

Mourning the Loss of a Beloved Pet

When I ran into a friend and casually asked how she was, she replied, “Fine”—and then burst into tears. She explained that her cat had died the week before, and my heart went out to her. She works at home and had relied on her kitty’s constant companionship and unwavering devotion. “Maybe it’s silly, but I almost feel as though I’ve lost my best friend,” she said. It is not at all silly—or uncommon—to feel bereft in such situations, given that many pet owners consider



their dogs, cats and other lovable critters to be members of the family. Yet because some people regard a pet as “just an animal,” they may not offer appropriate emotional support (as they would if you had lost a relative, for instance)—and the lack of understanding makes it harder to get through this difficult time. You may even doubt the legitimacy of your grief, believing it to be excessive, which also stymies attempts to mourn and move on. I called psychologist and grief counselor Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD, author of [*When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remembering and Healing*](#), to discuss ways to ease the pain after the loss of a pet.

His suggestions... Recognize the depth of your grief as a reflection of the strength of your love. “The more profound the attachment to your pet was, the more profound your grief is likely to be,” Dr. Wolfelt said. Accept that all your feelings are valid. Along with sadness, you may experience a surprising array of emotions... anger, denial, confusion, relief (if the animal had been suffering), even guilt (if you euthanized your pet or were unable to keep it safe from harm). These feelings are normal.

Seek support from other pet lovers. Friends and relatives who care as deeply for their animals as you did for yours can sympathize, understanding the bond you shared with your pet. *Also helpful:* Pet grief support groups. Ask your veterinarian for a referral to a local group... or check www.pet-loss.net. Express your grief. Write in a journal, compose a song, paint or sculpt... any activity into which you can pour your grief helps you process painful emotions, said Dr. Wolfelt. Consider whether there is a deeper well of pain within you. If you seem stuck in your grief, perhaps losing your pet triggered a subconscious review of an earlier loss. Dr. Wolfelt explained, “You may not have mourned adequately for a previous death... for instance, of a parent. The pet’s death can bring out those repressed feelings, making your current grief seem out of proportion.” If you suspect this, consult a therapist or grief counselor for help in finally mourning your earlier loss.

Create a ritual to honor your pet. Having a funeral or memorial service for your pet encourages family members to openly express their emotions, formally acknowledge the loss and share comforting memories. *Also helpful:* Create a scrapbook dedicated to your pet, with photos and small mementos such as a collar tag. Think carefully before getting a new pet. The decision about whether or when to acquire another animal is highly individual, so only you can say when you're ready. *But:* If you bring another pet into your home before you have truly accepted that your previous companion is gone and cannot be replaced, you may be disappointed. As Dr. Wolfelt said, "First you must allow yourself to mourn the death of your pet—because that is what lets you open your heart to the love and companionship a new pet can provide."

Source: Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD, is a psychologist, founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado, and faculty member in the department of family medicine at the University of Colorado Medical School in Denver. He is the author of more than 25 books on grief and loss, including [*When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remembering and Healing*](#) (Companion). www.centerforloss.com