

COPING STRATEGIES FOR PET LOSS

by Jean Arnold, DVM

One of the most difficult aspects of bereavement is the sense of hopelessness it causes. When you are grieving over the loss of a pet, it is easy to believe that this emotional state may last forever. It is wise to keep in mind that TIME is the only cure for grief. No matter what coping strategy you use, there is no instant remedy for your pain. Grief progresses at differing rates for different people.

Recovery is two fold: accept your emotions, and focus them in a positive manner; adjust your life so the absence is less noticeable and less painful.

- 1) Let yourself grieve. Acknowledge your emotions, the importance of your pet, and express your grief. Don't worry what others think, and don't let others tell you how and what you may feel. And, remember that your pet is a loved one. In this way you may work through the initial stages of grief.
- 2) Remember the good times. Always remember your friend in a good way. Not while it was sick, but when it was well and doing things with you. Do remember that you were its best friend, and it lived you very much. Think about the good you did for your pet.
- 3) Seek outside help. If you are having trouble coping, seek understanding from friends, family, counselors, doctors, veterinarians, and even books. Arizona veterinarians and the Companion Animal Association have a PET GRIEF SUPPORT SERVICE (602) 995 5885 or <http://www.caaainc.org/petgriefsupport.htm> .
- 4) Turn to your faith. Often a belief in a higher power, and an afterlife, or some purpose in life helps many people deal with their loss.
- 5) Be prepared. Often it isn't possible to prepare in advance for the death of your pet, but the more you do to prepare your emotions, the better off you will be. If an animal is old and sick, realize that the loss is inevitable. Thinking about the disposal of your pet's remains prior to the inevitable may not decrease the pain, but does reduce the stress involved. When euthanasia is necessary and if you have the luxury of time, make an appointment several days in advance, to enable you to make use of this time to say farewell. Last, prepare by giving all the love you can while it is alive.
- 6) Rearrange your surroundings, all the toys, belongings, and even special spots on the sofa, etc., bring back painful memories after your loss. Two methods are proposed: a) giving donations of your pets belongings to needy animal benefit groups, or b) when you obtain a new pet, using those belongings for it.

7) Change your schedule. Feeling depressed at times of the day which you spent in the company of your pet is common after loss. Create and then focus on new activities at those times. Your choices depend on where you are in the grieving process, and what you can handle at this time.

8) Write down your memories. Such a reminder helps you focus on all the good memories of your pet, and at the same time, serves as a catharsis for your emotions, a way to express them and work through them in private, while creating a lasting memorial. Some people write thank you letters to their pets.

9) Create a memorial through photos, through a cremation urn, through purchasing statues like the pet, or by helping others.

10) Help others. Some people volunteer at animal benefit groups, foster unwanted animals, or organize clubs, and others donate to these groups or to veterinary research organizations in honor of their deceased pets.

11) Concentrate on living pets. For some people, caring for and doing special things for the surviving pets makes a significant difference. Some of these animals also suffer, while others may not show you any signs. All of the family pets can benefit as well as you. Some people feel less consolation in their surviving pets, and may even feel resentment that they still live while the other has died. Resolving these feelings helps one adapt and heal the grief you feel.

12) Last, but not least, many recommend getting another pet. Most agree not to do so right away, until you have time to recover fully. If you hurry your grieving, you may find yourself resenting the new pet, or expecting it to be a carbon copy of the old one. This may prolong your grief. **GIVE YOURSELF TIME.**