

Learning to cope with the painful loss of a beloved pet

By **Jodi Schneider McNamee**
Correspondent

A pet is a constant loving friend, and facing his or her loss can be devastating.

Pets bring so much love, support, and companionship into our lives, and many people have experienced the joy that comes with having a pet. Sadly there also comes a time when they have to face the heartbreak of losing their cherished furry friend.

Whether you had to euthanize your pet or lost your dog in an unexpected manner, the grieving process will be different for everyone.

Grieving is a personal, individual experience. Some people find the mourning process comes in stages, such as denial, anger, guilt, depression and eventually acceptance, but not necessarily in that order.

Many pet parents find ways to cope, whether the loss is sudden or a result of an illness or condition that has worsened over time.

Monica Rendon, certified dog trainer for Three Rivers Humane Society, has had many pets over the years. Rendon describes her ways of coping with grief from pet loss:

“I love animals and I’ve been the proud and loving owner of many dogs, cats, goats and several horses. No loss has been easy, and losing a beloved pet doesn’t get easier with added experience. But for me, when it comes to losing a dog, I take it harder than any other species. For me, the process of dealing and coping with a canine loss is two-fold. Beyond my usual sobbing and emptiness that follows the loss, is an unselfish motivation to honor the memory of my dog.

“I have means, the time, the space and the heart, and I tend to quickly go and adopt another dog that is desperately in need of a loving home. Because I work with unwanted pets, I see their stress and discomfort in a chaotic shelter setting. And I believe that if my departed dog could communicate with me from over the Rainbow Bridge, he would nudge me with affirmation, ‘yes, go get that one!’ And so I do. The other motivation is purely selfish; I love the feeling of coming home to someone who has missed me like it’s been forever!”

Intense grief over the loss of a pet is normal and natural.

Don’t let anyone tell you that it’s silly, or overly sentimental to grieve.

Sisters resident Gayla Nelson has felt intense grief since last December, when her dog Louie vanished from a friend’s home.

“Every time you adopt a new animal you know that one day they’ll be gone, it’s inevitable,” she said. “But when Louie went missing on Christmas Eve, it shattered me! I was away when he went missing, and he hasn’t been found yet. I used to take him to work with me on trail cleanups with the Oregon Equestrian Trail group, and out of habit I still look for him every time when I am about to leave. I am still heartbroken. But after a while, I felt that I just had to rescue another animal, and so now I have Keiko, a fun and zany cat that I adopted from CRAFT in Tumalo. Keiko is my cope.”

Others find that grief may come in waves, or a series of highs and lows. Some people may take weeks to sort out their sadness, while others can take months or even years.

Sisters Gallery & Frame Shop manager Helen Schmidling lost her dog,

Shanti, because of a prolonged illness.

“We lost our sweet therapy dog Shanti nearly four years ago,” she said. “I thought that I was OK with euthanizing Shanti, because she was in so much pain. But when it came down to it, I was a puddle of tears. My response was mixed: my own grief mixed with relief that Shanti was no longer suffering, and that I was freed from caring for a very sick dog. Eventually, I began to look for a rescue dog. Four months later, Cathy Warner from Groomingdales sent a young woman to Sisters Gallery & Frame with a sweet dog that really needed a new home. And that’s how we acquired Logan. He helped us cope.”

People can experience shock if the death of their pet was sudden and unanticipated, and may experience an emotional numbness.

Sisters resident and photographer Lynn Woodward recently lost her 7-year-old furry companion, Jessie Jane, quite suddenly.

Lynn and a friend took Jessie on a four-mile walk and she seemed fine. The next day, her breathing rate was

increased and Lynn took her to the vet.

“They took X-rays and found nodules in her lungs,” Lynn recalled. “Jessie Jane passed away a few hours later. I was sitting with her on our bed, she looked up at me and she propped herself up and laid her head and chest in my lap. I wrapped my arms around her, she stopped breathing, and she died moments later. Right after she died, I cried and even wailed for hours. I just let it out. I think it’s a lot healthier to not pretend that everything’s OK — to lose control over it, to just let it out.

“You never know when time is up for any of us,” Lynn reflected. “You just never know when our last day is here.”

The bond that humans form with animals can be very deep and fulfilling, and the loss of a beloved pet can have an impact on you that is as great as the loss of a family member or friend. This bond is what makes interactions with animals rich and rewarding, but also what makes the grief process so complicated.

Allow yourself time to grieve and heal.



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