

An Introduction to Pet Loss

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"In today's impersonal, highly technological and complex society, more people than ever are enjoying their pets - regarding them as loved family members, cherished friends and confidants. Animal companions serve many important purposes and play many significant roles in our lives and provide physical and emotional well-being. Their presence has a calming effect; blood pressure is reduced as are loneliness and depression. There are a lot of reasons that are responsible for making the pet industry a 36 billion dollar a year business."

Grief is the normal, natural and healthy response to loss, yet we are seldom socialized to understand and cope with this powerful emotion. It is difficult enough for us to grieve and talk about the loss of a loved human being. It is far more difficult and embarrassing for us to discuss the loss of a pet. Yet for many of us pets are members of the family and psychologists have long recognized that the grief suffered by pet owners after their pet dies is the same as that experienced after the death of a person. In fact, many normal people can grieve more for a pet than a close friend or relative.

Often, people are embarrassed or ashamed to talk about the loss of a pet. There are no public rituals such as funerals and memorial services to comfort the bereaved. There are many emotions those grieving the loss of a pet experience: isolation/withdrawal from friends and family; depression, sadness; uncontrollable crying; anger at themselves, the vet, God; guilt that they did not do enough for the animal; anxiety; loneliness; inability to concentrate or focus; a short fuse; exhaustion; eating too little or too much; sleeping too little or too much, etc.

People who are grieving the loss of a pet need to understand that they are not alone - that there are many others who are grieving the loss of a pet. They need to understand that grief is normal, natural and healthy. They need to openly and honestly express their feelings to others who are sympathetic and empathetic. They can find local support groups and contact their local animal welfare organizations to see if counseling is available.

For so many of us who share our hearts and our lives with animals, we need to understand that when these pets die, there is a deep void in our lives. We have become accustomed to caring for our pets and spending quality time with them. They play an important role in our everyday lives and activities. When they leave us, we are left alone and lonely. None of us grieve in the same exact way - there is no allotted time for grieving. The duration and manner in which we grieve will depend on the meaningfulness and intensity of the relationship we have shared with our animal companion and upon how many other significant losses we have sustained. "