



# Paws for Pets

## Coping With The Death Of Your Pet

When a person you love dies, it's natural to feel sorrow, express grief, and expect friends and family to provide understanding and comfort. Unfortunately, the same doesn't always hold true if the one who died was your companion animal. Many consider grieving inappropriate for someone who has lost "just a pet."

Nothing could be further from the truth. People love their pets and consider them members of their family. Caregivers celebrate their pets' birthdays, confide in their animals, and carry pictures of them in their wallets. So when your beloved pet dies, it's not unusual to feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your sorrow. Animals provide companionship, acceptance, emotional support, and unconditional love during the time they share with you. If you understand and accept this bond between humans and animals, you've already taken the first step toward coping with pet loss: knowing that it is okay to grieve when your pet dies.

Understanding how you grieve and finding ways to cope with your loss can bring you closer to the day when memories bring smiles instead of tears.

### What Is the Grief Process?

The grief process is as individual as the person, lasting days for one person or years for another. The process typically begins with denial, which offers protection until individuals can realize their loss. Some caregivers may try bargaining with a higher power, themselves, or even their pet to restore life. Some feel anger, which may be directed at anyone involved with the pet, including family, friends, and veterinarians. Caregivers may



also feel guilt about what they did or did not do, and may feel that it is inappropriate to be so upset. After these feelings subside, caregivers may experience true sadness or grief. They may become withdrawn or depressed. Acceptance occurs when they accept the reality of their loss and remember their animal companion with decreasing sadness. Remember, not everyone follows these classic stages of grief—some may skip or repeat a stage, or experience the stages in a different order.

### How Can I Cope with My Grief?

While grief is a personal experience, you need not face loss alone. Many forms of support are available, including pet bereavement counseling services, pet-loss support hotlines, local or online Internet bereavement groups, books, videos, and magazine articles. Here are a few suggestions to help you cope:

- Acknowledge your grief and give yourself permission to express it.
- Don't hesitate to reach out to others who can lend a sympathetic ear.
- Write about your feelings, either in a journal or a poem.
- Call your local humane society to see whether it offers a pet loss support group or can refer you to one. You may also want to ask your veterinarian or local animal shelter about available pet loss

## Care Animal Hospital

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### Upcoming Dates of Interest:

- © July 4th: Independence Day
- © August 1st: Friendship Day
- © August 8—14: Smile Week
- © August 15—21: Friendship Week

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- hotlines.
- Explore the Internet for pet loss support groups and coping information.
- Prepare a memorial for your pet.

### What Can I Do for My Child?

The loss of a pet may be a child's first experience with death. The child may blame himself, his parents, or the veterinarian for not saving the pet. And he may feel guilty, depressed, and frightened that others he loves may be taken from him. Trying to protect your child by saying the pet ran away could cause your child to expect the pet's return and feel betrayed after discovering the truth. Expressing your own grief may reassure your child that sadness is okay and help him work through his feelings.

### Is the Process More Difficult if I'm a Senior?

Coping with the loss of a pet can be particularly hard for seniors. Those who live alone may feel a loss of purpose and an immense emptiness. The pet's death may also trigger painful memories of other losses and remind caregivers of their own mortality. What's more, the decision to get another pet is complicated by the possibility that the pet may outlive the caregiver, and hinges on the person's physical and financial ability to care for a new pet.

## Favorite Hiding Places

A cat will hide for all sorts of reasons, whether it's the sudden appearance of the cat carrier (indicating an upcoming car trip), or the frightening noise of the vacuum cleaner. Some cats simply do not feel sociable while you have company visiting (human or animal). Unless you are in a hurry to make that veterinarian appointment or to catch a flight, leave your cat alone for a little while. She will probably come out later when she's feeling more sociable. However, seek out your cat if she misses the next meal or will not come out of her hiding place for a longer period of time—it could be an indication of illness.

The best way to find a hiding cat is to ask yourself this question: "If I were a cat, where would I hide?"

Start with these favorite spots:

- Under the skirt flap of an upholstered chair
- In the fireplace
- Behind books
- Behind the bathtub
- Behind the ironing board
- In a drawer
- In a laundry basket
- Under the bed
- In a torn mattress lining
- Behind the drapes
- Behind an open door
- On top of the kitchen cupboards
- In the folds of a lumpy comforter

For all these reasons, it's critical that senior pet owners take immediate steps to cope with their loss and regain a sense of purpose. If you are a senior, try interacting with friends and family, calling a pet loss support hotline, even volunteering at a local humane society. If you know seniors in this situation, direct them to this web page and guide them through the difficult grieving process.

