

Companion Animal Loss



"A pet is never truly forgotten until it is no longer remembered." - Lacie Petitto

If we love our companion animals, if they are part of our family circle, we will grieve when they die. Grief is grief, and no matter what we are grieving, our reactions can be very similar. Our head knows the 'who' or the 'what', our heart simply knows that we hurt.

(The term companion animal, in this context, is inclusive to fish, mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians or insects).

Grief is the natural and inevitable response to loss, and it can affect every part of our life, including our thoughts, behaviours, beliefs, feelings, physical health and our relationships with others. When a companion animal dies, the bereavement experience may not be any different to what we experience following the death of a human being.

The grief experienced following the loss of a companion animal is real. For some people, a companion animal may be their most central and vital relationship. It may be the reason for getting up each day and perhaps their only experience of love. Attachments formed with animals can be as significant as those created with humans. It can be very distressing, particularly if there are feelings of guilt concerning decisions made about euthanasia.

Animals provide companionship that reduces loneliness and depression and eases anxiety. Companion animals may also provide us with an influx of 'feel-good' hormones, which help to promote relaxation and social bonding. They support our emotional well-being and can imbue our actions with meaning. Animals need to be cared for and with that comes nurturing and responsibility. Dogs need walking, fish need to be fed, and horses need riding and brushing down. This is why, in addition to emotional pain, after a companion animal dies, we may feel aimless, lost and lacking purpose in our daily life.

What to expect when a Companion Animal dies

Recovering from companion animal loss, as in all forms of grief, requires us to recognise life changes and find ways to manage these changes. These adaptations may include increasing self-care and seeking social support from people who are compassionate and understand the significance of the relationship without judgment.

Sometimes grief experienced from companion animal loss can feel 'disenfranchised'. This means that the loss is not acknowledged or validated by others. You may think that you have 'less right' to grieve the loss of an animal rather than another human being. Your grief, however, is unique to you, and as long as you are not causing harm to yourself or those around you, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to grieve. Grief is not something that should be placed on a hierarchy.

Common grief responses

After a death, we may experience a range of intense feelings, such as sadness, anger, anxiety, disbelief, panic, relief, irritability, guilt or numbness. Grief can also affect our thinking. We may think we will never get over this, or that we are going crazy. It can affect our beliefs and the way we view the world. Sometimes grief can also cause difficulty in sleeping and physical symptoms such as headaches, nausea, aches and pains. If physical symptoms persist, check with your GP to exclude other causes.

Call us: 1800 642 066
www.grief.org.au

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What can you do?

When grieving, it can be all too easy to neglect our own needs. Taking the time to look after yourself can make a big difference in your ability to function on a day-to-day basis, and in the longer term. Below are suggestions for how to get through the difficult times.

- » Create a memorial by doing or making something to honour your companion animal.
- » Develop meaningful rituals, such as lighting a candle whilst listening to special music.
- » Allow yourself to express your thoughts and feelings by writing a letter, a poem, collecting photos. Allow yourself to cry if you need to.
- » Consider what activities may be helpful for children to express their grief, such as playing games, drawing, reading books, craft, singing or dancing.
- » Regular exercise such as walking, housework or gardening is helpful to use pent-up energy and enables better sleep patterns.
- » Draw on your religious or spiritual beliefs and practices.
- » Explore other people's grief experiences through books, movies, or articles.
- » Do things that you find relaxing and soothing.
- » Eat food with nutritional value, limit alcohol and caffeine and try to maintain a routine, especially around bedtime.
- » Sharing and talking with other compassionate people can reduce the sense of isolation and loneliness that comes with grief.
- » Allow people to help you. Don't be embarrassed to accept their help. You will be able to help someone else at another time. It is your turn now.
- » Consider joining a companion animal loss support group to share with others who have had similar experiences. Some animal clinics and veterinary practices offer these.
- » Sometimes people tend to offer unasked-for advice, usually along the lines of 'you can always get another pet'. That may be true, but it may be best to grieve your companion animal first before trying to fill the empty space.
- » Talk to children about the death of a companion animal using age-appropriate language. Use terms like 'He has died' rather than 'he has gone' which can be difficult for children to understand.

When to seek further help

Don't be afraid to seek professional support from a bereavement counsellor, psychologist, general practitioner or other health professionals. Many practitioners offer telephone and online help.

Phone a helpline like Lifeline, Beyond Blue or Friendline if you feel isolated or need support.

Download the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement's MyGrief app for immediate information about how to receive bereavement support or how to support someone who is grieving. The MyGrief app is available at <http://bit.ly/mygrief> for both Apple and Android smartphones.

Contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement on 1800 642 066 to arrange to speak with a specialist bereavement counsellor about telephone or online bereavement counselling.