

Understanding grief and holistic ways to heal.

Grief is an entirely natural and normal reaction to losing our loved pet. Grief does not distinguish between love for human or animal. We simply mourn and grieve because we love. One cannot exist without the other. And losing a pet that we love hurts. Our life and shared daily routine is turned upside down. Our grief in many ways symbolizes the importance of our pet in our lives. Our pet is often our loyal and faithful best friend. They are family. It is possibly the most honest, non-conditional, genuine relationship we have; devoid of falsity and insincerity. Many people rely on their pets for conversation, laughter, company and comfort. For some people, such as the partially sighted, this affinity extends into assistance with daily living. People living alone, the housebound, older adults and those who find human relationships awkward, often thrive in the company of animals. Caring for our pet can be the main reason for getting up in the morning. This loss of such a mutually loving and supportive relationship can be devastating. We may feel we have lost part of our identity. For example, many dog walkers are known through their pet ('Otto's dad') rather than their own name.

Many bereaved animal lovers face the challenge of trying to cope with day to day activities, such as going to work or looking after the family. As with any bereavement, people may need to take time off work and unfortunately, not all employers sympathise. This can put tremendous stress on the bereaved. It may be necessary for you to see the G.P if you are unable to work.

Whether grief lasts for days, weeks, months or years, it is debilitating, distressing, painful and isolating. It can begin even before death, frequently when a terminal diagnosis is given and we are aware that our pet has a limited amount of time left. Or when we are forced to live apart from a pet due to personal circumstances or a pet disappears. A pet does not need to die for its human companion to experience grief. Enforced separation can provoke exactly the same emotional and physical reactions that may be experienced by an owner whose pet has passed away. For owners whose pet is missing, not only may grief be a problem but the not knowing of what has happened to it and continual searching, adds to the burden. Other people may fail to understand their sadness.

Some animal lovers who have been nursing a sick pet may experience mixed feelings of relief and grief which is confusing. This is completely normal. Nursing is physically and emotionally draining. The relief that is felt relates to being free from the practicalities of nursing and that the suffering of our pet is over, not relief that our pet is gone.

Unfortunately, animal bereavement is unique in that the bereaved sometimes come up against others who do not understand or appreciate the impact of their loss. Too many owners have endured the dreaded 'it was only a dog/cat/horse/rabbit' comment. It is incredibly painful to have one's cherished relationship derogated and demonstrates the lack of empathy from those making such remarks. One needs to accept that some people do not understand the bond that we have with our pets but it is still very hurtful, especially when one is battling with grief. The heartache at losing an animal companion is no less for many, than the death of a human relation or friend. In fact, some bereaved animal lovers have spoken of feeling even worse after losing their pet than when a loved human has died. Many bereaved pet owners themselves have been taken completely by surprise at the depth of their feelings – 'I didn't know losing a pet could be so painful' is a common comment. Also, many bereaved animal lovers have spoken of their feelings of anger and disbelief at the world going about its daily business in the face of such a loss. Our world has been turned upside down and everything is different but outside, the world carries on as normal.

When we talk of grief, it is easy to think of grief as a fixed element, rather like a broken leg. But grief is as complex and individualistic as the possessor; symptoms vary from person to person; in their intensity and in their duration. Psychological features may include anxiety, depression, anger, fear, despair, shock, panic attacks, guilt, numbness, crying, apathy, hysteria, desperation, hopelessness, restlessness and a general inability to cope with normal day to day activities. Physical ailments can manifest including vomiting, nausea, stomach pain, diarrhoea, insomnia, headaches, dry mouth, fainting, weakness, confusion, lack of appetite, palpitations, chest pain, forgetfulness, weight loss or gain, shaking, trembling, nightmares, collapse to exacerbation of existing illnesses. All of these issues can be profoundly disruptive to daily living; can interfere with going to work (indeed we may need time off work) and are very frightening. Often, people feel they are on a roller coaster with their emotions. Or like the sea – continually ebbing and flowing like the tide. Everyone is different; some people will have mild sadness to others with problems that require professional medical assistance. Although uncommon, loss of a pet has resulted in suicide. If you or if you suspect a bereaved owner is at risk of self-harm, this must be considered an emergency and urgent medical attention sought immediately.

