

## Grieving the Loss of a Pet During the Holidays

For so many of us, the holidays are a joyous, fun-filled time of laughter, gaiety, music, entertainment, camaraderie and friendship. It can be a time when friends and family come together and share the pleasures, beauty, gifts and “magical” spirit of the season. It is a time of love, hope, good will, compassion and generosity.

However, many of us face the holidays with sadness, loneliness and despair. Perhaps we have experienced the loss of a job or profession, financial hardship, foreclosure or the loss of our home, divorce or separation, Empty Nest, retirement, illness, or the death of a loved one- whether it is a human being or a beloved pet. We feel a deep, agonizing pain and sorrow and face a void in our lives that no one seems able to fill or even understand. We may choose to isolate ourselves from others. We may not even be able to articulate what it is we are feeling or even to identify it. What we are experiencing is one of the most devastating and emotionally intense aspects of life – grief. Although grief is the normal, natural and healthy response to loss – it is also one of the most profound, debilitating and challenging emotional states we can experience. Through grief, we enter a labyrinth of intense and complex emotions ranging from sadness to anger, depression to anguish, from fear to guilt, from loneliness to isolation and from helplessness to hopelessness.

In the midst of the holiday entertainment and advertising industry’s portrayal of the warmth, close familial ties, friendship, coziness and cheer associated with the holidays as well as the similar images of the holidays conveyed and perpetuated by other forms of the media, we may truly feel lost and depressed and that we do not seem to fit in or belong anywhere. And although we may have lost a pet that is like a child to us, few people seem able to understand or empathize with the grief we feel over the loss of “just” a cat or a dog. For so many of us, a pet is a beloved, loyal and devoted family member with whom we have shared our daily lives and routines as well as holidays and special occasions. We share a profound bond and emotional intimacy and honesty with our pets that we seldom share with other humans. Our pets do not judge us and they love us unconditionally. They are our loyal friends and confidants. They are devoted to us and seem to empathize with our feelings. People who have not shared a quality relationship and deep bond with an animal simply cannot grasp the extent of our emotional connection and commitment to a pet.

There are many ways to cope with and recover from grief, although generally the holidays tend to exacerbate our feelings of self-pity and sadness. However, this does not have to be the case. Here are some ways to dispel some of your sadness:

- 1). Identify and acknowledge that you are indeed grieving over the loss of a creature that was and will always be dearly loved by you.
- 2). Express your sadness and your loss openly and without shame or embarrassment to a fellow animal lover, a sympathetic and empathetic friend or family member, an animal

welfare volunteer or worker, a grief counselor who specializes in helping people recover from the loss of a pet.

- 3). Know that loss is an inevitable part of life, and that all of us suffer loss. We must learn how to cope with and recover from grief.
- 4). Celebrate and eulogize the life of your lost pet. Cherish the memories. Go ahead and glance through your photo album of pictures together that help you recall the wonderful times you shared. Weep, sob, laugh – let your emotions run freely.
- 5). Be grateful and truly thankful for the privilege and blessing of spending quality time with this beautiful, vulnerable and creature so pure of heart and spirit.
- 6). Allow yourself to cry. Tears are both healing and cathartic.
- 7). Pay a visit to an animal shelter or rescue organization and provide TLC for the animals. Walk and play with the animals.
- 8). Foster an animal in need of a home during the holidays.
- 9). Make a donation to an animal welfare or rescue group on behalf of your beloved pet.
- 10). Write a letter to your pet or the Creator of your pet in which you express your true feelings whatever they may be – and for your gratitude for having the privilege and opportunity to share your life with this special friend.
- 11). Know that you are not alone in your grief – there are many people who are experiencing grief similar to your own. There are many people who, like you, love their pets deeply and regard them as family members.
- 12). Keep in mind the TRUE SPIRIT of the holidays - not the glamorized, romanticized “Hollywood” version parlayed by the media. Be still and know... Love, respect, appreciate and help your fellowmen and the creatures with whom you share the planet.
- 13). Grief is cumulative, and there is no allotted time for it to come to an end. One day, you will find that you are no longer experiencing the intensity of the sadness and despair you have been feeling. You may decide to adopt another dog or cat. He will never “replace” the one you have lost, but he will bring you great joy and happiness.
- 14). In the true spirit of the season, love, respect and appreciate all of God’s creatures and the planet upon which you live. And, if you can, be of help to one in need, you will feel the true meaning and magic of the season!