

Coping With the Loss of a Dog

Grieving

Our dogs live relatively short lives. For many of us who love our dogs, their death can affect some of us even more than the death of a relative or friend. The death of a dog leaves few people totally untouched.

A dog may come to symbolize many things to each of us. It may represent a child, perhaps a child yet to be conceived or the innocent child in us all. It may reflect the ideal mate or parent, ever faithful, patient and welcoming, loving us unconditionally. It is a playmate and a sibling. It is a reflection of ourselves, embodying negative and positive qualities we recognize or lack in ourselves. The same dog may be all of these, alternating between roles on any given day or for each member of the family.

When a dog dies, we expect that our pain will be acknowledged, even if it is not shared, by our relatives, friends and colleagues. Though the bond between you and your dog is as valuable as any of your human relationships, the importance of its loss may not be appreciated by other people. The process of grieving for a dog is no different than mourning the death of a human being. The difference lies in the value that is placed on your dog by your family and by society as a whole.

Your grief may be compounded by lack of response from a friend or family member. Realize that you do not need anyone else's approval to mourn the loss of your dog, nor must you justify your feelings to anyone. Do not fault anyone who cannot appreciate the depth of your grief for a dog. The joy found in the companionship of a dog is a blessing not given to everyone.

Seek validation for your pain from people who will understand you. Speak with your veterinarian, a veterinary technician, groomer or another dog owner. Ask for a referral to pet grief support groups or veterinary bereavement counselors in your area. The death of a dog can revive painful memories and unresolved conflicts from the past that amplify your current emotional upheaval. Seek comfort in the support of professional counselors or clergy.

This is an opportunity for emotional growth. Your life was and will continue to be brighter because of the time that you shared with your dog. This is the best testament to the value of your dog's existence.

Five Stages of Mourning

The stages of mourning are universal and are experienced by people from all walks of life. Mourning occurs in response to an individual's own terminal illness or to the death of a valued being, human or animal. There are five stages of normal grief.

In our bereavement, we spend different lengths of time working through each step and express each stage more or less intensely. The five stages do not necessarily occur in order. We often move between stages before achieving a more peaceful acceptance of death. Many of us are not afforded

the luxury of time required to achieve this final stage of grief. The death of your pet might inspire you to evaluate your own feelings of mortality. Throughout each stage, a common thread of hope emerges. As long as there is life, there is hope. As long as there is hope, there is life.

1. Denial and Isolation: The first reaction to learning of terminal illness or death of a cherished dog is to deny the reality of the situation. It is a normal reaction to rationalize overwhelming emotions. It is a defense mechanism that buffers the immediate shock. We block out the words and hide from the facts. This is a temporary response that carries us through the first wave of pain.

2. Anger: As the masking effects of denial and isolation begin to wear, reality and its pain re-emerge. We are not ready. The intense emotion is deflected from our vulnerable core, redirected and expressed instead as anger. The anger may be aimed at inanimate objects, complete strangers, friends or family. Anger may be directed at our dying or deceased pet. Rationally, we know the animal is not to be blamed. Emotionally, however, we may resent it for causing us pain or for leaving us. We feel guilty for being angry, and this makes us more angry.

The veterinarian who diagnosed the illness and was unable to cure the disease, or who performed euthanasia of the dog, might become a convenient target. Health professionals deal with death and dying every day. That does not make them immune to the suffering of their patients or to those who grieve for them.

Do not hesitate to ask your veterinarian to give you extra time or to explain just once more the details of your dog's illness. Arrange a special appointment or ask that he telephone you at the end of his day. Ask for clear answers to your questions regarding medical diagnosis and treatment. Discuss the cost of treatment. Discuss burial arrangements. Understand the options available to you. Take your time. Both you and your veterinarian will find that honest and open communication now are an invaluable long-term investment.

