

Saying Goodbye: Coping with the Grief of Pet Loss

The loss of a beloved pet can be a deeply painful experience, often evoking grief and sorrow comparable to the loss of a human family member.¹ Understanding the stages of grief and adopting healthy coping mechanisms are essential for navigating this difficult time.

The Stages of Grief in Pet Loss

Grief is a multifaceted process involving physical, emotional, social, and cognitive reactions to loss.³ Individuals often experience grief in stages or phases, although the process is highly individualized and does not always follow a linear progression.¹ Common stages of grief include shock and denial, a feeling of numbness and disbelief that can last for hours to weeks.¹ This initial phase is followed by searching and yearning, where individuals acutely miss their pet, experiencing preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased and sometimes even sensing their presence.¹ As reality sets in, anger and resentment may surface, often directed towards oneself, others, the veterinarian, or even the pet.¹ Bargaining may occur, involving attempts to make deals or negotiate for the return of the pet, often accompanied by feelings of guilt and regret.¹ Profound sadness, loneliness, and despair characterize the depression stage, where individuals may withdraw socially and lose interest in previously enjoyed activities.¹ Finally, acceptance involves coming to terms with the reality of the pet's death, integrating the loss into one's life, and cherishing memories.¹ Some models of grief also highlight the importance of shock and guilt specifically in the context of pet loss, with shock involving psychological trauma and a fight-or-flight response, and guilt often arising from decisions made about the pet's care, especially euthanasia.⁵ It is important to remember that everyone grieves differently, and there is no set timetable for this process.¹

Healthy Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

Adopting healthy coping mechanisms is crucial for navigating the grief of pet loss.⁶ It is essential to acknowledge your grief and give yourself permission to express it, allowing yourself to cry and feel the emotions that arise.⁶ Reaching out to others who can offer a sympathetic ear, such as friends, family, or pet loss support groups, can provide comfort and understanding.⁶ Creating a tribute or memorial for your pet can be a therapeutic way to honor their memory, which might involve creating a photo album, planting a tree, writing a letter, or spreading their ashes in a special place.⁶ Engaging in self-care activities, such as getting enough rest, eating healthily, and exercising, can help manage the stress of grief.⁹ Journaling, volunteering at animal shelters, expressing feelings through art, and spending time in nature can also be helpful coping activities.⁹ It is advisable to try not to replay the last moments with your pet, especially if they were traumatic, and instead focus on the life you shared and favorite memories.⁸ Finding ways to honor your pet by helping other animals, such as volunteering or donating to animal welfare organizations, can also be a meaningful way to cope.⁶ For individuals who have other pets, spending extra time with them can provide comfort.⁶ It is important to be patient with yourself and allow the grieving process to unfold naturally, taking things one day at a time.⁶ If grief becomes overwhelming or interferes with daily functioning, seeking professional help from a grief counselor or therapist is recommended.⁹

The Importance of Acknowledging and Validating Pet Loss Grief

Acknowledging and validating the grief associated with pet loss is crucial for the healing process.¹⁷ Often, society may not fully recognize the depth of this grief, leading individuals to feel isolated or to downplay their sorrow.¹¹ It is important to understand that the bond with a pet is unique and deeply emotional, and the feelings of sadness, guilt, and other emotions are valid and deserve attention.¹⁹ Mental health professionals play a vital role in validating pet loss grief, providing understanding, coping strategies, and a supportive environment for healing.¹³ Pet loss support groups can also offer validation and help individuals realize that their feelings are normal and that they are not alone in their pain.¹⁶ Recognizing the significance of the human-animal bond and allowing oneself to openly grieve are essential steps towards healing.¹³

Finding Comfort and Guidance: Resources and Support for Pet Loss

For individuals grieving the loss of a pet, numerous resources are available to provide comfort, support, and guidance through the grieving process.

National and Online Pet Loss Support Groups and Hotlines

ASPCA Pet Loss Helpline
877-GRIEF-10
Monday-Saturday 12:00pm Noon to 12:00am Midnight

Cornell University College of Veterinary Pet Support Hotline
607-253-3932
Monday-Friday 6-9 p.m., Saturday-Sunday 12-3 p.m.

Tufts University Pet Loss Support Hotline
508-839-7966

Monday-Thursday 6-9 p.m., 24-hour voicemail

Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine
517-432-2696
Days and hours vary

Chicago Veterinary Medical Association Pet Loss Helpline
630-325-1600
Leave a voicemail, calls returned 7-9 p.m. CT

University of Illinois
877-394-2273
Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday 7-9 p.m. CT

Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine
540-231-8038
Tuesdays and Thursdays 6-9 p.m.

Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine
866-266-8635
Monday-Thursday 7-9 PM, Saturday 1-3 PM PT (during school semester)

Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets Help Line
707-557-8595
Not specified

Animal Memorial Service - Pet Parent Grief Line
844-472-9588

Pet Compassion Careline
855-245-8214
24/7

Online Support Resources

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement

<https://www.aplb.org/>

Provides pet loss and grief support, resources, support groups, and training for professionals. Offers chat rooms and video support groups.

Pet Loss Support Network

Provides resources for coping with pet loss.

The Rainbow Bridge Pet Loss Grief Support Center

<http://www.rainbowbridge.com/>

Offers grief support, a chat room, safe message boards, and healing poetry.

Lap of Love

<https://www.lapoflove.com/>

Offers information, resources, palliative and hospice care, and pet loss support groups (virtual).

Pet-Loss.net

<http://www.pet-loss.net/>

Hosts many resources and supports to assist families in coping with pet loss.

IAADP Assistance Dogs Loss Committee (For Service Dogs)

Supports families coping with the loss of their service dog through peer-facilitated support calls and resources.

Kali's Wish Cancer Foundation

Supports pets and their families through pet cancer.

The Argus Institute's Human Animal Bond Trust

Offers a pet loss group that meets via Zoom. Provides free grief counseling relating to pet loss and support for end-of-life decisions.

Michigan State University Veterinary Medical Center

Offers a pet loss support group that meets online.

The Pet Loss Support Page

<http://www.pet-loss.net/>

Provides resources on pet loss, quality of life, euthanasia, and bereavement. Offers a list of resources and support by state.

Pet Loss, Grief Support & Candle Ceremony

<http://www.petloss.com/>

Find personal support resources, a weekly Candle Ceremony, a chat room, and safe message boards.

Pet Cloud

<https://petcloud.pet/>

Offers weekly virtual pet loss support groups, a membership support program, grief support, and quality-of-life and euthanasia guides. Offers online pet loss support chat rooms.

Losing Lulu (Facebook Group)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/losinglulu/>

A Facebook group for grieving behavioral euthanasia.

Grief Healing (Website)

<https://www.griefhealing.com/>

Comprehensive online resource for those dealing with all types of grief, including pet loss.

Radiant Heart's Facebook Group for Pet Loss Support

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/radiantheartpetlosssupport/>

A Facebook group for pet loss support.

Chance's Spot

<http://www.chancespot.org/pet-loss-support/index.php>

Provides pet loss support resources.

Pet Loss Help

<http://www.petlosshelp.org/>

Offers resources and support for pet loss.

Pet Memory Project

<http://www.petmemoryproject.com/>

A project dedicated to remembering and honoring deceased pets.

Pet Soul Grief and Loss Support (Facebook Group)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1024115891330510>

A Facebook group for pet loss support.

PVC: Coping With the Loss of a Pet - Support Group (FB)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/739466563141011>

A Facebook support group for pet loss.

Pet Bereavement Support

<https://www.theralphsite.com/pet-bereavement-support/>

Offers an online pet bereavement support group with forums and articles.

Healing Hearts - Pet Loss Grief Support

<https://www.healinghearts.pet/>

Provides online forums and resources for pet loss grief support

San Francisco Resources

SF-SPCA San Francisco
250 Florida St, San Francisco, CA 94103
First Tuesday of every month, 7:30-9:00pm (April on 2nd Tuesday)
petloss@sfspca.org
Geraldi Building, no registration required

Muttville San Francisco
Via Zoom
First Monday of the month, 7:00-8:30pm
[Click here to register](#)
Virtual via Zoom

East Bay Humane Society Berkeley
2700 Ninth Street, Berkeley, CA
Third Tuesday of the month
(510) 845-7735
Drop-in, donations appreciated

Peninsula Humane Society Burlingame
1450 Rollins Rd., Burlingame, CA
Second Thursday of the month, 7-8:30pm
(650) 340-7022 ext. 327
Virtual via Zoom also available

Pet Emergency & Specialty Center of Marin
San Rafael
901 E. Francisco Blvd., San Rafael, CA
Third Thursday of the month, 7:00-8:30pm
(415) 456-7372

Marin Humane Society Novato
171 Bel Marin Keys Blvd., Novato, CA
First Monday of the month, 6:00-7:30pm
(415) 526-5699
Call Mimi De Gennaro to register

Hope Hospice Dublin
6377 Clark Avenue, Dublin, CA
Second and Fourth Monday, 7:00-8:30pm
(925) 829-8770

ARF/Hospice of the East Bay
Walnut Creek
2890 Mitchell Drive, Walnut Creek, CA
Second Tuesday of the month, 5:30-7:00pm
(925) 887-5678 ext 1075
Free drop-in group

