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Hospice & Home Support
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Many thanks for your continued generosity.

When We Lose a Cherished Pet

By Elizabeth Landrum, Ph.D. and Nancy Ewert

When people share an intense and special bond with an animal companion, it is natural for them to feel devastated and often overwhelmed with sadness when that animal dies. While we usually associate this kind of grief with the loss of a beloved cat or dog, it can also arise with the death of a farm animal, rabbit, bird, or any time a relationship and emotional attachments have formed. Nonetheless, the grief for an animal is often not treated with the same respect and sensitivity as the grief we bear with the loss of a human companion.

It is common for those who have lost a pet to perceive that their emotions are being dismissed or minimized, and this can contribute to shame or guilt about the intensity of feelings that often arise from the loss. If you have experienced the death or disappearance of a significant companion animal, you know the hurt is deep, real, and exhausting. As Lopez veterinarian Barbara Swahlen says, "After 36 years of practice, I have been witness to the entire spectrum of grieving over a pet's loss, with many clients confiding in me that they feel guilty because they are more grief stricken over the loss of their pet than the loss of a parent or sibling. My feeling is that a pet is an intimate part of your day to day life, depending on you for every aspect of his or her life--food, water, shelter, healthcare, and affection. In most cases, parents and siblings are more separated from our lives. To me, it makes perfect sense that we would feel that loss more profoundly."

In the time following your loss, it is not uncommon to hear hurtful or unhelpful comments from well-meaning friends. They might talk about their own living pets, tell stories about animal deaths you don't want to hear, make judgments about how you cared for yours, or encourage you to find another pet before you are ready. People will often ask the age of your pet and if they learn the animal lived into senior years, they might not understand that "a good long life" is not only "never long enough," but might be missed even more than a shorter one.

When we have shared many life changes and experiences with animal friends, finding in them a safe haven and solace during trying times, the pain of missing them is poignant. Daily routines and habits are hard to "get over," and the joys that come with a pet's habits, antics, and idiosyncrasies are special, unique, and irreplaceable. It is rare that we spend every waking moment with our human companions, but often we do with our pets, accentuating the experience of loss. It is not unusual to find yourself visualizing, hearing, or sensing, even stepping over, your pet in places where you were used to seeing them. Because a pet can add structure to your day, keep you active and more social, and even provide a sense of purpose or satisfaction in caring for another being, adjustments to these "secondary" losses are difficult and may take more time than expected.

While grief is always individual and personal, and there are no maps or timetables for recovery, people are often surprised by how unmoored they can become with the loss of an animal friend. People whose animal was their primary source of companionship or touch, especially those who live alone, may find it particularly difficult to adjust. If one has endured a number of losses, especially recent ones, the death of a pet can hit hard.

"What we have once enjoyed we can never lose; all that we love deeply becomes a part of us."

- Helen Keller

Guilt is a common and often the most difficult feeling following the loss of companion animals. Instead of focusing on how we contributed to their quality of life, we ruminate on self-critical thoughts, such as how we didn't pay them enough attention, times we left them too long, or were frustrated with a behavior. After the excruciating decision to euthanize, the weight of guilt can be hard to carry, even when there was no other humane option. The responsibility for life and death decisions for a being that is wholly dependent upon us comes with a cost. Replaying the death and decisions around it, self-questioning and self-criticism, including distortions in our thinking, can plague us for weeks. Post-traumatic symptoms after a sudden or accidental death are also common. Any of these experiences are not to be considered unusual or unhealthy unless they persist, unchanging, for months.

While feelings of guilt, loneliness, depression, anger, and anxiety often arrive in waves, the lows become shorter and less intense over time. Since losing a beloved being makes us more vulnerable to any health concerns, basic healthy self-care (especially sufficient sleep and exercise) becomes vitally important. Though it does get better, the pain may come back unexpectedly. The recovery process happens gradually, can't be hurried, and charges us to trust in our resilience. What is important is to not "get in the way" by resisting this natural process. Having a trusted, understanding confidante, especially one who understands this kind of loss, can help, as can words (including cards, emails, and memories) that affirm the significance of the experience. Finding ways to memorialize your companion and focusing on other personal sources of meaning may also aid in healing after your loss.

If you are grieving for a companion animal, Lopez Island Hospice & Home Support is here to help. We provide grief support, free of charge, to those in need. Call 360-468-4446 for more information.