



Goodbye *and BEYOND*

A Workbook for Those Enduring
the Loss of a Companion Animal

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With Contributions by
Annette Lacey, PsyD





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TRIBUTE TO A BEST FRIEND

Sunlight streams through window pane
unto a spot on the floor...
then I remember,
it's where you used to lie,
but now you are no more.
Our feet walk down a hall of carpet,
and muted echoes sound...
then I remember,
It's where your paws would joyously abound.
A voice is heard along the road,
and up beyond the hill,
then I remember it can't be yours...
your golden voice is still.
But I'll take that vacant spot of floor
and empty muted hall
and lay them with the absent voice
and unused dish along the wall.
I'll wrap these treasured memorials
in a blanket of my love
and keep them for my best friend
until we meet above.

- Author Unknown

FOREWORD

At Veterinary Specialty Center, we understand that companion animals can be more than just “pets”. They can be family members, children, friends, and siblings⁷. Losing a pet can be as devastating as losing a human family member and in some ways, pet loss can be more crippling. Unlike when a human friend or family member dies, society does not expect that we need time to grieve. Not everyone understands the strength of the human-animal bond, so you may hear comments such as “just get another cat”, or “he lived a good long life”. Most of the time, these comments are made with kind but misguided intentions. You are the only one who truly knows how much your pet meant to

you, but try to remember that you are not alone in your need to grieve for a pet.^{9,12}

The grieving process may leave you confused and unsure how to proceed. The following pages include information to help you navigate some of the feelings and questions you may encounter along the way, as well as some questions for you to answer. You may find enough comfort in the support of your friends and family or you may want to seek support elsewhere. Whatever your needs, do not feel embarrassed or ashamed in seeking them. There is a resource section in the back of this book which can help guide you to an appropriate source of information or support.

BEFORE A LOSS

Anticipatory Grief

When your pet is terminally sick, it is normal for you to experience emotions similar to those you feel after a loss. This is called “anticipatory grief”. You may find yourself asking, “my pet is still alive...why do I feel like I’ve lost him/her already?” There are aspects of anticipatory grief which are more difficult to endure than the actual loss. Knowing that your pet’s life expectancy is less than you expected, even when your pet is elderly, can be devastating. You still have to make decisions and go about your normal life for an undefined period of time, while feeling scared, worried, and confused. Sometimes people find themselves wishing it was over, or that their pet would die in his or her sleep eliminating the need for an unpleasant decision. Most people feel guilty after thinking these thoughts.

As hard as this time can be, you can use this period to make some decisions and/or arrangements.¹⁴ You can spend some special time with your pet, which you could not do in the

case of a sudden death. (See page 11) Start thinking about what is important to you and your pet as far as quality of life is concerned. (See page 7) Think about arrangements you may want after the death of your pet, so that you won’t have to think about it when you are emotionally distressed. Make a plan for what you will do if your pet dies suddenly at home.

Considering these options can help give you a sense of control instead of helplessness in a scary and sad situation.

During this time it is important to care for yourself as you would after losing your pet (see page 16). Tell your

friends and family what is happening and that you need support. Talk to your veterinarian, and make sure you clearly understand what is happening with your pet’s health. It is important to remember that even if you come to accept the inevitability of the loss, your pet’s death will probably still seem shocking when it happens. Preparing for the loss will not necessarily lessen your grief.

**You fought hard to stay alive, my friend
In the end, though, you couldn’t conquer death.
But neither did death conquer you.
Death cures all diseases, mends broken bones,
Breaks all chains
And made you free at last.**

- Author Unknown

Questions/Discussions

- **What questions do I need to ask my veterinarian about my pet’s condition?**

- **What do I want done with my pet’s remains? Do I want a burial or cremation?**

- **If burial, which cemetery? If cremation, do I want the ashes back?**

- **Who in my life will support me during this time? Have I contacted them yet?**

- **Will my employer allow me some time off to grieve?**



TO LOVE AGAIN

Oh what unhappy twist of fate
Has brought you homeless to my gate,
The gate where once another stood
To beg for shelter warmth and food?
For from that day I ceased to be
The master of my destiny,
While she, with purr and velvet paw
Became within my house the law.
She scratched the furniture and shed
And claimed the middle of my bed,
She ruled in arrogance and pride
And broke my heart the day she died.
So if you really think, oh cat
I'd willingly relive all that,
Because you come forlorn and thin
Well don't just stand there—come on in!

