Grieving the Loss of Your Pet

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As a huge portion of the population can attest, pets enrich our lives and provide some much needed love and companionship. For those who have pets, it is easy to recall the excitement you felt when you first brought that new addition into your home. The chewed shoes, the clawed couch, the mysterious stains are all forgiven when you are greeted by the enthusiastic welcome and unconditional love of your new pet.

Of course, not everyone sees animals as beloved, faithful companions who are to be cared for, just as they care for you. Some people may view them as creatures with a purpose - such as a cat for rodent control, dogs for protection or service dogs who aid people with physical or mental health challenges. While animals may serve a utilitarian purpose for some, it’s hard to deny the increasing emotional impact that a pet can have on your life. You have only to visit YouTube’s website to see just how many pet owners think that their pet is the most adorable and entertaining creature on earth. According to Petfinder.com, 57% of American households own either a dog or a cat. And out of those pet owners, 9 out of 10 consider their pet to be a member of the family.

For many, pets have become so important that experiencing a pet’s illness or death can be deeply distressing. As your pet ages or falls sick, you may sometimes have to make decisions that can be gut-wrenching. It’s not uncommon for pet owners to spend huge sums of money on specialty supplies, food or medical care with many people going into debt for life-saving procedures, often when they can least afford to do so. It is the stress of dealing with an unexpected illness plus the financial toll it can take that makes these kinds of events so traumatic.

When your pets become ill, being able to make calm and logical decisions regarding emergency treatment can seem nigh impossible. As one pet owner commented, “I felt a bit silly getting so emotional over my cat. I mean, it’s not like it was about my husband or anything. But still, I found that it was overwhelming to try and decide what to do.”

A veterinarian can try to help you make the right decision and do what is best for your pet, but weighing the medical facts along with your emotions is not always easy. If you are a pet owner, it’s advisable that you and your family prepare yourselves for the possibility that this situation might arise by considering the following questions in advance:

- What is the life expectancy of your pet?
- Are there any health issues that commonly occur for your type/breed of pet?
- Are you willing to put him through veterinary treatment, even if it’s distressing to your pet?
- Every pet owner must consider if the recommended treatment will actually improve the quality of his life or will it simply prolong his life?

If you’re dealing with a long-term chronic illness, you may eventually be faced with the agonizing decision to euthanize your pet. How do you determine when it is time to take that step, particularly if your pet has a good day now and then? As one woman described, “I remember asking the vet for some kind of definitive answer to the question of ‘How will I know when it’s time?’ The vet replied, ‘You’ll know… but it can be different for each owner as to when that point is reached.’” The woman added, “I remember that I wasn’t really happy with this answer, but I have to admit that she was right. It eventually became clear to both me and my husband when it was time.” These tough choices can be shrouded in anguish, guilt, and paralyzing uncertainty. There is no quick answer and our pets depend on us to act, if only to help keep them comfortable. It can help to reach out for additional support at these times to enable you to get past the emotional reaction and make the best decision for you and your pet.

The loss of a beloved pet can feel as significant as the loss of a family member for some and should not be minimized or taken lightly. Some well-intentioned friends and family may say things like, “It was only a dog”, or “You need to get over this.” Some may not even acknowledge your loss because they don’t know what to say or are afraid of saying the wrong thing. It’s important to acknowledge that grieving pet owners may experience all of the same symptoms of loss such as sadness, tearfulness, lack of energy or agitation. These are all natural responses and will diminish over time particularly if you are patient with yourself and give yourself permission to grieve. Everyone reacts differently to sadness and loss and there is no right or wrong response.

After your loss, you may notice that your home will seem empty and unusually quiet. You may ask yourself, “Did I do everything that I could have been done?” Feelings may be varied and all are perfectly normal. Don’t second-guess yourself. Instead, try to find peace in the love your pet provided to you and you to him.

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It’s also a good idea to resume your normal routine as soon as possible to facilitate healing. You may find that focusing upon something else entirely different is helpful in achieving a bit of distance and perspective. It may be helpful to reach out to family and friends, so try not to isolate yourself. Spending time with loved ones and friends can be a welcome distraction and helpful in getting through the mourning period. You’re likely to find that others will share stories of beloved pets they have lost which may also provide you with some comfort. Knowing that you’re not the only one who has gone through such a loss can be a powerful support.

In addition to using your own personal support network, consider calling the Employee Assistance Program for some short-term counseling. Being able to speak with a counselor, someone who is not a friend or family member, can be helpful in accepting your loss and moving through your grief. This is particularly important if your recent loss is triggering memories of other losses in your life. No matter when you call, a counselor will provide you with confidential assistance over the phone as well as the chance to meet with someone in-person to address your grief. You are not alone and many people have benefited from short-term grief counseling, regardless of whom you have lost.

To reach the Employee Assistance Program, please call 800-292-2780.

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Are you surrounded by notes and reminders? Stress can impact your memory! Call the Employee Assistance Program for support and an evaluation. 1-800-292-2780

“Animals are such agreeable friends - they ask no questions; they pass no criticisms.”

–George Eliot 1819–1880