, water, and rest are important for staying healthy and feeling better.

Put off that trip to the pet store. “Fight off the instinct to get a new pet so you won’t miss the old one,” Wolfelt says. “It’s important to only welcome a new pet into your home once you are ready to attach to him appropriately without comparison.” While each person’s timeline is different, he suggests giving yourself at least six months to process the loss of your pet before getting a new one. “When in doubt, wait,” he says.