- Author unknown

MAKING THE DECISION

Pets can die suddenly from injury or illness, but you may find yourself in a situation in which you need to decide if you should opt for a humane euthanasia for your pet. You may have little time to make the decision, or this could be a choice you think about for weeks or months. There are many factors which can affect a decision. Although it is tempting to ask others what they would do in a similar situation, ultimately only you can make this decision. Some things to consider:¹⁴

My options

Your veterinarian is the best place to start. Write down all the information so you remember later. With each option, include how your pet will be affected, and how much extra time the treatment may give you with your pet. Research the disease if you need more information, either by obtaining a second opinion or by reading on the subject. However, be careful that you find your information from credible resources.

My pet

Thinking about your pet's quality of life is one of the best tools for deciding how to proceed. In this way, you can create a kind of

“living will” for your pet. This tool can be helpful when your pet is having a health crisis. When your emotions threaten to override your decisions, you can refer to this living will. It will help you remember what criteria you decided are important for your pet. Ask yourself what criteria must be met for your pet to have a good life.¹⁴ Use the space provided to write these down. Try to write down your feelings about each question you ask.

My family and me

When your pet is sick, there may be some physical, financial, and time requirements you must meet in order to care for your pet. It is tempting to accept more responsibilities than you can reasonably perform.

Your beliefs

Personal beliefs play a large factor in decisions of this nature. What one person believes is acceptable for their pet may be vastly different for another. What you believe is what is important. Other people may easily give you advice or pass judgment, but you have to live with your decisions, so make them based on your own opinion.

Questions/Discussions

- What options did the veterinarian give me? For each option, write down the pros and cons, such as prognosis (probable time added to your pet's life) and cost. Is a cure possible, or will treatment be indefinite?

- What is best for my pet?

- Can he/she eat and drink on his/her own? If not, do I have an option for providing nourishment?

- Can he/she sleep comfortably? If not, is there a medication which will allow better sleep?

- Can he/she urinate and defecate properly? If not, can I assist him/her, or can I keep him/her clean enough to prevent infection, urine burns, etc.? This task requires time, but also may require strength depending on the size of your pet.

- Is he/she still affectionate and does he/she still enjoy your company?

- Can he/she enjoy normal activities such as play, walks, etc.? If not, can I provide alternate stimulation?

- What is best for me and my family?

- Will I hurt myself trying to care for my pet (for example, if my pet is large or may bite because of pain)?

- Do I have a schedule which allows me to follow a treatment protocol? Some medications must be given many times a day, and your pet may need to see the doctor often.

- What other commitments do I have? Do I have the energy and emotional reserves to take on the treatment?

- Can I afford this? Will I be jeopardizing the welfare of my family and other pets by taking on this financial responsibility?

- What are my beliefs?

- How do I feel about quantity of life versus quality?

- Do I have specific beliefs about euthanasia? Does my family?

ON A CAT, AGING

He blinks upon the hearth-rug,
And yawns in deep content,
Accepting all the comforts
That Providence has sent.
Louder he purrs, and louder,
In one glad hymn of praise
For all the night's adventures,
For quiet restful days.
Life will go on forever,
With all that cat can wish,
Warmth and the glad procession
Of fish and milk and fish.
Only- the thought disturbs him-
He's noticed once or twice,
The times are somehow breeding
A nimbler race of mice.

