



Helping Friends Who Are Mourning a Loss

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When people think of pet loss they usually think of an animal dying. But there are many different types of loss and no matter how the loss occurs, the guardians of these pets often have intense reactions as a result. They may experience distress, anxiety, guilt, depression, sadness, loneliness, and other unpleasant feelings for quite some time after. How you talk to them about their feelings and reactions can make an important difference in their lives.

Some people do not take pet loss seriously. They think people are silly for grieving over a pet. They are quick to tell you to get on with your life and get another animal. They cannot understand how you can become so attached to a dog, cat, bird, or other pet. Out of fear of being put down or ridiculed, many animal lovers keep their strong feelings of attachment to their pets - and their grief in relation to them - to themselves. They are then left alone with their upsetting feelings of bereavement. This is not healthy.

Responses that are appreciated

Adopt an attitude that conveys that you are taking the distressing experience of the mourner seriously. Listen and speak with empathy, understanding, support, sensitivity and compassion.

- Show interest by asking the mourner about the circumstances of the pet's death/loss.
- Convey that you welcome hearing the stories of his/her fond memories of her/his animal friend. Ask how the pet got his or her name, and encourage the mourner to tell you how the pet became a member of the family.
- Refrain from asking if the mourner is planning on getting another pet, or suggesting where such a pet might be bought. A pet owner might feel offended by this - despite your good intentions in asking.
- Avoid the use of clichés - such as telling the mourner that time heals all wounds, or reassuring them that they will soon "get over it."
- Send the mourner a condolence card - one specifically made for pet loss, if you can find one and if it seems appropriate. Writing a thoughtful line or two (or more) on the card, in your own words, will probably be very much appreciated.
- Write down the dates that are important to the bereaved pet owner, like the dates of the pet's death, birth, adoption, etc. Consider sending a follow-up note, e-mail, or card, or making a telephone call to the mourner in remembrance of these special days.
- Send a donation, in honor of the deceased or lost pet, to an animal-related organization (such as a humane society, animal shelter, or one devoted to improving the health of animals through medical research).
- After a few weeks or months, follow up by asking the bereaved individual how she or he is doing in his/her mourning process over the loss of her/his pet. (Use the pet's name and correct gender).
- Be cautious about making assumptions on how you think the mourner might be feeling and reacting. Realize that the mourning process, as with people's responses to the death of human loved ones, can be multi-layered and highly complex. Keep in mind that everyone is unique, with her/his own needs and preferences. Good judgment is essential in dealing with people in such a vulnerable state.
- Encourage the mourner to talk to a professional if their grief is prolonged or especially intense. Psychotherapists who specialize in pet loss counseling provide a supportive, compassionate, and knowledgeable presence to anyone grieving the loss of a pet.