### Will My Other Pets Grieve?

Surviving pets may whimper, refuse to eat or drink, and suffer lethargy, especially if they had a close bond with the deceased pet. Even if they were not the best of friends, the changing circumstances and your emotional state may distress them. Give surviving pets lots of TLC ("tender loving care") and try to maintain a normal routine. It's good for them and for you.

### Should I Get Another Pet?

Rushing into this decision isn't fair to you or your new pet. Each animal has his own unique personality and a new animal cannot replace the one you lost. You'll know when the time is right to adopt a new pet after giving yourself time to grieve, carefully considering the responsibilities of pet ownership, and paying close attention to your feelings. When you are ready, remember that your local animal shelter is a great place to find your next special friend.



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# Selecting the Right Pet for You Kids & Making the Introduction



For many kids, the family pet is their best friend—a companion who not only provides unconditional love, but who also teaches them

about friendship, responsibility, loyalty, and empathy. While most family pets are cats and dogs, other animals may also be appropriate for children. Rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, guinea pigs, small birds, and fish can make great family pets, for instance, as long as they receive the specialized care they need.

The key to creating a true "family pet"—one who is gentle, loyal, and loving to both animals and people—is to treat the animal as a beloved family member and to provide the training and care he deserves. It's not enough to get a pet "for the kids." A pet is not a temporary playmate for children, but a lifelong family member who depends on the entire family, especially adults.

## **How old should my child be before we get a pet?**

Although many experts recommend a child be at least six years old before a pet is brought into the family, you are the best judge of your child's maturity. At the very least, your child should exhibit self-control and understand (and obey) the word "no." If you think your child is ready for a pet, first introduce her to friends' well-behaved pets so you can observe your child's behavior around them.

## **Should we get a young animal or an older one?**

Many families with young children choose a kitten or puppy, believing these pets are safer, easier to train, and more adaptable than older, larger pets. But this isn't always true. Because puppies and kittens are fragile, require extra time and care, and are prone to play-related scratching and biting, they may not be appropriate for a household with young children. Adopting a friendly, calm, adult animal who has a known history of getting along with young children may be the best choice for your family. Before making a decision, talk with animal experts such as veterinarians, animal trainers, and animal shelter adoption counselors who can help you select the right animal for your family.

## **What kind of dog is best with kids?**

As a parent, you want your child to be safe around your dog. You want to know which breeds are good with children and which aren't. The truth is, all dogs have the potential to bite, and a dog's breed is only one of many factors that affect temperament and behavior. The best dogs for kids are those who receive proper socialization, humane training, exercise, and attention; who are given adequate food, water, shelter, and veterinary care; who are sterilized; and who are safely confined.

## **How should my child interact with pets?**

To protect both your child and your pet, it's critical that an adult supervise all pet-child interactions. It's also important to help your child see the world through your pet's eyes. Ask your child how he would feel if someone poked at his eyes or pulled his ears. Explain that even the most docile pet has limits, and that all animals must be treated with caution and respect. Help your child understand that:

- Pets need space and may not always welcome human attention, especially when eating, playing with their toys, or resting.
- Pets may become upset by too much petting or stimulation. Teach your child to heed warning signs (such as hissing, lip curling, retreating, and growling) that indicate her animal friend wants to be left alone.
- Other people's pets may feel and display discomfort if your child touches or even approaches them. Tell your child to get permission from an adult before touching another pet. Explain how some pets may feel threatened when stared at, cornered, or hugged.
- Animals in pain may lash out or bite anyone who tries to touch them. Teach your child to leave an injured pet alone and to immediately notify an adult.
- Some dogs get excited and may even become more dangerous when children scream and run. Teach your child appropriate behaviors around dogs.
- Dogs contained in yards or cars may try to protect their territory if approached. Teach your child not to tease or get close to them.

## **How can I help my pet feel safe?**

Pets, like children, need time to adjust to new sur-

## Selecting the Right Pet for You Kids & Making the Introduction continued...

roundings and circumstances, and need opportunities for "down time." Provide pets with a place of their own where they can retreat from children. Don't put your pets in situations where they feel threatened. For example, dogs left alone in yards can be accidentally or intentionally teased by neighborhood children. What's more, pets live longer, healthier, and safer lives when kept indoors with the family.

### **How can my kid help care for a pet?**

Allowing children to help care for a pet teaches responsibility and instills a feeling of competency and accomplishment. Choose tasks appropriate for the age of your child. Even young children can be involved in some aspect of caring for an animal friend—selecting a new toy or collar, assisting with grooming, or carrying a food can.

### **How can I teach my kids to take good care of pets?**

The best way to teach your children how to be responsible pet caregivers is to be one yourself. This should start before you even get a pet—make sure you have realistic expectations about pet ownership. And take steps to select the right animal for your family at the right time.