- Sir Alexander Grey



SAYING GOODBYE

Saying goodbye is not easy. You will never feel completely ready to lose a friend. However, if your pet's health is not too poor, spending some special time together will give you some new and special memories to carry with you when he/she is gone. There is no "correct" way to spend this time. Make sure you are doing something both you and your pet will enjoy. Visit a special place, or take long car rides together. Give your pet some special treats, and spend extra time with him/her. You may want to be in close contact with your pet. Grooming

or massaging your pet can be a relaxing activity for both of you.

You may have friends or family who feel close to your pet, and will be sad when he/she is gone. Talk to them about what is happening with your pet's health, and offer them the opportunity to say goodbye as well. If you have children, ask them if there is something special they want to do with or for your pet. Encourage them to spend time with your pet, draw pictures or write/tell stories of your pet, and talk about the future loss.

Questions/Discussion

- What is my pet's favorite activity?

- What can we do as a family to give extra love and attention to my pet?

- Who in my life knows and loves my pet? Will they want to say goodbye?

AFTER A LOSS

Grief

Grief is the collection of feelings and emotions experienced after a loss. It is a process⁷. Grieving is unique to each person, and there is no wrong way to grieve.^{3,7} Grief follows no set schedule, and can still occur years after the loss. After you experience a loss, the feelings of grief are very intense, and you may feel completely overwhelmed by them. The feelings come and go like waves in the ocean². Immediately after a loss the grief waves may hit over and over, leaving you feeling like you cannot recover. This is normal. By acknowledging the grief and allowing yourself the time you need, the waves should lessen in time both in intensity and frequency⁷. Long after you have recovered from the grieving process, a fresh wave may hit you when you are reminded of the loss. Symptoms of grief are extremely varied.^{2,4,7,10,11,13,14} They include:

PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	SPIRITUAL
Fatigue	Anger	Asking why
Crying	Guilt	Wondering where my pet is
Difficulty sleeping	Loneliness	Dreams about your pet
Change in appetite	Withdrawal	Thinking you see or hear your pet
Numbness	Loss of concentration	Feeling angry with God
Restlessness	Sadness	Feeling closer to God
Sighing	Depression	Feeling angry with your pet
	Irritability	Longing to be with your pet

You may feel some of these things, but there is no “correct” set of feelings, and no order in which you should experience them. People who act as caregivers experience another dimension of grief after a loss.

People who care for a pet have many daily activities which revolve around the pet, such as feeding, walking, and grooming. Older or sick pets probably have even more complex routines, including medications, therapies, and doctor appointments. Many people sleep in the same room or the same bed as their

pet. When you lose the purpose for these routines, you may feel especially lost. Your home may feel unfamiliar to you, and you may not know what to do with your time. Many things in your home will remind you of your pet. This is one of the reasons pet loss can be so debilitating.

