

Coping with the loss of a pet?

A support guide for adults and children

Grieving for the loss of a pet, whether through death or enforced separation, can be a very sad and difficult experience. Life, once filled with the love and friendship of a pet, may suddenly seem very empty.

Feelings of despair, loneliness and even depression can be overwhelming. There may also be a strong sense of guilt and self-doubt, particularly when a decision has been taken to euthanase or rehome a much loved pet. These feelings are normal and a testimony to the special bond between people and their pets. Unfortunately, not everyone understands this grief and it can be a very lonely and isolating experience.

In this guide, created with more than 25 years experience working within this area, we offer support, tips and advice sections for adults, seniors and children coping with pet loss.

We all respond to loss differently, the level of grief we experience will often depend on factors such as our age and personality, the age of our pet, and the circumstances of their loss. Generally, the more significant our pet is to us, the more intense the emotional pain we feel. If we live alone, often pets are our only companion and coming to terms with their loss can be even harder.

Remember there is no time limit on grief – our experience is different to each of us.

Support for you

Many of us share an incredible bond with our pets, they are an integral part of the family. They provide companionship, bring happiness and for some even provide a sense of purpose. So, when a pet passes away - or goes missing or is stolen - it can trigger all sorts of painful emotions. Life can suddenly feel very empty.

Here are some useful things to remember:

You are normal - Some may not understand how upsetting the loss of a pet can be, and can make you feel you're overreacting. You should not feel ashamed of your emotions, and the grieving process can't be forced or sped along. Be patient with yourself. Understand that what and how you are feeling is perfectly normal.

Don't ignore pain - bottling up your feelings will only make matters worse in the long run. To heal you need to actively face your grief. Don't be afraid to show your emotions.

It's okay to cry or feel angry After all you have lost someone very special and dear to you. Don't be hard on yourself, if some days are more difficult than others. There will be events that trigger your grief. This can be places you often went to, or the date of your pet's arrival or their birthday. Support from others will help, and when you are ready, make these days a celebration of that unconditional love you shared.

- Open up - talking about your feelings and your pet can really help. Don't be afraid to speak to family and friends, especially if they knew your pet, as they can support you. You may also find putting pen to paper provides comfort. If a pet is lost or stolen, then there is often no closure and this can be very difficult. One thing we suggest, is writing down how you feel and what you would have said to your pet before they left. This can work for any form of loss.
- Seek help - finally, if you find that your grief is severely impacting your ability to function in day to day life, seek professional help as you might be suffering from depression.
- Practice self-care - losing a beloved pet can be very stressful, often throwing your normal routine into havoc. It is important to make sure you continue to care for any other animals in your home and of course, yourself. Look after yourself physically as well as emotionally. Make sure you eat, sleep and spend time with those that care about you. If you can, try exercising regularly too, as this will release endorphins that will help boost your mood.

Support for senior adults

Throughout life, we experience an increasing number of major life changes, these can include, the loss of beloved friends, family and pets. The death of a pet can hit retired seniors even harder than younger adults, who may be able to draw on the comfort of close family or distract themselves with work.

If you're an older adult living alone, your pet was probably your sole companion and taking care of the animal provided you with a sense of purpose and routine.

Following the loss of your pet, it is normal to grieve and feel sad, but it is equally important to recognise signs of depression. Caring for a pet will have previously occupied a lot of your time as well as boosting your morale and optimism. Feeling depressed can cause you to feel worn out, lonely and isolated.

Here are some useful things to remember:

- A change to your daily routine can help – it's a good idea to try to fill your time with activities you enjoy. Picking up a long-neglected hobby, taking a class, helping friends, rescue groups or animal charities to care for their animals can all help
- Share your feelings with friends and family who understand how deep your loss feels. If you feel uncomfortable talking to friends, call our Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Line – don't keep your grief to yourself.
- Accept offers of help and support even if you don't feel like talking to anyone. Friends, family and Support Volunteers will offer comfort and help you remember your pet fondly and process your grief.
- Adjusting to life without a pet can be hard especially if your pet provided a sense of purpose as well as companionship. Volunteering to help pets in need can be a good way to decide if you're ready to become a pet owner again.

Support for children

When a pet dies, or isn't there anymore, it is often a child or young person's first experience of the death or loss of something close to them. They may feel that they have lost their best friend, an important member of their family and they may feel very sad and lonely. Feelings of numbness, disbelief and denial may be common. Sometimes anger or guilt may also be felt for something they did or said that makes them think they contributed to the death or loss. The way in which children, young people and those around them deal with pet loss may lay the foundation for how they cope with other losses later in their life.

