

# Grieving the Loss of a Pet

In the fall, as the leaves begin to change and the sun drops behind the horizon more quickly, I remember the last autumn I lived in New England. It was eight years ago that we buried "Cat" in her favorite place at the edge of the pasture where the first morning light would shine. She had a bright chestnut coat and the sun sparkled red and gold on her mane when I rode her in the foothills of California twenty years earlier. Thousands of miles and a million memories later we stood breathing the chilled morning air together for the last time.

We had a granite marker engraved with her name and the date. Beneath it is her photo and a memorial letter. In the spring the Tiger Lilies we planted bloom just over the fence line . . .

The loss of a companion; whether human, furred or feathered, is traumatic for those who loved them. For those of us who consider our pets as a part of the family, and value them as such, a death or loss is cause for mourning. Unfortunately, the opinion and comments of others who do not have the same attachment to their companion animals cause even more stress to a grieving owner.

It is important that anyone suffering from the loss of a pet recognize that their feelings are valid. Those feelings may range from guilt, anger, shock, denial, bargaining, and depression and cycle through over and over again. The time it takes to recover will vary from person to person and from one loss to another. Acceptance comes in it's own time.

In the case of accidental death, the loss is immediate and shocking. On the other hand, serious health issues because of old age or injury requires an owner to consider euthanasia. Making the decision to end a pet's life humanely is heart wrenching. Putting the welfare of a companion animal above the owner's need to continue the relationship is one of the hardest things an owner can experience.

An almost endless torture is the loss of a pet through theft or negligence that results in an unrecovered stray. Not having closure to the owner/companion relationship leaves the haunting

**The animals pictured below are only available for three days, but there are plenty of other choices! Visit the Valencia County Shelter, 1209 NM 314, one mile south of Main Street in Los Lunas. Open 8:00 am - 4:00 pm Tues - Sat. 866-2479**



worry of the final resolution to the life and resting place of the missing companion.

My first dog was sixteen when she developed congestive heart failure. I had months to consider what to do when the end was near. Being young and mobile I decided that when she died, whether in her sleep or assisted, I would have her remains cremated so that I would not have to leave her behind when I moved on. When my second dog was nearing the end at thirteen, suffering from diabetes and Cushings disease, I again had time to resolve how to handle the final days. In February when Maggie Mae lost her struggle with kidney failure we had set a precedence and didn't have last minute pressure in making a decision about what to do.

Given options, and knowing ahead of time how we feel it is best to bring our time with our "fur kids" to an end, has helped tremendously in moving through the grieving process. Having gone through it so many times with our own sweet babies and the many rescue dogs we have been with at the end of their lives, has made it more of a natural part of the cycle of life. Yet, there are always tears, regrets, guilt, and pain from each loss.

Autumn brings a kind of sadness. Like tears, the leaves fall.

## Some ways to cope with pet loss:

If you bury your pet at home, or in a special place that has significance to you and your family, you may want mark the site with a head stone. For some, having a place to visit is helpful. You may want to plant flowers or a tree to add a living memorial there, as well.

Cremated remains may be placed in an urn and kept, along with a photo, in a special place in the home. Some prefer to scatter the ashes in a garden, at a often visited wilderness area, or another spot that was a favorite place where time was spent together.

Holding a ceremony with family members and friends who understand your close attachment to your pet can help bring closure and acceptance to his death. Lighting candles, reading a poem, or reminiscing about happy experiences with him, can all be a part of your way of saying good-bye.

You may want to send a notice to friends and family to let them know about your pets passing so they are aware of your sad time and can offer you their support.

Because your pet was a part of your everyday life, there will be many reminders of his absence. Some families leave food bowls, beds, and toys out for a while, others prefer pack or give them away.

In the weeks after your loss you may want to assemble an album of photos, pressed flowers, a lock of hair, and other small mementos. A memory box may hold his favorite toy, blanket, collar, tags, notes of condolence, and other larger items related to your pet and significant to your life together.

To honor your pet's memory you may want to volunteer your services or make a donation to one of the many rescue organizations or the animal shelter. You may consider donating to a veterinary school doing research to cure a specific disease or animal medical research in general.

There are a lot of books and on-line resources to help those who need assistance in finding a way to get past an overwhelming loss. Of course, speaking with others, who feel as strongly about their pets as you do, may help. However, grief counseling may be necessary for someone who cannot overcome their bereavement on their own.

There isn't a simple or single way to handle the loss of a pet. Each person has to go through the process in his own time and in his own way. We can take some comfort in knowing that the heartache of loss is because we were able to give our hearts to our companion - they deserve no less.

**Article and Photos by Judy Babcock, Quixote Humane, Inc.**