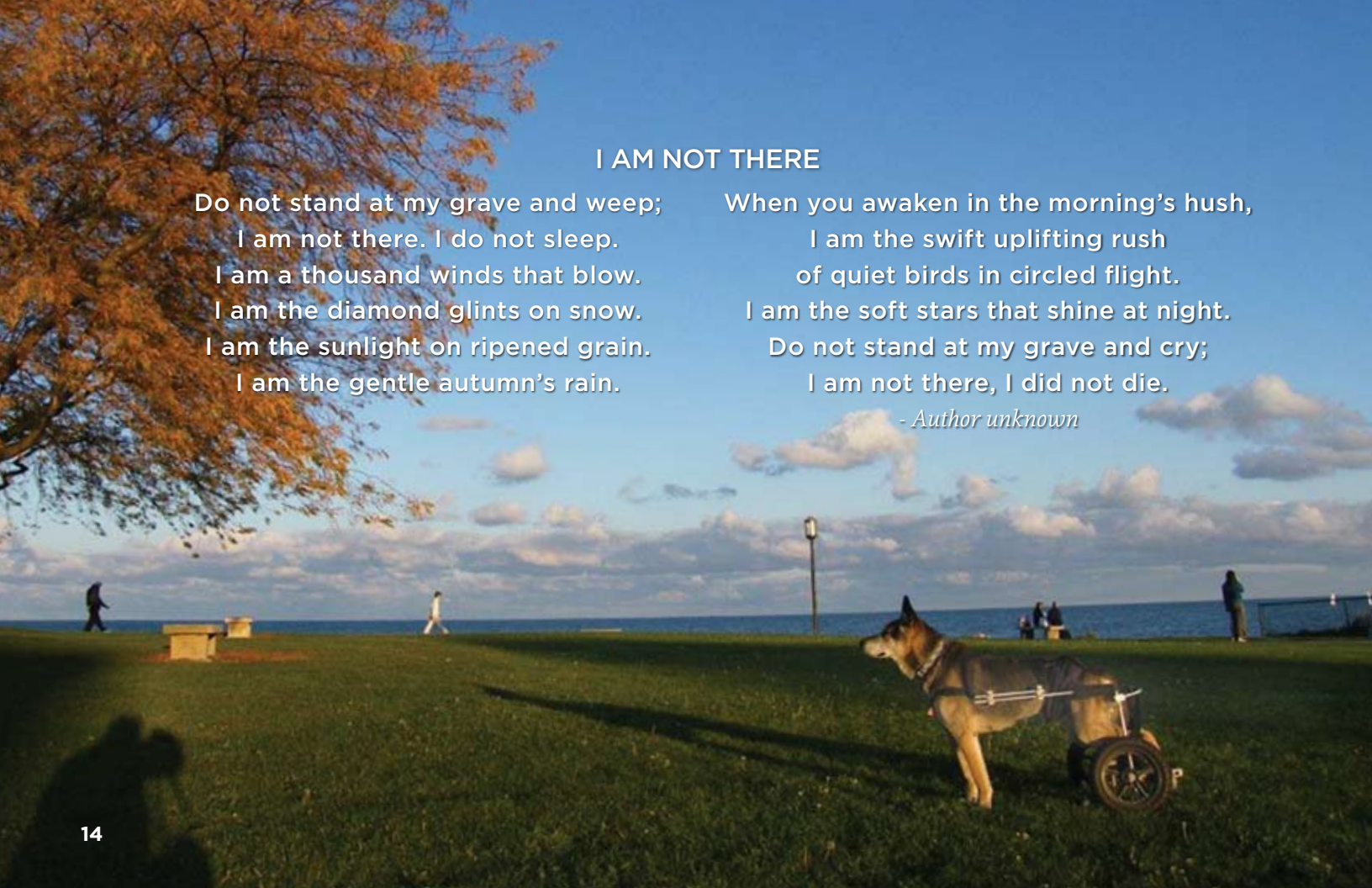
Questions/Discussion

- **What emotions have I been experiencing?**

- **What do I feel like doing?**

- **Will any of these things hurt me or someone else?**

- **What changes in my daily routine am I experiencing?**



I AM NOT THERE

Do not stand at my grave and weep;
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn's rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush
of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there, I did not die.

- Author unknown

Guilt

Guilt is one of the most common feelings associated with loss. You may find yourself regretting things you did or did not do with your pet. You may question decisions you made concerning your pet's health, especially toward the end of his/her life. If your pet had a long and difficult illness, or you could not face the decision of euthanasia, you may have wished that your pet would die on its own. These kinds of thoughts can also lead to overwhelming guilt. All these

feelings are normal, but often irrational.^{7,10} In most cases, there is no way you could have known exactly what the right choices were until after the fact.

Try to remember the happiness you provided for your pet. Think of the time you spent together, the home, treats and toys you provided, and the love you had for him/her.¹⁰

Questions/Discussion

- Am I feeling overwhelmed with guilt? What about?

- Is this a rational guilt? Did you really harm your pet, or were you doing the best you could in the situation or with the knowledge you had?

