

Let's Talk: Coping with the loss of a pet

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Hi, my name is Chastity Williams. I'm a licensed clinical social worker and today we're going to talk, I'm going to talk to you about loss of a pet. If you're watching this video, chances are you probably either lost a pet or you know someone who has, and that can be a really difficult position to be in. It certainly is, you know, very difficult as pets are a part of our family and for some people, maybe even our children. So, when you do lose a pet there is a normal cycle of loss that you do go through.

The stages of loss

So, part of that cycle is going to be denial, that would be the first part, is just kind of feeling numb, not really able to believe what's happening and just trying to wrap your head around it. The next part of that would be anger, which is a normal part of the healing process. You may find that anger can be directed towards anybody, maybe even yourself, depending on the circumstances surrounding the loss.

The next part is bargaining, and that's just more where you are trying to create a sense of power, trying to figure out what's happening. You might even question what you could have done differently in this situation. For some people it may be, you know, maybe they could've taken their pet to the vet sooner, and then for some people they might even create a deal, or try to make deal with God or a higher power, to postpone the inevitable of what's about to happen.

Grief is different for everyone

The next stage would be depression, and that's just kind of general sadness, you're just kind of feeling sad about the situation. For some people they might even have some fleeting thoughts of suicide, so if you do notice that those thoughts do persist or escalate, you certainly want to seek immediate help.

The final stage for some could be acceptance, that is a part of the healing process, it kind of lets you know you're starting to heal and coming to terms with the loss. You're also kind of learning to maybe live in a world without that pet. So, certainly

keeping in mind that, you know, grief is very different for each person. You may even feel like you're going a little crazy, your emotions might be all over the place. You may even notice that you might want to sleep with your pet's blanket or a toy, and that's certainly part of the process, and just kind of remembering that for each person it's very different.

Guilt is a normal part of the cycle of loss

When trauma is a part of the loss it can definitely create a lot more pain. For that, that could be whether you witness this death, maybe you inadvertently caused the death, or maybe even a missing pet, you know, those can certainly bring a lot more pain. When you have to euthanize an animal, even if that was the best medically or humane option, can definitely be really traumatic and much more devastating. There definitely can be a lot of guilt associated with that process and, you know, a lot of times people might second guess their decision on whether they chose to take their pet too soon, or they waited too long.

And then there's also some other guilt that also may come into play when you look at whether you should stay in the room with the pet when this is happening, or whether you should not stay in the room with the pet, and then they were feeling like they were left alone. So there's definitely a lot of guilt that comes with this whole situation and just keeping in mind that, that is a part of the normal cycle of loss.

Talking to children about the loss

For talking to kids about loss, that can be a really difficult time, especially with children if they've never experienced a loss before. This may be their first time, so definitely, being honest with them about what's happening. You know, not using terminology like, they were put to sleep, as that can create a sense of stress associated with sleeping. Also, avoiding saying that the pet ran away, even though that can make things better in the moment, for you or maybe even for the child, it certainly doesn't help with the idea or the concept of them learning to accept the idea of death or loss.

Sometimes with the child, just remembering that when you give them information, depending on their age and their level of maturity, can depend on how much you choose to share. So, certainly keeping that in mind. With kids there's a lot of

different needs that they have, their loss, their needs and their abilities to process may be different from adults, so sometimes giving them things like maybe going to your local bookstore or library to find books that may help to explain this process. Or maybe even having them draw a picture of their pet, can kind of help with, helping them to better understand the situation and helping to come to an acceptance of this loss.

How you say goodbye is unique to you

Saying goodbye to your pet can be a really, really, tough time, but the one positive part of that, is that, that goodbye can be just as unique and special as the bond that you shared with that animal. Some people have varying options that they may do, they may scatter their pet's ashes, they may bury their pet. Some people may even go to a park to release balloons, then you have those people, that they may donate to an animal charity or volunteer at an animal shelter.

Whatever it is that you choose to do, is certainly unique to you and that relationship that you shared. Just kind of keeping in mind, I think, the biggest thing here is to remember to surround yourself with good support and supportive people, and keeping in mind that if you do need some professional help, that it's okay to ask for professional help. It's okay to seek a therapist if you need one. And I think right now, just keeping in mind, that even though this is really difficult and that you don't see it right now, just remembering that your heart will heal with time.

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44.27.326.1-RFL (4/17)