

Losing a Pet

Helping others understand

Grief

No matter how well prepared we think we are it is always a shock and we mourn the death of our pets just as we do a human friend or member of our family.

The depth of emotion felt is often unexpected and is difficult to fully express to others who have not shared the companionship of a pet. Each of us experiences grief in a unique way. Often it is hard to accept that our companion has gone and the house feels very empty. This sense of loss may last longer than you expect but it is helpful to realise that your reaction is a normal response and these emotions can be considered a tribute to what your pet has meant to you.

Avonvale staff have all experienced losing their own pets, so do not be afraid of sharing your feelings with us or with other friends who have shared a similar experience.

Helping children understand

We don't profess to be experts on children's behaviour and all children process the loss of a family pet differently. We will try to be as sensitive as we can to help you in explaining the loss of your pets to children.

Losing a family pet may be one of the first experiences of death a child has, and it is important not to make assumptions about how they may react. Younger children have difficulty in grasping the permanency of death and may ask questions about when your pet is coming back. Older children are curious about many aspects surrounding death such as euthanasia and burial. The death of a pet may be especially upsetting when there have been other losses in a child's life.

It is generally recommended that children be told the truth about their pet in honest simple language that they will fully understand. Straight forward words such as 'died' are more appropriate than 'put to sleep' which a child may misunderstand. If possible children should be prepared if their pet is terminally ill or that euthanasia is being considered so that they can ask questions, and say their farewells.

If your child wishes to be present at the time of euthanasia or see their pet's body afterwards, please discuss this with your vet who will be able to offer advice. There is no right way or wrong way and the choice is yours.

Don't be afraid to allow your own sadness to show and encourage children to talk about their feelings. Often drawing pictures of the pet can help children express their emotions. A beautifully illustrated, very honest book about the death of a pet, **Missing My Pet**, written by 6-year-old Alex Lambert (with some help from his Mum) can be helpful in supporting young children.

Other pets at home

When a much loved pet dies, it is hard to know whether other pets in the home are also suffering from grief or reflecting your own sense of loss. However, some pets often do appear to grieve and pine for a lost companion, especially if they are left as the sole pet in the household. Cats and dogs may show varying degrees of behavioural change, but the majority of pets recover completely and resume normal lives.

Your pet doesn't understand death as we do, but he or she will certainly miss his departed companion, and may initially seem to search and pine.



WARWICK

SOUTHAM

KENILWORTH

WELLESBOURNE

STRATFORD

Signs of pining may include:

Loss of appetite

This may be coincidental, and a sign of illness rather than grief. A health check will rule this out and your 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 - 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 not trying to tempt your pet between mealtimes.

It may help to try feeding in a different place from usual for a day or two.

Changes in sleeping patterns

If your pet won't settle alone it may be helpful to allow your pet to sleep in your bedroom for a few nights. 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.

Lethargy, lack of interest in life, disinterest in exercise

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. Fun and games are incompatible with feelings of depression so games can be a very effective way of helping them to cheer up.

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, encourage the dog to play with the toy; act the fool, jump about, and sooner or later the dog will try to join in.

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, your dog should rush up to you eagerly in anticipation of a game. Then 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.

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 as he 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 toy 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). 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.

Displacement activities /over-grooming (*more common in cats than dogs*)

Cats often demonstrate stress in subtle changes of behaviour such as over-grooming. A particular spot often on the belly or toes will be licked repeatedly causing a loss of fur and sometimes inflamed skin. Flea infestation or allergy can also cause this behaviour so a trip to the vet to rule this out is recommended. Grooming stimulates calming hormones in cats and any change in home routine can cause a cat to start over-grooming as a way of reassuring itself. Re-establishing a routine after the loss of a companion will help to reduce the stress and lots of play and attention will break the cycle.

The Future - getting another pet

After a while you may feel ready to fill the gap left by the loss of your pet by introducing a new animal to the household. Only you will be able to decide when the right time is for you, there is no right or wrong period. A new pet will not replace the one that has been lost so investing love in a new animal will not betray the old, but will bring a new personality and loving companion to your home.

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 outgoing 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.

Our team at Avonvale will be happy to help you consider new pets and give advice on introducing a new animal to your family especially if you have other pets already.

Bereavement advice and support is also available through the:

Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Line

0800 096 6606 (8.30am -8.30pm)

pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk

For more information
Please contact your Avonvale Vet

Avonvale

Veterinary Centres

Warwick: 01926 400255

Southam: 01926 812826

Kenilworth: 01926 854181

Wellesbourne: 01789 841072

Stratford: 01789 561010

www.avonvets.co.uk