

## **Peaceful Passing for Pets: A Caregiver's Guide To Pet Hospice Care, Chapter 7, 'Bereavement'**

Grief has many facets. First of all, it is a highly individual experience. It often comes in stages that may include shock, anger, denial, loneliness, self-pity, guilt, regret, and over-all sadness. Some of these feelings may be experienced more intensely than others, but know that your feelings will come and go, eventually with less intensity, and with less frequency. Ultimately, acceptance will come, but reminders of your loss may trigger grief even many years later. In the beginning, when you are feeling most overwhelmed, it is helpful to seek outside help and support.

Many people find that the grief accompanying the loss of a pet is more intense than the grief accompanying the loss of a parent. This of course adds to one's guilt, but there are reasons for this phenomenon. It probably can be explained by the fact that there is less emotional baggage with the loss of a pet. For example, your pet never set boundaries in bringing you up, never argued with you about your activities, or disciplined you when you went astray. In other words, you inevitably had conflicts with your parent no matter how much you loved him or her. Your pet on the other hand, always greeted you with enthusiasm, accepted you, and loved you unconditionally. Some people say that they learned more about love and the giving of love from their pet than from a parent or any other person.

Because we seem to be a feeling-avoidant society, it is hard to acknowledge that grieving is so painful and that it is such a gradual and often slow process. It can take weeks, months, and sometimes years. It cannot be ignored. In fact, if healing is to take place, it must be expressed through crying, writing, talking, or whatever outlet that an individual finds helpful.

Some people find it is beneficial to write about how they felt about their beloved companion. Artists like to paint or sketch their memories. Others may need to talk about how they feel while still others deal with their feelings in less obvious ways. I wrote a small book, *Magic Dog*, the biography of our golden retriever, Ben. I also spent hours making a scrap book of pictures of all the good times we had. A friend who lost her cat gathered those who knew her pet for a special time to reminisce about their times with her. One person's memory reminded another person's memory of her cat, Julie. At the end of the gathering, Julie's life had actually been eulogized. Donating to an animal organization in the pet's memory can be helpful to families. Whatever ways the pet is remembered and honored serve to comfort and to heal the mourners.

Because everyone grieves differently, some family members will need to talk while others will prefer to reflect and be more private. Many people experience a disruption in their waking, sleeping, and eating routines. Some people may wish to reduce their social activity by staying home and being alone more than usual. Employed people often take days off from work. Almost everyone is upset by those who seem to lack understanding of what you are experiencing. Grief produces not only emotional but also physical symptoms.

You will have friends who have experienced what you are suffering as well as friends who do not understand at all. In the beginning, it is best to stay away from anyone who says, “But it was just a cat (or a dog),” because they can make you feel even more isolated and lonely. Stay with friends who understand your grief and those who let you cry. You may want a support group and/or the social worker or chaplain from your hospice organization. There is a lot of help available so be sure to use it.

Take good care of yourself. Because grief depletes you physically as well as emotionally, it can be overwhelming. You are also tired from the weeks of caretaking. Exercise, even if it is an effort to take a walk or bicycle a mile. Eat a healthy diet and try to get proper sleep. Give yourself the gift of private time and social time with understanding friends. The time will come when you will remember the gifts that this pet gave you, and you will be glad for having had this companion in your life.