

## Grief Emotions and Management

It is very tempting to want to 'hate' grief,  
to see it as the enemy, the unwelcome guest.  
Instead, try opening yourself to grief . . .  
ask it what it has to teach you.  
Ask it what it is training you to do, to be.  
Ask this uninvited teacher into your life  
and notice how things begin to shift.  
Remember that grief never asks you to let go of love.

*By Ashley Davis Prend*

Pets play a very special part in our lives providing unconditional love, joy, loyalty, acceptance, friendship, comfort and companionship sometimes over many years. Many people love their pet in the same way that they do any other family member and it is not surprising that the loss of a pet should invoke a range of potentially intense emotions. This is not something to be embarrassed about – it is perfectly natural and appropriate.

Emotions that you may experience around the loss of a pet include:

### **Depression:**

- Clearly for most people the loss of a pet leads to feelings of sadness, lethargy and misery; although potentially very severe, these feelings typically start to ease, albeit sometimes very slowly, after a period of days and do not impair one's ability to go about one's daily business.
- However in some cases traumatic and distressing events such as pet loss can trigger clinical depression with feelings of extreme sadness that may last for weeks or months and interfere with daily life. Clinical depression is an illness that can manifest physical signs and for which medical assistance should be sought.

### **Remember Our Love**

I was chosen today  
I'm learning to fly  
The world took me away,  
But please don't you cry

And I chose you today  
To try and be strong  
So please don't you cry  
And don't say that I'm gone

When you're feeling alone  
Just remember our love,  
I'm up near the stars  
Looking down from above.

Remember our love  
In a moment you'll see  
That I'm still here beside  
you  
When you're thinking of  
me.

*By Julie Epp*

### **Anger:**

- Anger may be directed for example at your veterinarian, your pet's illness, your pet, yourself or even God/a higher power
- Although anger may seem to help as it distracts from the pain of bereavement, in the long run it only serves to prolong an already difficult situation; release the anger and allow yourself to hurt as this is the only path to recovery.

### **Confusion:**

- Sometimes following the loss of a pet, especially a long-term companion, people describe thinking that they heard or saw their pet. This is especially common just after being asleep and before being awake enough to acknowledge reality. This confusion is relatively common, will become less frequent in time and is definitely not something to feel embarrassed about.

### **Denial:**

- Denying the reality of your bereavement can seem like an attractive option as it keeps the hurt at bay – if you don't feel the pain, maybe it will just go away. However this rarely works and instead the pain simply remains bottled up inside until it is finally unleashed. Accepting and acknowledging your bereavement is the first step to dealing with it.
- If your pet is still with you but you are planning euthanasia, denying the reality of what is soon to occur deprives you of vital time in which you could be preparing emotionally for the bereavement (in so far as this is possible) and maximising the time you have left with your beloved companion. Likewise, if your pet has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, accept and work with the reality – make the most of the time you have left while you can, shower him/her with love, spend as much time together as possible.
- Denying the seriousness of your pet's signs can lead to a delay in obtaining treatment or in euthanasia thereby prolonging suffering which in turn can manifest as guilt and/or anger subsequently.

### **Guilt:**

- Some people feel guilty because they have doubts over the decision they made to euthanase their pet; some blame themselves because they feel they were negligent or did something to contribute towards their pet's demise ("If only I had/hadn't..."); others feel guilty about times during their pet's life when they felt they could have been more attentive or caring.

- Guilt is a negative and destructive emotion and you should try instead to focus on positive and happy memories associated with your pet's life. In some circumstances it is also possible to learn lessons that you can carry through into the care of a new friend at the right time.

Many people experience a similar range and time frame of emotions following bereavement; however it is important to remember that there is no set pattern of grief – it is ultimately an individual experience that depends on many factors including your individual personality, the circumstances surrounding your pet's death and the relationship you had with your pet. Similarly how long it takes to start to feel better will vary between individuals.

The first and most important step in coping with the emotions surrounding pet loss is to acknowledge and discuss them rather than deny or repress them; attempts to suppress feelings of grief can sometimes actually prolong the healing process. After all your grief simply demonstrates how much you loved your pet and in many ways is something to embrace and work through rather than fear or ignore. Allow yourself the time and space to grieve, cry as much as you want to, but try to avoid spiraling into a black hole whereby preoccupation with your grief worsens your depression and state-of-mind making it increasingly difficult to break out of the vicious circle. Try to make time for healthy distractions such as your family, friends, work and other activities. This will help you to cope with your grief and maintain a sense of reality and perspective. Take as much care of yourself as you can by resting and eating adequately (eat whatever food brings you comfort!), and don't be embarrassed about seeking support from family and friends in your time of bereavement. Remember that some people will be more able to understand the love you shared with your pet than others; that is not to say that these latter people care any less for you, just that they may not be 'animal people' and may not be able to fully grasp the attachment you had to your pet.

Something else that some people find can be helpful is to keep a grief diary where you write down your thoughts and emotions around the loss of your furry friend. This can start beforehand and can continue for as long as you find it helps; there is no set format or timeline, just whatever you find helps you.

"...Grieve not nor speak of me with tears, but laugh and talk of me as if I were beside you...I loved you so - 'twas Heaven here with you."  
(Isla Pasehal Richardson)