As soon as you bring a pet into your family, set up and enforce rules regarding proper pet care. For example, tell your children not to pull the animal's tail, ears, or other body parts, and insist that they never

## How Pets Help People

Many of us enjoy the companionship of pets. In fact, according to a 2002 survey by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 62% of American households include pets. These animals don't ask for much—just a short list of basics such as food, shelter, veterinary care, and, of course, our companionship. Pets offer far more in return, teaching us about love, improving our emotional and physical health, and providing us with unconditional affection and friendship.

### **Do pets make good teachers?**

Companion animals are natural teachers. They help people of all ages learn about responsibility, loyalty, empathy, sharing, and unconditional love—qualities particularly essential to a child's healthy development.

tease, hit, or chase the pet. Teach children how to properly pick up, hold, and pet the animal. These simple lessons are essential to helping kids become responsible caretakers.

Although certain pet-care activities must be handled by adults, you can still include your children by explaining why and what you're doing. For example, when you take your pet to the veterinarian to be spayed or neutered, explain to your child how the operation not only reduces pet overpopulation but can also make your pet healthier, calmer, and more affectionate.

Also involve your children in pet-training activities, which not only make your pet a more well-mannered family member, but also teach your child humane treatment and effective communication.

Ultimately, your children will learn how to treat animals—and people—by watching how you treat the family pet. They'll study how you feed, pet, and exercise your companion animal. And they'll pay close attention to how you react when a pet scratches the furniture, barks excessively, or soils in the house. Frustrating as these problems are, "getting rid of" the pet isn't just unfair to the pet and your children, but it also sends the wrong message about commitment, trust, and responsibility. When faced with pet problems, get to the root of the problem. Often a veterinarian, animal shelter professional, or dog trainer can help you resolve pet issues so you can keep the whole family together.



Through helping to care for a pet, children also learn to care for their fellow human beings.

There is an established link between how people treat animals and how they treat each other. Kindness to animals is a lesson that benefits people, too.

### **Can pets be therapists?**

Given the right animal, people, and circumstances, pets can indeed serve as "therapists." In animal-assisted therapy programs, a companion animal may visit with hospital or nursing home patients. For the program to be safe and effective, the animal must be carefully screened and the pet's caregiver must be trained to guide the animal-human interactions. When a specific therapy is desired, a credentialed professional should

## How Pets Help People continued...

monitor the program. Even in less formal animal-assisted activities, where the animal is introduced to an individual or group with no specific therapeutic goal, patients and staff often experience improved morale and communication.

### **How do pets serve as helpers?**

Specially trained assistance dogs provide people who have physical and mental disabilities with the profound gift of independence. Assistance dogs are not classified as pets under the law, and they are allowed in public places where pets are prohibited. These dogs serve as the hands, ears, or eyes of their human partners and assist them by performing everyday tasks that would otherwise be difficult or impossible. Dogs may also detect changes in behavior, body language, or odor that precede seizures in their human partners, alerting them so that they may seek a safe environment.

### **Can pets also be healers?**

Pets are good for our emotional and physical health. Caring for a companion animal can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment and lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation in all age groups. It's well known that relaxed, happy people do not become ill as often as those who suffer from stress and depression.

Animal companionship also helps lower a person's blood pressure and cholesterol levels. And studies show that having a dog increases survival rates in groups of patients who have suffered cardiac arrest. Dog walking, pet grooming, and even petting provide increased physical activity that strengthens the heart, improves blood circulation, and slows the loss of bone tissue. Put simply, pets aren't just good friends, they are good medicine.

### **Can pets benefit the elderly?**

Because many Americans are living longer lives these days, sometimes elderly people find themselves living alone because they have outlived loved ones, or because they live far from any family. There is a way, however, for the elderly to find new meaning in their lives, and to redefine what it means to be "young at heart"—by adopting a companion animal from a local shelter.

We already know that the many physical benefits pets confer onto people work for all ages, whether you're eight or eighty. If you're older, a pet can offer you a sense of well being, a sense of encouragement, and even a reason for living. Being responsible for another life can add new meaning to your own life, and having to care for and provide a loving home to a companion animal can also help you remain active and healthy.

You may want to consider adopting an older animal, however, rather than a puppy or kitten or a rambunctious "teenage" pet. Older pets are more likely to be calm, already housetrained, and less susceptible to unpredictable behavior. Older animals are often more easily physically managed by elderly persons than stronger, excitable younger animals; yet older pets still confer the same medical and emotional benefits on their owners as younger animals do. Animal shelter staff can help potential adopters find the most suitable animal for their lifestyle, ensuring a great match between pet and person.