Children's reaction to the loss of a pet at different age stages

Most children form strong and special bonds with their pets and they are an important member of the family. The death or loss of a pet may be particularly painful if:

- the pet was very special, such as a first pet.
- there have been other losses in the child's life, for example the death of a grandparent, loss of friends.
- a lot of disruption such as having recently changed schools, or suffered a break-up of parents or other family members.
- The age of the child and their concept of death may also influence how they react to the loss of a pet.
- Children up to two years of age have little concept of death, but may miss the presence of an animal and will be aware of tensions in the family if others are grieving.
- Two to four-year-olds have difficulty grasping that death is permanent and may commonly ask: "Where is Sammie going? Why isn't he moving?"
- Five to ten-year-olds may ask: "Why don't their eyes close? What happens to him when he goes in the ground? Will my other pets be lonely?"
- By the age of nine onwards most children are aware of the biological finality of death and they may be curious about the aspects surrounding death, such as post-mortem or burial.
- Adolescence is a time of high emotions and adolescents may be less willing to share feelings or talk about real issues. In fact they may feel closer to their pet than with other members of their family.

Here are some useful things that may help when supporting a child:

- Consider other possible losses that the child may be experiencing which may be influencing their grief.
- Make sure the child doesn't hear about the pet's death from someone they don't know.
- Always be honest about the circumstances – don't pretend that the pet has 'gone missing' if, in fact, it has died.
- Include the child when discussing options or making decisions about the pet.

- Don't underestimate their feelings. Encourage the child to talk about their pet and express their emotions; writing a story or poem or drawing a picture of their pet can be helpful.
- Try to understand the importance of the animal and what the child has lost, don't trivialise or minimise their grief.
- Use language that the child will understand – straightforward words such as "dead" or "died" are more appropriate than "put to sleep", which may cause some confusion and anxiety for younger children.
- Be prepared to talk about how the animal died, but don't include distressing details.
- Inform their teacher if the child is very upset, but do so discreetly.
- Don't be afraid to share your own feelings of sadness.
- If children are having other difficulties in their lives, a pet's death may be the last straw and particular care must be taken to understand their problem; professional help may be needed.

Saying Goodbye

Although this is hard, planning ways to say goodbye and to remember a pet can be helpful and comforting for both adults and children of all ages. Whether you choose burial or cremation, it's a good idea to involve all members of the family.

Rituals and Burial

Holding a funeral for your pet can help you and your family openly express how you are feeling. This can be particularly helpful for children to process the loss – but only include little ones in the ceremony if they want to be involved.

Cremation

- Remember, it is your decision if you decide on cremation as to who you instruct to carry out your final wishes. Never feel rushed as it is an important decision that has to be right for you and your pet. You may want to keep the ashes in a special casket or bury them in a special place.
- Ashes can be scattered on favourite walks and special places in the garden.

Memorials

Memorialising our pets is an important part of the grieving process. Here are some popular ways to remember and celebrate their lives by:

- Writing poems or letters to your pet
- Painting pictures and making models
- Making a scrapbook with photographs or a memory box
- Creating a memorial on the Blue Cross website bluecross.org.uk/create-a-tribute-your-pet
- Volunteering or sponsoring in your pets memory

Introducing another pet – when is the right time?

After the loss of a cherished pet it might be tempting to fill the void with another furry companion. But, this is an entirely individual choice and from our experience generally, it's best to mourn your old pet first, and wait until you are emotionally ready to welcome a new animal into your home.

The decision of when to do this is a very personal one. Volunteering at an animal shelter, or spending time caring for a friend or family member's pet might help you figure out if you're ready or not.

When the time is right, don't feel guilty for taking a new pet into your life. Remember, it will have its own personality and love for you. But we always keep a place in our hearts for those we have loved and lost.

Free confidential helpline and email support service

Blue Cross's Pet Bereavement Support Service is here to support everyone young and old through their loss and help you come to terms with it. We provide a phone support service which is open every day of the year, including bank holidays.

To make contact call: FREEPHONE 0800 096 6606

The confidential support line is open everyday 8.30am-8.30pm. For those who prefer to write we also have an email service.

pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk

Expect a response from this within a 48 hour period.

Webchat (8.30am-8.30pm)

[Bluecross.org.uk/about-pbss](https://bluecross.org.uk/about-pbss)

For further copies of this leaflet, please contact:

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