Humane Society Silicon Valley Milpitas
901 Ames Ave, Milpitas, CA
First Tuesday, 6:30-7:30 pm
(408) 262-2133 x120

New York Resources

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement
Brooklyn

7014 13th Avenue, Suite 202, Brooklyn, NY 11228
2nd and 4th Saturday of each month, 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm ET
<https://www.aplb.org/online-video-support-about/>
Online support group

Hopewell Animal Hospital Hopewell Junction
2611 Rte. 52, Hopewell Junction, NY 12533
Every 3rd Sunday at 11 am
(845-221-7387), info@hopewellanimalhospital.com
RSVP appreciated

Bideawee Manhattan
410 East 38th St., New York, NY 10016
1st Friday of the month, 10 a.m. - 12 p.m.
(212) 532-4986, katelyn.lombardi@bideawee.org
Free

Animal Medical Center New York
510 E. 62nd St., New York, NY 10021
Every other Thursday, 6:15 PM to 8:15 pm
(212) 838-8100, socialwork@amcny.org
Check website to confirm dates

Bideawee Wantagh
3300 Beltagh Ave, Wantagh, NY 11793
1st & 3rd Saturday each month, 10 a.m. - 12 p.m.
(516) 785-4199 ext. 1, alicia.ryan@bideawee.org
Free, now held on Zoom

Legacy Pet Crematory
West Babylon
21 Eads St., West Babylon, NY 11704
Usually 1st Saturday of every month (if enough people)
(516) 500-7387, info@legacypetny.com

Bideawee Westhampton
118 Old Country Road Westhampton, NY 11977
1st of each month, 10:30 a.m. - 12 p.m.
(866) 262-8133, kimberly.keith@bideawee.org
Free, now held on Zoom

West Village Veterinary Hospital New York
Second Wednesday of each month
susanpcohen@msn.com, (212) 633-7400
Run by Dr. Susan Cohen, DSW

Lollypop Farm Rochester
Terrence B. McIntee Lollypop Training and Education Center
Second Saturday of every month, 1 p.m. – 3 p.m.
petloss@lollypop.org
Free, pre-registration required

Washington State Resources

Seattle/King County Humane Society Bellevue
13212 SE Eastgate Way, Bellevue, WA 98005-4408
Saturday mornings at 10:00 am
(425) 641-0080
Virtual on 1st and 3rd Saturdays

Seattle Animal Shelter Pet Loss Support Group

2061 15th Ave W, Seattle, WA 98119
Thursday evenings at 6:00 pm
(206) 386-PETS (7387)

The Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County
2608 Center Street, Tacoma, WA 98409
Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon
(253) 284-5809, monicaw@thehumanesociety.org
Free, no pre-registration required

BirchBark Foundation
Online Via Zoom
Mondays from 6:30 - 7:30 pm
Not specified
Virtual via Zoom, free

Whatcom Humane Society Bellingham
2172 Division Street, Bellingham, WA 98226
Monthly
(360) 733-2080 ex. 3116, outreach@whatcomhumane.org
Check website for more information

The Benefits of Seeking Professional Help: Talking to a Therapist

Seeking professional help from a therapist or counselor specializing in pet loss can provide significant benefits for individuals struggling with grief.⁹ Mental health professionals are trained to understand the profound and complex bond between pets and their owners and can validate the intense grief experienced upon their loss.¹³ They can offer coping strategies and tools to help navigate the grieving process, such as journaling, mindfulness exercises, or creating memorials.¹⁵ In a counseling setting, individuals can find unconditional support and empathy without judgment, which may be lacking in other social circles.¹⁵ Therapists can help individuals understand the stages of grief and how these may manifest in their personal experience, fostering insight and acceptance in the healing journey.¹⁵ Participating in pet loss grief counseling can also connect individuals with others experiencing similar pain, creating a sense of community and reducing feelings of isolation.¹⁵ For those struggling to accept the death of a pet or experiencing symptoms like anxiety and depression, grief counseling can provide a chance to honor and talk about their loved one while working to understand the significance of their loss and process their thoughts and feelings.¹⁴ Therapy offers both adults and children valuable tools and support to navigate the mourning process.¹⁴ It can provide a safe space to process emotions, guidance through the grieving process, and support in adjusting to life without the pet, ultimately fostering long-term emotional resilience.¹⁸ Counselors can also help address feelings of guilt surrounding decisions made at the end of a pet's life and assist in determining readiness for getting another pet.¹⁸

The loss of a pet can result in profound grief, and understanding the stages of this grief along with utilizing healthy coping mechanisms is vital. Numerous national, online, and location-specific resources, including support groups and professional therapy, are available to help individuals navigate the challenging experience of pet loss.

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