

# 7 Self-Care Essentials While Grieving the Death of a Pet

Grieving for our companion animals is hard, here are seven strategies to help.



Research shows us that grieving the death of our companion animals can be just as painful, if not more than, grieving the loss of a family member or friend. There are helpful steps to take immediately after your pet's passing, and also key self-care strategies that can help someone process through their grief experience.

Grieving is a highly personalized, individualistic experience that is influenced by culture and social groups. The process in

which you might experience the pain of losing your pet might look immensely different from even a direct family member living in the same house.

Below are seven helpful steps one can take to provide some nurture during an extremely emotionally painful and exhausting time. Our grief is an expression of the love we have felt, the pain of loss and the process of having to reintegrate our life into what it will look like with the “absence” of our pet. I place “absence” in quotes as many believe it is only a physical loss, as our pets will always remain in our hearts and their influence upon our lives will last forever. Please note the list is not in any particular order of importance, and everyone has to process within their own timeframe.

## 1. Set aside the time to grieve in your own way and release your emotions



We live in a very busy time, where there are always 20 things on the “to-do” list and the ability to only get five things done in a day. It is a time of constant distraction and people moving very quickly. Those experiencing grief can feel angry that life hasn't slowed down on the outside, due to the painful feelings on the inside. You need time to grieve and to experience your emotions, fully. Give yourself the time to feel, experience, and let the emotions you are experiencing release at regular intervals along your journey through grief and on a daily basis in the beginning. Otherwise, you might find yourself stuffing your emotions

which can cause more pain down the road.

## 2. Reflect upon the life shared between yourself and your beloved pet

Active reflection can be hard, even without experience in the pain of grief. Take time to reflect either through writing, storytelling, or whatever form of expression brings you comfort. I typically encourage my clients to start a memory journey and reflect upon the life shared. It can be easy to want to immediately write down the pain of grief, especially in the beginning. However; when you are taking the time to purposely reflect in this manner, try to focus on what positive memories were shared. This allows your body to experience a different emotion and helps bring you from pain into gratitude for the time spent together over time. Make sure to not use this method to avoid experiencing pain, we must experience both within the grief process.

## 3. Make sure you continue to meet your basic needs

One of the most frequent complaints in the immediate phase of grief, or acute phase, is the complete loss of appetite. Sleep is also commonly very disturbed as our mind can be rapidly attempting to process through the experience. Guilt plays a role in this as well. Try, as best you can, to continue eating. Try, as well, to fill yourself with nutritious foods. Grieving is a lot of hard work, and can be taxing on the body. Fill yourself with nutrients to help your body process. Try to maintain a sleep schedule, go to bed on a routine and focus on your chosen calming practice while doing so.

## 4. Choose a calming practice and use it frequently



As we said earlier, it can be incredibly frustrating and painful that the outside world doesn't slow down. We aren't typically allowed days off from work to grieve the death of our pet and are even only federally mandated to receive three days from our employer for direct, human, family members. Choosing a calming practice such as meditation, active focus on breathing, mindful eating, or releasing our body tension can help as our anxieties that may increase during social

obligations while we are still experiencing our grief.

## 5. Maintain routines with your living animals as best you can

Animals thrive on routines and structure. While you're grieving, your living pets are also experiencing the loss and absence of your pet and their companion. Dogs experience grief and can search for their pack member. Cats may hide or spend more time alone, changing behavior while they process alongside of you. Horses may run the fence line for some time and whinny, trying to receive a return call from their mate. Try to maintain walking routines and feeding schedules as not to disrupt their process or your own. Routines allow us a sense of structure and familiarity, although the first few times can be painful, these immediate triggers can reduce over time.

## 6. Memorialize the memory and love of your pet



Saying “see you later” to ones we love can be a crucial step in moving through the grief experience. Sometimes, we don’t get to say “goodbye” before our pets passing. Not having a form of closure in this process can leave some feeling as though they have a hole in their hearts. Memorializing the memory of your beloved pet can be a good way of ascertaining some form of closure. Some people choose to write a letter, some have funerals and services, some people create shadow boxes with their dog or cat tags and collars and imprint of their paw. Others decide that they will find a favorite space or memory from their pet’s life and

spend some time there. There is never a wrong way to memorialize the beautiful experiences and life that was shared.

## 7. Don’t hesitate to seek support from understanding friends or relatives

Although grief is a highly individualistic experience, we grieve within communities. Entire communities can even grieve within their own way. It’s important to recognize when you need support during your grief process. Such support could look like calling an understanding friend and going on your first walk together after the death of your animal, or getting a cup of coffee. It may also look like seeking support from a helping professional to process through the pain and anxieties of losing your pet. There are also many online communities through social media and forums such as Max’s Healing Hearts Community which allows a safe space to express your grief, seek peer support, and share in the memory of your beloved pet.

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