Much research and writing has concentrated on stages of grief. Shock, denial, bargaining, reliving events, sadness, anger, yearning, depression and acceptance. Elizabeth Kuler-Ross was instrumental in introducing the idea of stages of grief. Not everyone will go through all the stages and not necessarily in the same order. Stages of grief can be taken as a rough guiding point and as a process of the acceptance of death. Also, the acceptance of death does not automatically collate to diffusing emotions as the actual acceptance of death can be painful.

Shock normally occurs when we hear bad news. Even if it is expected, the actual verbalization brings home the reality of the situation. We may feel numb. This numbness acts as protection to cushion us from the events which will follow. People may become faint, start shaking, vomit, become immobile or collapse.

Denial may follow shock and is also a coping, protective mechanism. Often, there is a complete disconnection from reality. Information cannot be absorbed. The situation is too awful for it to be real. We cannot believe that they have died.

As numbness and denial wears off, reality creeps in. The replaying of past events over and over in our mind is common. Wishing we could alter the course of events; blaming ourselves/others for our decisions; feeling guilty; the final outcome and the despair that we cannot change it.

Searching and yearning for our loved pet is normal. We may believe that we see, hear and feel them around us. They are in our dreams. This is quite a common phenomenon and the reasons for this are unclear.

Anger and rage over the death of a pet can be overwhelming. For people living alone, the enforced isolation can add to the fury. Anger can be directed in all directions; ourselves for failing to save our friend; God; the veterinary surgeon; the person who caused the accident; ineffective treatment; even the pet itself for leaving us bereft. Blame and guilt add to the pressure. Unconnected events trigger angry responses - often lashing out at others due to stress. Anger is difficult to manage, even when justified. It can be internalized and manifest as deep depression.

Depression, sadness and grief bites as the full reality of the death hits hard. Grief cannot be rushed and people should not be pressurized to 'get over it' quickly. Concentrate on one day at a time. Anxiety can be immensely distressing and frequently accompanies depression. Anxiety over losing one's close friend; loss of routine and lifestyle; and being alone can be so frightening. Normal life may be suspended due to lack of interest and concentration. Thoughts of self-harm are not unknown.

Acceptance can be viewed as a turning point. Though this is not to say there will be no further episodes of sadness in the future. Acceptance is when there are more non-mourning times than mourning. Activities can be resumed and enjoyed. Grief is not the overwhelming emotion of the day and it does not overshadow all that we do. We accept our lot, however unwanted, as the new reality. We feel connected to our environment and that we can continue with life. There is hope and possibilities for the future. Happy memories of our pet bring smiles and fewer tears. Acceptance is in no way disrespectful to our loved pet and no one should feel guilty at the easing of pain. The passing of time alone can often take the rawness out of emotion.

However seeing grief as part of a theoretical model does not necessary help us. So is there anything we can do to help us get to a point where a sense of normality is more prominent than the awareness of loss? Most importantly, let your feelings out; cry, yell, rant but don't bottle up how you feel – let it go as often as you need. Some people try to keep busy by concentrating on work or a hobby. Finding something to make us feel better isn't easy especially as grief is exhausting and draining.

It would be nice to be able to wave a magic wand and make all the hurt and sadness disappear but unfortunately such a wand hasn't yet been invented. Simply knowing that your grief is normal and completely natural can bring some comfort. Millions of animal lovers have walked in your shoes and feel your pain. Just talking to a like-minded friend or organization that offers animal bereavement support can offer peace of mind. There are many internet sites where bereaved animal lovers can share thoughts – even reading another's story can make you feel less alone in your pain. If talking is too difficult, some organizations are happy to help via email. People who need professional counselling can seek this through their G.P or privately. However, the bereaved should satisfy themselves that their therapist has a good grasp of animal bereavement issues as not all professional counsellors do.

