

Welcoming a new friend into the home.

The silence can be deafening. Unless you belong to a multi pet household, coming home to the new, unwelcome, animal free house is one of the most painful situations a bereaved animal lover faces. For those living alone, it is especially sad. Even if the house consists of other human family members, it is not a home without the familiar paddle of paws, woofs, purrs and tweets. For many people, the house has lost its soul.

One of the most dreaded, insensitive comments a bereaved owner faces is that 'you can always get another one'. It degrades and belittles the owner's grief and the importance of the relationship between animal and human. It implies all animals are the same, like for like and that another can easily be acquired and adapted just as a new pair of shoes. Frequently, some people genuinely do not realize how upsetting their remarks are to the bereaved owner. They may be at a loss in how to comfort them in their grief and suggesting 'getting another one' seems a quick fix solution. It also demonstrates the lack of understanding of the depth of grief that is experienced by people for their companion animals. Also, it illustrates how some people view animals as a commodity.

A departed pet cannot be replaced; they were and will remain unique. And inviting a new animal friend into the home does not take away one's grief. At most, it provides a distraction as our thoughts are occupied with settling the new pet in.

Everyone varies enormously in the duration of their sadness and grief and their readiness in considering when will be a good time for a new pet to be welcomed into the home. This may be days, weeks, months or years. And sadly, for some people, the pain is so traumatic and long-lasting that they cannot face sharing their life again with an animal companion.

It is essential that much thought is put into the decision and especially guarding against rushing into acquiring a new pet until you are ready. All family members should be unanimous in when to seek a new pet and what type of companion. If one family member isn't keen, then ideally, wait a little longer. The consequences for the owner and new companion animal can be unfortunate if the timing is too soon. The owner may reject the animal or be unable to cope. The owner may then feel guilty at letting the new animal down which only adds to their overall unhappiness. Or an owner may persist at home with the new animal without any real bonding; feeling disappointed; caring for it begrudgingly out of duty; or the owner's lifestyle may be at odds with the animal's needs. If there is any doubt about finding a new animal companion, then it is better to delay the happy event.

When people have made the decision to adopt a new pet, they frequently feel guilty in doing so and that they are being disrespectful to the deceased pet. There is absolutely no need to feel shame or disloyalty. The love, joy and memories shared with the lost pet will never disappear. And looking forward to sharing one's life again with a special animal friend is a sign of healing. It is completely normal to still miss pets that have died while enjoying the company of a new friend. The love for the departed pet never dies. If you are adopting a new pet from an animal rescue shelter, you are providing a home to an animal that has fallen on hard times and this can be comforting.

Choosing a new pet can be exciting and daunting at the same time. Will I make the right choice? Will I love it less/more than the last? Animals are individuals with their unique characters – it will not be like the last pet, however similar it may be in breed or looks. Some owners can be disappointed in being determined to adopt a pet which is the same colour or breed to find it has none of the traits as the last pet. They become angry and resentful. Have your circumstances changed and will this affect the type of pet that will suit you both? Will I offer a home to more than one animal? In a multi-pet household, consideration must be given to the existing pets – will they accept another addition to the family? Do I have the time to integrate the new pet with the existing ones?

Animals are living longer than ever. It is common for cats to live well into their mid/late teens for example. If considering adopting a puppy or kitten, one needs to take into account two factors. Firstly, can I or am I prepared for such a long term commitment? Secondly, is the pet likely to outlive me? For older people, this must be a practical consideration and the animal's interests should be foremost. One possibility is for mature owners to enjoy the company of an older animal. Moreover, middle aged and senior pets are often less demanding in the amount of care that they require. Older dogs may need fewer, shorter walks and older cats may like long sleeps on a warm knee. This again may be ideal for the mature owner who may be less mobile. Animal rescue charities often seek people who can offer emergency temporary foster homes and this could be an option too.

The financial implications of keeping a pet, short and long term need to be considered. Food, litter, straw, bedding, toys, boarding and veterinary bills (even with insurance) over the years can amount to thousands of pounds. Is your job safe? Will a pension be sufficient to pay for everything? The owner must examine whether funds are available. Often another type of pet may be an option if resources are limited; re-homing a rabbit is likely to be cheaper than a dog for example. Some animal charities sponsor harder to home animals such as those with health problems, the elderly or long term residents with special needs. Normally the charity pays for the vet bills. This may be an option for someone who is willing to give such an animal a good home without the worry of large bills. This is often an excellent way of helping an overlooked animal find a home and brings enormous satisfaction.

The home environment is vital. Is it suitable for the new pet? How often and how long will I be at home each day? Do I work away from home? How much time can I devote to settling the pet into the household? How much time do I need to spend each day to ensure that it is happy and healthy? If the property is rented, has the landlord agreed to the animal? If children are keen for a pet, are they willing to care for it daily? An upstairs flat with no garden will unlikely suit an outdoor loving cat. An energetic collie dog will not appreciate been left alone for long periods in a small house. A rabbit will not want to walk on concrete. A nervous animal will hate living with noisy children. If a new baby is planned, will this fit in with the pet? Puppies and kittens can be time consuming and exhausting.

With so many considerations, some bereaved owners may feel that they do not want another pet as they do not want that commitment again. This may be especially true if owners are in the habit of now enjoying some freedom after a long period of protracted care for an elderly or sick pet.

However, for many animal lovers, it is the daily commitments and routines that we do miss and are desperate for those to be part of life again. We are prepared to work at building a new relationship. Careful consideration is the mark of a responsible pet owner and hopefully then you will discover a new friend which will compliment and enrich the lives of all.

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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