

Do Companion Animals Grieve?

Honoring the Bond

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Families that live together form close attachments. When a companion animal dies, surviving pets may “cling” to their human family members, be more reactive to stimuli, appear anxious or depressed, or demonstrate a loss of interest in playing, sleeping or eating. These behavioral and emotional changes may be a temporary response to the loss, a distress response to the owners’ sadness, a distress response to changes in routine that occur as the result of the death, or an underlying medical condition.*

Determining the best ways to help our companion animals transition more effectively through this process requires additional scientific study. The following suggestions, however, are provided for your consideration.

*Important Health Alert

If a cat stops eating, this can be a medical emergency. Please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

If a dog stops eating, alert your veterinarian.

Reward Healthy Behaviors

Be careful not to encourage a surviving companion animal’s behavior changes (e.g. hiding, barking, not eating etc.). Instead, use special treats and attention to reward healthy behaviors such as being appropriately quiet, being social, coming out of hiding, etc.

Try to avoid paying attention to your pet when he is showing disinterest in his/her normal food. Instead, pick up the bowl and offer the food again later. If you add a flavor enhancer to the pet’s food, do not do so right after the pet has refused plain food. Instead, wait several hours and then offer the flavor enhanced food.

Maintain Routines

Keep a surviving companion animal’s daily routine as unchanged as possible (e.g. meal times, walks, etc.). The more predictable, familiar and consistent the environment, the more readily the surviving companion animal(s) will adapt to changes in the family structure.

Look for Changes in the Social Hierarchy

Watch for changes in the social structure between surviving companion animals; particularly if the surviving pet often looked to the other pet for leadership. Such reactions may be more common in species or individuals that show more elaborate social interactions.

Whenever members are added or lost from groups of social animals, remaining animals may begin to show signs of separation anxiety. These behaviors include panting, pacing, whining, drooling, howling, barking and not eating treats while alone. When your pet is alone, video can be utilized to help monitor and record stress levels.

Exercise is the best non-drug stress reliever you have available for your pet. It can also be a helpful tool in managing your grief response. Prior to beginning a new exercise program with your pet, consult with your pet’s veterinarian and your own family doctor.

There are now pheromones available, in sprays and atomizers, which may be effective tools for reducing your pet’s anxiety. DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) is a replication of the pheromone that a mother dog releases while nursing her young. For cats, Feliway is a replication of the calming cheek marking pheromone. Many veterinarians, pet stores and pet supply catalogues have these products available.

For the most part, allow the companion animals to work out their own relationships. Punishment should be avoided as it increases levels of anxiety. Instead, try rewarding positive behaviors and interrupting undesired behaviors with obedience commands or redirection to a new activity.

Common underlying medical conditions can contribute to behavioral changes. A thorough medical examination may be needed to rule out these conditions. If you have any questions or concerns regarding changes in a surviving companion animal’s behavior, consult with your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist, or a certified applied animal behaviorist.

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Pet-Present Euthanasia

Families considering euthanasia may choose to have other pets present during, or immediately after, the euthanasia procedure. Some owners have reported fewer disruptions in their surviving animal's behavior when the surviving animal was permitted to see and/or smell the deceased pet.

If you are considering having a pet present during euthanasia, it is important to be aware of how your response will impact your surviving pet(s). Will your emotions potentially create a more stressful environment for your surviving pet(s)?

Also, it is important to be aware that it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict how your surviving pet(s) will react to the presence of the deceased pet. For example, responses may include appearing unaffected by the death, urinating on the deceased pet, stepping on the pet, growling or barking, etc. Although these behaviors are normal for animals, they may be upsetting to grieving humans.

Because of safety and other important considerations, we suggest arranging a specific time with your veterinarian to discuss the euthanasia process. Your veterinarian can help guide you in selecting the most appropriate arrangements for your pet and your family.

Adopting Again

In any family, new members join by birth, adoption, friendship or partnership, but not always by design or plan. The time to consider adopting a new companion animal is when the entire family has had sufficient time to deal with the emotions of grief. Adopting too soon can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment toward the new family member who cannot take the place of the companion animal who has died.

Some families may decide not to adopt a new companion animal into their lives because of the emotional, physical or financial demands involved with companion animal care. Others may feel the time is right to share their home and heart with another pet. For families that want to consider adoption, it will be important to remember that each companion animal has a special and unique personality. Take time to discuss different sizes, breeds or colors before making a final decision. Consider the needs and temperament of any surviving companion animals. When adopting a new pet, remind yourself that getting another pet is not an act of disloyalty. After all, your companion animal was happy when you were happy.

Assistance with identifying the best match for your family (pre-selection counseling) is available through most small animal practitioners, veterinary behaviorists, and certified applied animal behaviorists.

Written by Brandt, J., Shreyer, T., Day, S., and Feltes, E. (2005)
and adapted from *The Human Animal Bond and Grief* by
Lagoni, Butler and Hetts

Additional Resources

For owners struggling with a difficult decision or coping with grief after the death of a pet, a variety of support services including bereavement counselors, support groups, websites, books and articles are available. Volunteers are available to provide a supportive, listening ear to companion animal owners. Please contact the Companion Animal Listening Line (CALL) at (614) 292-1823 for more information or find resources on our web site: vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond

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