

# Pet Care Advice

## Coping with a grieving pet

When a much loved pet dies or is put to sleep, it is hard enough to come to terms with your own sense of loss without having to cope with a depressed animal as well, but pets do often appear to grieve and pine for a lost companion, especially if they are left as the sole pet in the household as a result of another animal's death. Cats and dogs may show varying degrees of behavioural change, but the majority of pets recover completely and resume normal lives. We hope this leaflet will help you to help your pet to adjust.

Your pet doesn't understand death as we do, but he or she will certainly miss his departed companion, and may seem to search and pine. Signs of pining may include loss of appetite, lethargy, lack of motivation and disinterest in exercise, restlessness and inability to settle, changes in sleeping patterns, displacement activities such as self-mutilation (more common in cats than dogs), and signs of separation anxiety such as crying when left or at night, or destructiveness.

### Loss of appetite:

Pop into the surgery for a check-up, as this may be coincidental, and a sign of illness. The vet may be able to give your pet something to stimulate his or her appetite. If there is nothing wrong physically, do not worry too much - no animal will ever starve itself to death, and your pet will soon start to eat again. Feed small amounts at the usual feeding times, taking up any uneaten food after about 10 minutes and try not to tempt your pet between mealtimes. It may help to try feeding in a different place from usual, or feeding away from home for a day or two.

### Changes in sleeping patterns:

It may be helpful to allow your pet to sleep in your bedroom for a few nights, if he or she becomes very restless and won't settle if left alone. However, dogs in particular may become over dependent - have your pet in his or her own basket next to you rather than on your bed, and return him to his own sleeping place as soon as possible, either by moving him back as soon as his general behaviour seems more normal, or by degrees, moving his bed night by night closer to the door, then onto the landing etc. If the restlessness persists, give us a ring - the vet may be able to prescribe a mild sedative to help your pet settle at night and allow YOU to get some sleep!

### Loneliness and separation anxiety:

Don't be tempted to take your dog with you whenever you go out to avoid leaving him on his own. Life has to go on as before for both of you, and your dog may become over dependent on your company and difficult to leave in the future. If you are afraid that he or she may become noisy or destructive in your absence then leave him for only very short periods to begin with, in a place where he can do least damage. NEVER scold him on returning if he has chewed something or made a mess, as this will only add to his anxiety and perpetuate the problem.

Leave a radio on for company, a large marrowbone or chew to occupy him (giving it to him just as you leave and removing it when you return so he only has access to it while you are not there), and an old item of clothing smelling of you left in his bed may help to comfort him. If separation anxiety becomes a major problem phone the surgery for further advice.



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## Lethargy, lack of interest in life, depression:

Cats may be helped at this time by giving lots of attention. Make time just to sit cuddling your cat and talking to him or her. Cats tend to be more solitary in their habits than dogs, and less likely to be obviously depressed. Cat toys or outdoor hunting sessions may stimulate activity.

Dogs can benefit from daily training sessions and play. They are usually naturally more playful than cats, and as fun and games are incompatible with feelings of depression, games can be a very effective way of helping them to cheer up.

If your dog doesn't naturally play with toys he can learn to do so. First of all, remove all toys and keep them somewhere out of reach - if toys are available all the time, the dog will have no particular interest in them.

Keep a toy somewhere handy, e.g. in a coat pocket, or on a shelf by the front door. Every time you have been out and the dog comes to greet you take the toy and encourage the dog to play. If the dog isn't very keen, play with the toy yourself; act the fool, jump about, tease the dog and toss the toy around. Sooner or later the dog will try to join in, and you can throw it for him to chase, or have a tug of war game with it.

Keep the game very brief to start with, increasing each time as the dog becomes more playful. Always finish the game before the dog shows signs of boredom, and put the toy away while he is still keen.

Soon, the dog should rush up to you eagerly in anticipation of a game. When he is doing this, try producing the toy at other times and see how he reacts. When he responds by eagerly launching into a game with you, you should be able to use the toy to distract and cheer him up when he is feeling low, or plodding along dejectedly on a walk.

## Getting another pet:

Dogs are more likely than cats to accept a replacement companion into the household, and may benefit from the introduction of another dog or puppy. You may find, however, that after the initial period your dog may actually be happier and more outward going than before - this often happens if the lost companion was a very dominant character. Adult cats do not appear to bond in the same way, and may not accept another cat easily. If you are considering getting another dog or cat, don't rush into it - make sure the decision is based on your own feelings and desire for another pet, not because you feel your dog or cat will be lonely.

## Further reading:

An excellent book which we recommend is

### **ABSENT FRIEND, Coping with the loss of a treasured pet**

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