

- Releasing pent-up emotions is far healthier than holding them in. If you are feeling guilty, talk about it, write it down, share it with a trusted friend - try to express it in some way.
- As a carer your days were probably very busy - there was always a reason to get up in the morning. It helps to find a new type of structure in your life. Setting daily goals can assist you in making sure that your days have a purpose.

Remember that grieving is an important part of healing the sense of loss. Be patient with yourself.

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# Pet Loss

Grief reactions associated with  
the loss of an animal

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## Humans and their pets

Pets and their human owners often share a special bond. The attachment can be similar to, and as strong as, the feelings we have for our family and friends, and many people see their pet as a member of the family.

## When your pet dies

There are a number of ways in which your pet may die. It may be through an accident, old age, sickness, or may have had to be euthanised (in other words 'put to sleep'). Sometimes your pet will be lost, go missing or be stolen.

## Feelings you might experience on the loss of your pet

The loss of a pet can be as devastating as the loss of a human who is important to us. The death or loss of a beloved animal is the end of a special relationship, and can be one of the most difficult times in a person's life.

Pets give us unconditional love and support, so when we mourn their death or loss, the emotional pain can be extreme.

For some people, their pets are their substitute children. Similarly, many people now live alone and their pets become their family. In these situations, the death or loss of a 'fur-child' can be as emotional as the void left after the death or loss of a human child.

The physical and psychological problems that

people experience when a human dies can also be experienced when a pet dies.

When grieving for your pet you may find that you sleep and eat less; you may feel that you don't want to go out as much as usual. You might spend a lot of time thinking about and longing for your pet.

Shock, numbness, searching, yearning and disorientation are appropriate parts of the grieving process.

The loss of a pet can trigger underlying emotions in profound ways. For example, you might be reminded of other traumatic times in your life when you lost close family members or friends. Feelings of loss or abandonment from your life may resurface.

Having your pet euthanized, because it was suffering may have been the 'right' decision, but it still may involve grief and guilt – "Did I do the right thing?" "Did my pet suffer?"

If your pet is lost, goes missing or is stolen, you might be extremely distressed because the situation is so uncertain. It's possible your pet may have died, but maybe it's still alive. This grief may be punctuated with hope that the animal will be found or be returned.

Not everyone values pets, and some people are not fond of animals at all. This can make it very difficult for them to understand the pain experienced by someone who has lost their beloved animal. Remember that it does not matter if others think you should not be upset by your pet's death. What is important is what your pet meant to you. There is no reason to feel that your grief is not justified or that it is strange.

## Remembering your pet

Talking to someone who understands the human-animal bond can be very helpful. You might want to talk to a trusted friend or family member. If you talk to your general practitioner, veterinarian, priest, counsellor or psychologist, make sure you let them know how important your pet was to you and how you viewed your relationship with it.

Have a burial or memorial service for the pet and invite family and friends who will understand and be supportive. Plant a tree or a flower in memory of your deceased pet. You may want to buy a statue or plaque. .

When you are ready – and you will know when that time has come – think about adopting a new pet. When the grief is strongest, you might swear that you will never have another animal. However, many people find that in time, they are ready to share their life with another pet. Acquiring another pet does not mean you are replacing the one that has died as each animal is unique.

Other people may decide that they are not prepared to go through the trauma of losing another pet. It is up to you to decide what is best for you.

Keep a photograph of your pet in a place where you can see it whenever you want to.

## Strategies

- Don't be afraid to ask for help if you feel you need it. It is better to deal with your painful memories as soon as you can.