

Pet Loss Grief Coping Techniques

Adapted from Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University



Animal Friends

Caryl Gates Gluck **Resource Center**
Thinking Outside The Cage.org

Experts offer 10 coping tips to help you and your children recover from the death of a beloved pet:

- Give yourself permission to grieve. Denying these natural emotions can elevate stress and physical fatigue.
- Seek out friends and family members who share your compassion for animals. Focus more on their good intentions and not necessarily their words. Animal Friends is a great resource in this way.
- Dismiss and ignore comments from those who may trivialize your loss. They may never have had a pet or recognized the closeness of your friendship with your pet.
- Recognize that your departed pet is one-of-a-kind who can never be replaced. When you are ready to adopt a new pet, embrace that new pet for her uniqueness and avoid comparing her to your previous pet.
- Treat yourself well. Eat healthy meals and get ample sleep. This is often ignored.
- Fight through sad or blue moods by exercising. Physical activity raises endorphins and other feel-good hormones in your body. Take longer walks or bike rides, for example, in scenic areas.
- Avoid declarations such as, "I will never get another cat." These statements hinder your healing process.
- Ritualize your pet's death through a ceremony or memorial service. The greatest way to honor the memory of a pet is to learn how to become a better person for having them in your life. Please see Ann Cadman our Remembrance Services.
- Spend time recalling happy, silly, fond memories you shared with your pet.
- Consider writing a letter or poem to and from your departed pet. Getting words down on paper can sometimes help the grieving process.

Like Losing an Older Sibling

Children losing pets to disease, injury or other circumstance can take its toll - on the entire family. "Over the past 20 years, we have re-defined our notion of family," says Ann Weber, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Asheville.

"Pets are more and more part of the family. They are often acquired as a companion for the child. There are a lot of development roles for a child and when the family pet dies, the child not only lost a friend, he or she may feel they lost a sibling of sorts, too, because everyone in the household answers to mom and dad."

At the Western Veterinary Conference held earlier this year in Las Vegas, family therapist Carolyn Butler, of Fort Collins, Colorado, led a workshop on children and pet loss. She works closely with veterinarians and families dealing with the death of a beloved family dog or cat or other pet. She regularly advises veterinary staff on the best way to explain to children at age-appropriate levels what happens during pet euthanasia. She urges parents to not hide their sadness.

"If parents don't show their sadness or grief, it sends the wrong message to children that grief is wrong," says Butler. "It is appropriate for parents to tell their children, I'm sad today, or, I just don't have as much energy today, because I miss our cat. But I still love you and you want to talk about [our cat], that's fine with me. "

The healthiest way to honor their memories is to recognize that you need to grieve before you can truly heal. Realize that sudden tear bursts or unshakeable blue moods and other emotion-ridden actions and attitudes are normal. As more regard pets as valued members of their families, their deaths take on a greater heart-tugging toll.

Based on the work by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., a Swiss psychiatrist in the late 1960s, most pet owners and their family members go through this five-step grieving process:

- * Denial/shock
- * Anger
- * Bargaining
- * Depression
- * Acceptance

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Keep in mind that it may take your children days, weeks or even months to go through this grief process. Also, recognize that not everyone goes through these steps in a linear fashion, says Dr. Weber.

During the grief process, avoid using euphemisms and go with honesty, recommends Dr. Weber. Use the word, “died,” rather than “put to sleep” when describing a pet’s death to children, particularly those under age 12.

A child may need an operation, for example, in the future and hearing the doctor tell him that he will “put him to sleep” to do the procedure may unduly frighten the child if you used that same phrase to describe the death of a family cat.

In addition, Dr. Weber advises to avoid saying, ““God loved Fluffy so much that He had to bring him to heaven.” The reason? Your child may wonder why God doesn’t love him enough to bring him to heaven, too.”

