

Grieving the Loss of Your Pet

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It's never easy to experience the death of a pet. Whether it's an older animal, who may have been part of your family longer than most of the furniture and some of the children, or a pet who has been with you for only a few years, the loss is always traumatic. When you have to make a decision to have your pet euthanized, other emotions become entangled with your feelings of loss. Once your pet is gone, you may think the experience is behind you, but unfortunately, it's not.

There will be an empty place in your household and in your life for a while, and for the first part of that "while" the void may seem huge. Even though there are ways to fill the void, the loss you've experienced isn't something you can simply ignore by assuming your world will adjust itself. Instead, you must deal with it, just as you would deal with the loss of any good friend. You can't expect yourself to think of your pet as a friend and, yet, dismiss those feelings as disposable because this friend happened to be an animal. It's not silly to miss your pet, and it's not overly sentimental to grieve for him. Nevertheless, he was a pet not a person, and that makes it more complicated to sort out exactly what it is you're supposed to do and feel.

Although we recognize the individual personalities of pets, it doesn't mean they're just "little people." The relationship you have with your pet is different from any human relationship you may have.

Another difference lies in the complicated question of "what happens next?" Many people believe that animals have no souls and are concerned that they won't see their animals in the next life. Perhaps you're unsure about what "the next life" holds for any of us. If having a soul means being able to feel love, trust and gratitude, then some animals may be better equipped than some humans.

When an animal becomes the pet of a responsible, caring person, he is given exactly what he needs and wants – a secure and comfortable home, companionship, and the opportunity to return the favor through loyalty and affection. Dogs, especially, are naturally eager to please their "leader" and are happiest when doing so. When a dog is too old or too sick to respond in the way he thinks he should, he can't understand why, and feels the anxiety of failure.

Because their natural life spans are shorter than ours, we usually outlive our pets. Nevertheless, the life you shared together can't simply be erased. Don't deny yourself the thoughts, memories and feelings that your pet's life deserves. You may decide to fill the empty place in your home and heart with another pet, but you'll never replace the special bond you held with the one you've lost.