HEALING

There are many ways you can try to acknowledge your grief, and start healing. Remember that what helps another may not help you. Do not feel embarrassed by your feelings. Only you know what you need. One person may find enough comfort in talking to a spouse, and another need to express him/herself in a grief group. Here are some things you can try to endure the grief waves:^{2,14}

- Care for yourself properly. Get plenty of sleep. Eat healthily and stay hydrated. Take time for yourself for walks, hot baths, or exercise. Try relaxing activities such as meditation. Avoid, if you can, situations which will cause you stress.²

- Allow yourself time and energy to experience your grief. Don't

take on too much at this time, like extra work, projects, or major decisions to distract you from your feelings. Join a bereavement group. This allows you to talk freely with others who are experiencing similar feelings. Call on friends and family, and tell them what you are going

through. They may not realize the depth of your grief, or know that you need them. Write in a journal about yourself and your pet.

- Remember your pet through memorials, rituals, or discussion. Make a scrapbook of pictures, or display photos where you can see them. If you cremated the body, scatter his/her ashes in a place

special to you and your family. Plant flowers over his/her grave if you buried your pet. Make a donation in your pet's memory to a shelter or a veterinary school.^{5,10}

**...I shall see beauty
But none to match your living grace
I shall hear music
But none so sweet as the droning song
with which you loved me.
I shall fill my days
But I shall not, cannot forget
Sleep soft, dear friend...**

- *Anonymous*

Questions/Discussion

- **Make a list of all the people who should be informed of your loss. Which of these will be sympathetic? Will any of them simply not understand the depth of your feelings? What will you say to these people, or in response to unfeeling remarks? You could simply tell them you are having a bad day and leave it at that, or try to explain your feelings. One suggestion given by Dr. Annette Lacey, a licensed clinical psychologist who specializes in the human-animal bond, is to say, "I don't expect you to understand, but I would like you to respect my feelings."**

- **Where do I feel the most at ease? At home? Outside? Try scheduling some time for yourself in a place where you can safely reflect on your feelings.**

CHILDREN AND GRIEF

Although parents naturally want to shield children from pain, loss is a normal part of life for children as well as adults. It is important that you as the parent be the source of correct information about what happens to your pets.^{7,8,14} If a child is not informed about what has happened, he/she may make up a truth from stories or his/her imagination. A child may also misconstrue the meaning behind the words used to describe a pet's death. Remember that what children understand may be vastly different from what you meant. For example, saying your pet got sick & died may lead to fears that any sickness, such as a cold, may cause death. Use correct terms like "cancer". Another example is the phrase "put to sleep". This description of the sudden disappearance of your pet may make your child fear that people may also disappear after bedtime. Also remember to explain the death in a developmentally appropriate way.

The loss of a pet may be the first death your children will experience, but it certainly won't be the last. How you teach your children to cope with grief will affect how they cope

with every loss in their life. Although loss is sad, it is a natural and inevitable part of life. You can help your children learn to grieve in a healthy and helpful way. The following is a short guide explaining how your child may react. He/she may fall into a different age bracket, so be cautious with your expectations of their behavior.

Children under three years will not understand death, but will notice the absence of your pet. You should tell them that your pet has died, but may need to explain many times that the pet will not return. Remember that without understanding the cause, they will be sensitive to the emotional change in you.¹¹ Try to keep a normal routine for them.

Children ages three to five see death as reversible, and may make a game out of playacting death.^{7,14} Do not worry if this seems callous and unfeeling. They are just trying to understand the event. They may continue asking when the deceased will return, and may feel responsible somehow for the disappearance. You should reassure them that past

bad behavior or mean thoughts did not cause the death.^{8,11} They may regress to earlier behaviors such as bed-wetting or tantrums, and may fear leaving their parents. Have short discussions often about what they are feeling. Encourage them to tell stories or draw pictures of your pet.^{7,11,15}

Kids ages six to nine start to comprehend that death is permanent.⁸ They may imagine it as a monster out to get them, or fear their parents may die. They may focus more on the physical side of death, and may ask questions which appear morbid. They may have problems at school or home. These kids should also be reassured that their past actions did not cause the death. Ask them if they want to be part of any memorial for your pet. They can be involved with making scrapbooks or building a memorial site in the yard.