Another of the most commonly recognised routes to fighting the debilitating symptoms of bereavement is free and simple. Getting some fresh air and exercise. We know trying to summon up energy when you are feeling so sad isn't easy. However, exercise, in whatever form, produces endorphins which are our natural fighters against pain and can boost our emotional mood. Even a short 10 minute walk a few times a day can help.

As grief is natural and can embody emotional and physical features, exploring a holistic or complementary road to healing may help. Holistic practices consider the individual as a whole; with mind, body and lifestyle affecting each another. Therapists tend to use natural organic plant based potions, tablets and lotions; physical manipulation; exercise; talking therapies. Holistic practitioners cover a wide range of therapies and there are new ones developing all the time. Many are professionally qualified and registered as such. Potential users of holistic practitioners should satisfy themselves that the particular therapy is suitable for them (do lots of research and ask questions) and that the practitioner is qualified. All reputable practitioners will refer clients onto their G.P if appropriate. It is interesting to note that many holistic practitioners normally pursue treatment methods which do not involve animal testing – this is frequently important to animal lovers.

Why do people choose holistic therapies? Often they are seen as natural and gentle with fewer side effects than conventional medicine (though side effects, and serious ones, can result); there are a wide range of options and prices; people may not wish to bother their doctor and do-it-yourself is an option. Most health shops stock a wide range of products which promote good health as do numerous internet sites. People can shop for goods and services to meet their particular needs. Internet shopping and information especially allows

for privacy and the bereaved may welcome this. Sadly, many bereaved owners fear that their grief is misplaced – ‘how can I be so upset after losing my pet’ and are reluctant to visit their G.P. for fear of ridicule. Holistic therapists tend to be seen as taking a wider ranging and comprehensive view of life. However, it is also fair to say that finally the medical fraternity have realized the impact of pet bereavement.

Holistic therapies may not be appropriate on their own for those already affected by other mental/physical health issues. The bereaved and practitioners need to be aware of when to seek professional help. But some holistic therapies may form part of a package of help and may offer less invasive support. Users of conventional and holistic medicine should check with their G.P or pharmacist for the suitability of treatments and that if combined therapies are used, that they do not conflict.

A few of the most common holistic therapies are noted below:

One of the oldest holistic therapies is acupuncture. Established thousands of years ago in China and the Far East, it is available through private practitioners and the N.H.S. However, N.H.S treatment is underfunded and largely reserved for pain management. Traditional Chinese acupuncture believes that energy flows through 12 main channels, or meridians, in the body. 6 meridians are termed yin and 6 termed yang. Problems arise when energy in the body, termed qi, is disturbed by ill health. By inserting fine needles into the skin to stimulate qi, balance and natural healing may be restored. Traditional Chinese acupuncture has been developed by some practitioners who offer an alternative method of acupuncture. Also, patients may be instructed to use acupressure at home. This involves pressing certain points on the body. This is often used to treat headaches. Also using acupuncture cones (a sticking plaster incorporating a needle) can be applied at home.

Another ancient tool of support for the bereaved is herbalism. Using herbs to treat physical and emotional difficulties dates back thousands of years. Many of our pharmaceutical drugs have their foundation in plant matter and there is much valid scientific evidence to back up the effectiveness of certain herbs. Herbs can be used in many forms and strengths from tablets, teas, drinks and powders. There can be wide discrepancies in the quality of herbal products from different producers as can the price.

Bereaved pet owners trying to decide if herbalism may help them can either research herbal or flower alternatives themselves or consult a herbalist or medical herbalist. Some health shop staff are qualified to give general advice as are some nutritional therapists. Medical herbalists are the gold standard in the field. Some practitioners are trained in orthodox western medicine too. Some not only prescribe herbal remedies but may make their own. Particular herbs have undergone extensive research and may be of help to the bereaved.

