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## **Honoring grief: The key to surviving the death of your pet**

[Losing a pet](#) is a profound trauma. We shouldn't be surprised then that afterward--maybe for a long time afterward-- we're experiencing a kind of PTSD.

By whatever alchemy, pets often become our soul mates; the relationship we have with them, based as it is not on spoken language but on something more elemental and perhaps, in many cases, more authentic-- can be among the most profound we will ever experience.

### **Recognize the stages of grief**

Pet lovers who've lost their animal companion know the process of healing from this trauma is not linear. However, it can be helpful to track our progress with grief, as the experience-- precisely because it affects us so severely-- has been studied.

The Kübler-Ross model offers one of the better known theories on how we recover from a major loss. This model posits that we experience grief in five stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and finally Acceptance.

Unfortunately, humans and their emotions are messy: In its treatise on dealing with grief, The Mayo Clinic advises us that we should "Remember that grief is unpredictable. Grief doesn't move along a predictable path or at a fixed pace." So, if we find acceptance one day and slip back into anger another, such a phenomenon is not actually a regression. It's a natural consequence of losing a beloved companion.

### **Take care of your health**

Mental Health America urges us to honor the intensity of this experience. "You may not be prepared for the intensity and duration of your emotions or how swiftly your moods may change. You may even begin to doubt the stability of your mental health."

And indeed, grief is intense, with real medical implications-- grief for a pet being no exception: The New England Journal of Medicine's article on a woman experiencing Broken Heart Syndrome after the death of her dog illustrates this point dramatically: her symptoms mimicked those of a heart attack, her hormone levels measuring up thirty times higher than normal.

Why should this intensity be surprising? It shouldn't be. Many of us consider our pets as our children, and ourselves as parents. Accordingly, we build our lives around our pets. The routine of care--walks, feedings, playtime-- is part of the fabric of our daily existence. The loss of that pet then creates an acute and disorienting emptiness. It is not just our lifestyle but our identity as caretakers, as parents, that is suddenly ripped away. We are left with a debilitating sense of futility. Why take a walk? Why make a meal? Why get out of bed at all? Without our beloved companion, these questions become very difficult to answer.

## **Seek support**

Society in general doesn't always honor pet death as the debilitating experience it is. But ironically, we need support to survive. Expelling grief is vital: We need to talk about how we feel. If we don't have a close, empathetic community to lean on, we would do well to seek out a pet loss support group. In these groups we can allow ourselves to express the depth of our pain, without the onus to minimize it, explain it, or justify it-- because that pain is tacitly understood.

Veterinarians, well versed in pet death and grieving owners, can direct us to these groups if we aren't up to finding them ourselves. Local animal shelters often have programs as well. Informal support groups can also be organized via NextDoor, Facebook, or Craigslist.

## **Take time to recover**

Along with asking for help, we should also not be afraid to ask for time off: from work, from relationships, from obligations. The Mayo Clinic advises us to avoid major decision-making when grief is fresh. Honestly, it's questionable if we should even be driving, or operating anything more dangerous than a Kleenex. We aren't functioning when we lose a pet. It's really a form of illness. We need time, space, and rest.

There's also a great need then, as a community, to recognize and honor this grief. We the bereaved, can start by accepting that the pain we're enduring is indeed as terrible as it feels-- and it should be. Grief can't be skipped over, nor can the process be rushed. Leaning into it, letting it rage at full intensity-- is part of the healing process. We can look to all devastation in nature to confirm this: there can be no new growth before the storm has passed.

## **Honor your grief**

Even in new growth, scars remain. But scars are beautiful: they are the texture of experience, and of survival. These losses are so intense precisely because the love we had was equally intense.

We were lucky to know these creatures, and they gave us all they had. Eventually, we can honor them by trying to love something else, some other creature that also needs us, again. Until then, we can honor them by grieving as we loved them: profusely.

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A graduate of both UCSC and San Francisco State, Anna now divides her time between the Bay Area and the Pacific Northwest. Her writing career started as a blog about the trials of renting in San Francisco; today Anna writes about real estate in both California and Seattle. Anna also teaches college writing. When not tracking the market, combing the MLS for intriguing properties, or inspiring future writers to care about the difference between a colon and a semicolon, Anna prefers the world outside of buildings and restores herself in forests and on beaches with her dog.