Kids ten to twelve begin to understand that death is an inevitable occurrence, and eventually affects everyone.¹⁵ However, they may comprehend death as a consequence of an action, or punishment⁸. They may mimic their parents' grieving behavior, so trying to hide your grief may lead them to feel that grieving is inappropriate.^{7,11}

Teenagers over thirteen and up can understand death as adults do. They may alternate between acting too mature for crying and needing their parents, and feeling vulnerable and needing reassurance.^{4,7,11}

DOG'S SERENITY PRAYER
God grant me the serenity,
To accept the owners I cannot train,
Courage to train the ones I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

- Author unknown

Children of all ages may be allowed, but not forced, to attend a euthanasia.¹⁴ This is a very personal decision, and one which should be decided upon prior to the euthanasia, if possible. Remember to inform key people of your child's loss, such as teachers, day care personnel, and friends.¹⁵

ALL I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LIFE I LEARNED FROM MY DOG

Never pass up the opportunity to go for a joy ride • Allow the experience of fresh air and the wind in your face to be pure ecstasy • When loved ones come home, always run to greet them • Run, romp, and play daily • Be loyal • Never pretend to be something you're not • Eat with gusto and enthusiasm • If what you want lies buried, dig until you find it • When someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by and nuzzle them gently • Thrive on affection and let people touch you—enjoy back rubs and pats on your neck • When you leave your yard, make it an adventure • Avoid biting when a simple growl will do • No matter how often you're scolded, don't pout—run right back and make friends • Bond with your pack • On cold nights, curl up in front of a crackling fire • When you're excited, speak up • When you're happy, dance around and wag your entire body • Delight in the simple joy of a long walk • If you stare at someone long enough, eventually you'll get what you want • Don't go out without ID • Leave room in your schedule for a good nap • Always give people a friendly greeting • If it's not wet and sloppy, it's not a real kiss. - Author unknown



ANIMALS AND GRIEF

In 1996, the ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) conducted a study called the Animal Mourning Project. The study found that 36 percent of dogs ate less than usual after the death of another canine companion. About 11 percent actually stopped eating completely. About 63 percent of dogs vocalized more, or less, than normal. Study respondents indicated that surviving dogs changed the quantity and location of sleep. More than half the surviving pets became more affectionate and clingy with their caregivers. Overall, the study revealed that 66 percent of dogs exhibited four or more behavioral changes after losing a pet companion.

Although this particular study included only dogs, other species of companion animals certainly do exhibit behavior after losing a housemate that we would interpret as grieving.⁹⁻¹² They may sit at the door or window, waiting for the deceased pet to return. They may seem depressed, or begin displaying inappropriate behavior, such as vocalizing, chewing, or obsessive grooming. Pets are very sensitive to changes in our moods, so they also respond to the grief we feel.

It is important at this time to give extra love and attention to your remaining pet. However, remember not to reinforce behavior you do not want to continue, such as barking. Give treats and attention while he/she is engaging in an activity you want to continue. Keep routines as normal as possible.⁷

GETTING A NEW PET

Some people know for sure that they cannot live without a pet. If you are not absolutely sure, you may want to give yourself some time.¹⁰ This is not a time to make such an important decision which you may regret later. You may find yourself comparing the new pet with the one you lost. If the pet you just lost was older, and you got him/her as a puppy, you may not remember the time and energy needed to put into a new, young animal. You yourself are older and in a different stage of your life than you were when you adopted that pet. Waiting a while can prevent you from placing unreal expectations on the new pet.

Take time to honor the friend you lost. When you start feeling ready, maybe volunteer at a shelter or spend some time with a friend's pet to test your feelings.