3. Bargaining: The normal reaction to feelings of helplessness and vulnerability is often a need to regain control. If only we had sought medical attention sooner. If we got a second opinion from another doctor. If we changed our dog's diet, maybe it will get well. Secretly, we may make a deal with God or our higher power in an attempt to postpone the inevitable. This is a weaker line of defense to protect us from the painful reality.

4. Depression: Two types of depression are associated with mourning. The first one is a reaction to practical implications relating to the loss. Sadness and regret predominate. We worry about the cost of treatment and burial. We worry that, in our grief, we have spent less time with others that depend on us. This phase may be eased by simple clarification and reassurance. We may need a bit of helpful cooperation and a few kind words. The second type of depression is more subtle and, in a sense, perhaps more private. It is our quiet preparation to separate and to bid our pet farewell. Sometimes all we really need is a hug.

5. Acceptance: Reaching this stage of mourning is a gift not afforded to everyone. Death may be sudden and unexpected or we may never see beyond our anger or denial. It is not necessarily a mark of bravery to resist the inevitable and to deny ourselves the opportunity to make our peace. This

phase is marked by withdrawal and calm. This is not a period of happiness and must be distinguished from depression.

Dogs that are terminally ill or aging appear to go through a final period of withdrawal. This is by no means a suggestion that they are aware of their own mortality, only that physical decline may be sufficient to produce a similar response. Their behavior implies that it is natural to reach a stage at which social interaction is limited. The dignity and grace shown by our dying dogs may well be their last gift to us.

Explaining Dog Loss to Your Child

It is natural to want to protect our children from painful experiences. Most adults, however, are surprised to find how well most children adjust to the death of a dog if they are prepared with honest, simple explanations. From a young age, children begin to understand the concept of death, even though they may be unaware of it at a conscious level.

When a dog is dying, it may be more difficult for a child to resolve the grief experienced if the child is not told the truth. Adults should avoid using terms like "put to sleep" when discussing euthanasia of a family pet. A child could misinterpret this common phrase, indicating the adult's denial of death, and develop a terror of bedtime. Suggesting to a child that "God has taken" the dog might create conflict in the child, who could become angry at the higher power for cruelty toward a dog and the child.

Children are capable of understanding, each in their own way, that life must end for all living things. Support their grief by acknowledging their pain. The death of a dog can be an opportunity for a child to learn that adult caretakers can be relied upon to extend comfort and reassurance. It is an important opportunity to encourage a child to express his or her feelings.

Two- and Three-Year- Olds: Children who are two or three years old typically have no understanding of death. They often consider it a form of sleep. They should be told that their dog has died and will not return. Common reactions to this include temporary loss of speech and generalized distress. The two- or three-year-old should be reassured that the dog's failure to return is unrelated to anything the child may have said or done. Typically, a child in this age range will readily accept another pet in place of the dead one.

Four-, Five-, and Six-Year-Olds: Children in this age range have some understanding of death but in a way that relates to a continued existence. The dog may be considered to be living underground while continuing to eat, breathe, and play. Alternatively, it may be considered asleep. A return to life may be expected if the child views death as temporary. These children often feel that any anger they had for the dog may be responsible for its death. This view should be refuted because they may also translate this belief to the death of family members in the past. Some children also see death as contagious and begin to fear that their own death (or that of others) is imminent. They should be reassured that their death is not likely. Manifestations of grief often take the form of disturbances in bladder and bowel control, eating, and sleeping. This is best managed by parent-child discussions that allow the child to express feelings and concerns. Several brief discussions are generally more productive than one or two prolonged sessions.

Seven-, Eight-, and Nine-Year-Olds: The irreversibility of death becomes real to these children. They usually do not personalize death, thinking it cannot happen to themselves. However, some children may develop concerns about death of their parents. They may become very curious about death and its implications. Parents should be ready to respond frankly and honestly to questions that may arise. Several manifestations of grief may occur in these children, including the development of school problems, learning problems, antisocial behavior, hypochondriacal concerns, or aggression. Additionally, withdrawal, over-attentiveness, or clinging behavior may be seen. Based on grief reactions to loss of parents or siblings, it is likely that the symptoms may not occur immediately but several weeks or months later.