Staying with the plant and herbal theme, another option for healing is homeopathy (although a few products are animal sourced.) Medicines differ in type, potency and

dilution. Homeopathic solutions can be brought over the counter, on line or via a professional consultant or through a recognised homeopathic practitioner. Practitioners vary widely; many are doctors, nurses and other health professionals. It is available on the N.H.S and there are specialized hospitals and clinics. Homeopathy assumes that the body's defences can be stimulated by administering minute doses of herbs which in larger doses may cause symptoms of an illness. It harnesses the body's own innate ability to heal itself. It looks at why you are having symptoms rather than just treating them.

Finally on the plant theme is the potential benefit of aromatherapy. Very popular, its origins date back to 1000AD. It is often seen as one of the most easily accessible, relaxing and soothing of complementary therapies. Essential oils are made from concentrated essence of plants, leaves, bark and stems and can be inhaled, added to a bath or used for massage. Aromatherapy candles can give off a relaxing vapour.

Physical holistic therapies concentrate on manipulation of the body and exercise with some also combining cognitive stimulation. One example of this is yoga. Yoga has its origins in India 5000 years ago and there are various strands of yoga. Some forms of yoga combine exercise with meditation. Yoga classes are widely available including some within hospitals and surgeries. Because of the wide variation in yoga techniques, the bereaved may need to make enquiries into the suitability of types for them, especially if they have existing health conditions. Some forms of yoga are much more physically intensive than others.

Another physical holistic therapy is reflexology. Reflexology is based upon the belief that particular points on the feet, lower leg, hands, ears and face correspond to a point in the body. The reflexologist will apply pressure to these points to promote healing.

Massage is another physical source of relaxation for depression, tension and anxiety. Many forms of massage exist from a simple shoulder rub by one's partner; an Indian head massage available in beauty salons/clinics to a full body treatment from a qualified professional. Bereaved owners with complex health issues may wish to consult a professional therapist before starting treatment.

Death and bereavement can be shocking whether it is expected or not. It can make you re-evaluate life and deeply held beliefs. Followers of a religion may question why their God has taken their pet away, especially if the circumstances are considered very unfair. For some people, it involves concentrating on their thoughts or reassessing their ways of thinking and to do this, they turn to mediation. Mediation can be done anywhere by anyone and there is a wide range of information on the subject including books, CDs and classes on the practice with many strands to it. Mediation does not need to be linked to any religious belief system. It aims to teach you to find peace within your own mind.

If you know someone who is struggling with the death of their pet, try to help them, even small acts of kindness can make a huge difference. Picking up the phone for a quick chat can

break feelings of isolation; inviting them in for a cup of coffee; offering them a sympathetic ear. A bereaved animal lover is no different from any other bereaved person.

Ultimately, coping with grief involves taking care of and being kind to yourself. At the very least, trying to get adequate rest, sleep, food and thinking time. This may include easy things such as abandoning the ironing in favour of sitting quietly in the garden or eating uncomplicated healthy food rather than preparing elaborate dishes for the family. It involves abstaining from activities which are counterproductive such excessive alcohol consumption.

The future without a loved pet can appear very bleak. Concentrating on the day at hand can help – even breaking up the day into more manageable chunks such as morning, afternoon and evening may make the day ahead seem less daunting. Quite simply, trying to manage one's grief involves getting to a point where sorrow and pain does not dominate and overshadow the entire day. Taking small steps to finding some peace and respite for mind and body, even if that is only half an hour a day in the early stages, is an achievement. No one should put themselves under pressure to 'get over it' or feel embarrassed by their sadness.

Caring for an animal companion extends into caring for our own wellbeing after their death; it is what our pet would have wished. The intensity of all consuming grief gradually subsides but the love we feel for our beloved pet is never extinguished. And it is testament to our strength and love for animals that many of us go onto sharing our lives again with a new animal friend who we will cherish as we travel a new road together.

Animal bereavement support factsheets are a free resource to help bereaved animal lovers. They must not be interpreted as providing professional counselling or medical advice and no liability or responsibility can be accepted as such. Please consult your G.P for qualified assistance. Thank you.

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