Questions/Discussion

- Why did I adopt the pet I recently lost? For my kids? To be a companion for another pet? Was it a “chance meeting?”
-

- If there was a reason other than “I wanted a dog/cat/etc.,” is that reason still valid? In other words, am I getting a new pet simply to fill the void left by the other?
-

- What do I expect from a new pet? Do I expect him/her to behave similarly to the pet I lost?
-

- Am I prepared to adopt a young vs. an older pet? If I want a young pet, do I have the time to invest in training and keeping up with the energy demands of a young animal? Do I have the energy myself?
-

- If I adopt an older pet to avoid the younger stages, am I prepared for the shortened expected length of the bond with this animal?
-

- Am I getting a pet to be a companion to another pet I have at home? This new relationship will be different than the previous one. Am I prepared for this? Can I let them work out the hierarchy on their own (excluding real fighting) without getting offended if the new pet becomes “top dog”?
-

These are difficult questions, but dealing with the issues before adopting a pet can save you and the new animal stress and anxiety.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

Grief is a natural response to loss.¹ The healing process differs for everyone. Bereavement can vary from person to person¹ and among different cultural groups. For example, in addition to sadness, many people experience temporary changes in sleep and appetite while grieving.² Some people might feel overwhelmed or depressed.¹ Many such responses are considered typical and are to be expected. However, there may be signs that indicate professional help is needed to work through the loss of a pet. These signs are possibly similar to those that occur when people grieve the loss of other humans³ and might include:²

- Guilt unrelated to actions taken or not taken by the surviving person at the time of the death
- Thoughts of death (excluding thoughts that one should have passed away with the deceased)
- Preoccupation with feelings of worthlessness

- Serious or prolonged inability to complete daily tasks, such as selfcare (bathing, grooming, eating, sleeping), and/or inability to work.
- Slowness or difficulty with physical movement
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there (excluding seeing images of or hearing the one who has died)

Other indications that warrant professional help include suicidal thoughts (wishing to be dead, thoughts about killing oneself, or plans to take one’s own life); thoughts about physically hurting or killing someone else; the abuse of substances (such as alcohol and illegal or prescription drugs) in order to cope with grief and bereavement; physical illness worsened or complicated by grief; and on-going impairment in occupational functioning or social activities.⁴

RESOURCES

Books

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Booklets

- “What Now? Support for You and Your Companion Animal”, Argus Institute. 2009

Pamphlets

- “Helping Children Cope with the Serious Illness or Death of a Companion Animal”, Jennifer Brandt, MSW, LISW, Ph.D., and Martha M. Tousley, CNS-BC, FT, Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, 2004- 2005

Books for children

- Leeuwenburgh, E., and E. Goldring, *Why Did You Die? Activities to Help Children Cope With Grief and Loss*. Raincoast Books, 2008
- Morehead, D., *A Special Place for Charlee: A Child's Companion Through Pet Loss*. Partners in Publishing, LLC., 1996
- Rylant, C., *Cat Heaven*. The Blue Sky Press, 1995

Websites

- www.aplb.org www.griefnet.org
- www.hsus.org www.pet-loss.net
- www.petloss.com

HOTLINES AND SUPPORT GROUPS

Veterinary Specialty Center Support Group

As part of our on-going mission to serve not only pets, but the people who love them, Veterinary Specialty Center sponsors a no-cost support group for our clients. If you are interested in joining or would like more information, please contact Becky at **(847) 459- 7535, ext.300**.

Wings Pet Loss Support Group

The Chicago Veterinary Medical Association provides a Pet Loss Support Group called Wings. It meets at 7:30 pm on the first Wednesday of each month at the CVMA Office in Burr Ridge, 100 Tower Drive, Suite 234, Burr Ridge. (No reservations needed, no charge, but donations are accepted.) Call Pet Loss Helpline & Support Group at **(630) 325-1600**.

Companion Animal Related Emotions Pet Loss Helpline

The Companion Animal Related Emotions Pet Loss Helpline is a confidential telephone service offered through the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine. The service is available Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday evenings 7-9 pm Central Time. The toll-free telephone number is: **(877) 394-CARE (2273)**.

ASPCA Pet Loss Support Program

Pet parents can also receive help from the ASPCA Pet Loss Support program. For further information, call their Pet Loss Hotline at **(877) 474-3310**.

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