



when pets die

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It can be hard to believe how sad and lonely you can feel when your pet dies. To animal lovers, a pet is often treated like a member of the family – they ride in your car, sleep on your bed, they know the household routine, they recognise your voice – they know you and you know them. No wonder there's such a huge gap, an empty space, when they die.

So it's alright to be missing them, to be deeply sad and out of sorts – it's like your best friend is gone. Every time you look around the house there are reminders of them everywhere.

Pet loss however, may sometimes be an unacknowledged grief which researchers have actually termed 'disenfranchised grief'. This means that often the relationship is not valued and understood by others and therefore the accompanying feelings of loss also go unnoticed. But the grief of losing a much loved pet, a companion, is very real.

It's important not to be embarrassed about how you feel. It will be hard to get used to the emptiness when they aren't there for their usual feeding, bathing, grooming, walking routines and habits. Your sadness means you may cry or not feel like going to work or doing your usual activities. You might find it hard just to tell others about what happened because it makes you teary and emotional. Also, don't be surprised if you feel remorseful about having to make the decision to have them euthanized - there is no easy way to make such a choice.

You might want to consider some special ways to remember them – a simple farewell ceremony, saving some fur in a special container, keeping their favourite toy or collar as a memento, having their burial place or cremated remains marked by planting something special.

When children are involved, consider ways to include them rather than trying to hide it from them. Children can be very accepting of the lessons they can learn about the cycle of life and death and they often have their own ideas about what they would like to do to remember their family pet.

If you are a friend:

- Allow your friend time to get used to the loss of their pet. This means checking in on them over the next weeks; it will take some time to get used to their pet not being there.
- You don't have to avoid talking about what happened, or try to 'fix' their grief. There's no point in pretending it didn't happen – this doesn't help their grief to go away.
- Listen to their story and let them share their feelings – and say words like "I can see how much you loved him/her". "The two of you were really close friends."

In praise of pets – to warm your heart, have a look at our DVD tribute to pets and what they mean to their human companions. (Go to the Home page and click on the VIDEO tab)



Doris Zagdanski is a leading figure in modern day grief and loss education. Her seminars are included in vocational qualifications in Allied Health, Counselling and Funeral Directing. Her books and free factsheets are available at www.allaboutgrief.com