Adolescents: Although this age group also reacts similarly to adults, many adolescents may exhibit various forms of denial. This usually takes the form of a lack of emotional display. Consequently, these young people may be experiencing sincere grief without any outward manifestations.

Reasons for Euthanasia

We are never quite prepared for the death of a dog. Whether death is swift and unexpected or whether it comes at the end of a slow decline, we are never fully aware of what a pet has brought to our lives until our companion is gone.

Our involvement with the final outcome may be passive. We may simply not pursue medical or surgical treatment in an aging pet. Perhaps its ailment has no cure and the best we can do is alleviate some of its suffering so that it may live the remainder of its days in relative comfort. An illness or accident may take it suddenly.

Everyone secretly hopes for a dog's peaceful passing, hoping to find it lying in its favorite spot in the morning. The impact of a dog's death is significantly increased when, as responsible and loving caretakers, we decide to have the dog euthanized.

Euthanasia is the induction of painless death. In veterinary practice, it is accomplished by intravenous injection of a concentrated dose of anesthetic. The animal may feel slight discomfort when the needle tip passes through the skin, but this is no greater than for any other injection. The euthanasia solution takes only seconds to induce a total loss of consciousness. This is soon followed by respiratory depression and cardiac arrest.

Doctors of veterinary medicine do not exercise this option lightly. Their medical training and professional lives are dedicated to diagnosis and treatment of disease. Veterinarians are keenly aware of the balance between extending an animal's life and its suffering. Euthanasia is the ultimate tool to mercifully end a dog's suffering.

To request euthanasia of a dog is probably the most difficult decision a pet owner can make. All the stages of mourning may flood together, alternating rapidly. We may resent the position of power. We may feel angry at our dog for forcing us to make the decision. We may postpone the decision, bargaining with ourselves that if we wait another day, the decision will not be necessary. Guilt sits heavily on the one who must decide. The fundamental guideline is to do what is best for your dog,

even if you suffer in doing this. Remember that as much as your dog has the right to a painless death, you have the right to live a happy life.

Each of us mourns differently, some more privately than others, and some recover more quickly. Some dog owners find great comfort in acquiring a new dog soon after the loss of another. Others, however, become angry at the suggestion of another dog. They may feel that they are being disloyal to the memory of the preceding dog. Do not rush into selecting a replacement dog. Take the time to work through your grief.

To help you to prepare for the decision to euthanize your dog, consider the following questions. They are intended as a guide; only you can decide what is the best solution for you and your dog. Take your time. Speak with your veterinarian. Which choice will bring you the least cause for regret after the dog is gone?

Consider the following:

- What is the current quality of my dog's life?
- Is my dog still eating well? Playful? Affectionate toward me?
- Is my dog interested in the activity surrounding it?
- Does my dog seem tired and withdrawn most of the time?
- Is my dog in pain?
- Is there anything I can do to make my dog more comfortable?
- Are any other treatment options available?
- If a behavioral problem has led me to this decision, have I sought the expertise of a veterinary behavior consultant?
- Do I still love my dog the way I used to, or am I angry and resentful of the restrictions its condition has placed on my lifestyle?
- Does my dog sense that I am withdrawing from it?
- What is the quality of my life and how will this change?
- Will I want to be present during the euthanasia?
- Will I say goodbye to my dog before the euthanasia because it is too painful for me to assist?
- Will I want to wait in the reception area until it is over?
- Do I want to be alone or should I ask a friend to be present?
- Do I want any special burial arrangements made?
- Can my veterinarian store the body so that I can delay burial arrangements until later?
- Do I want to adopt another dog?
- Do I need time to recover from this loss before even considering another dog?