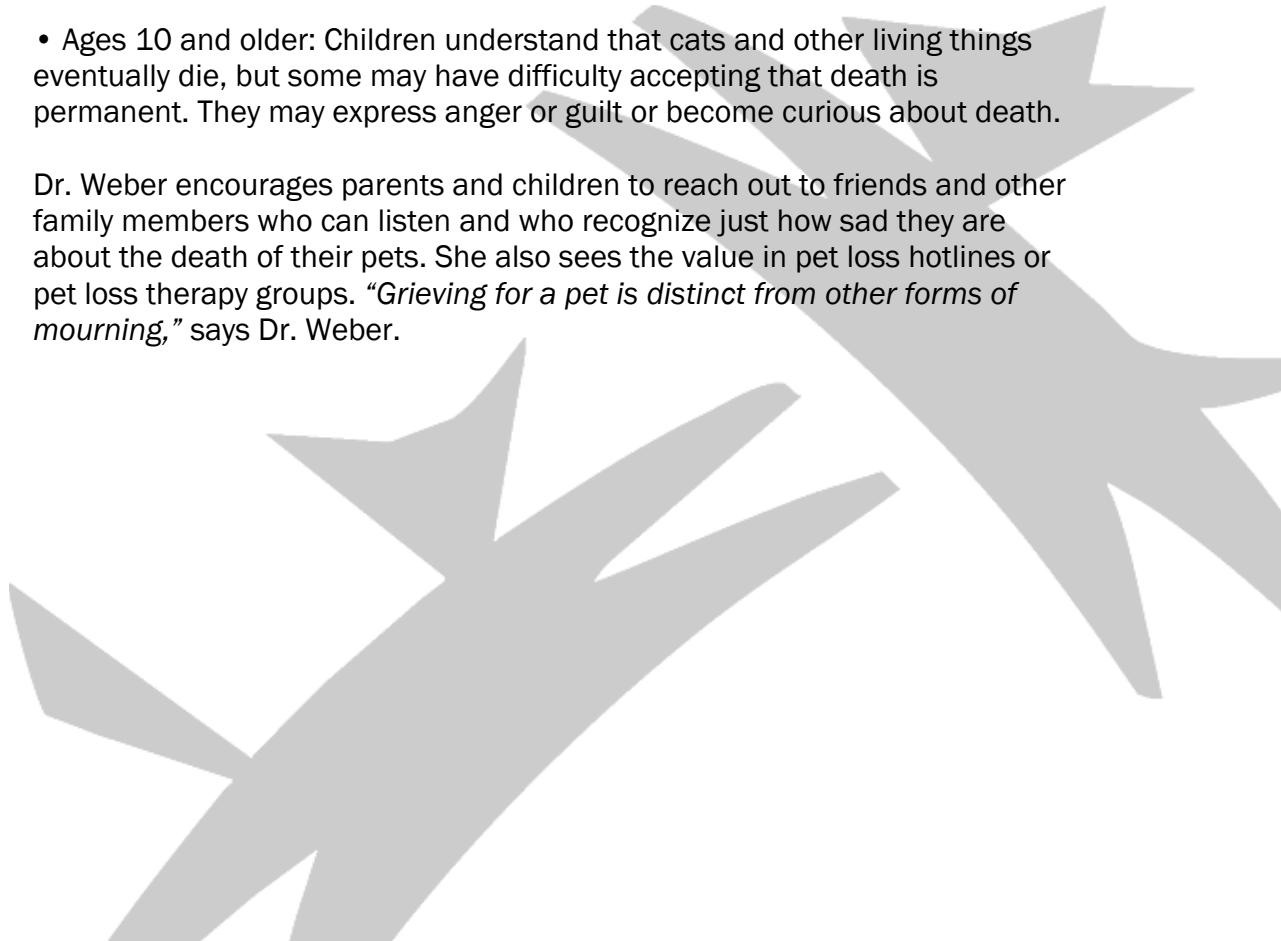


Tips for Different Age Groups

Keeping in mind that a child's level of maturity may be less or more, therapists offer this general guideline to help parents discuss the dying and death of family pets by these age breakdowns:

- Under age two: Babies and toddlers may sense the pet's death, based on feeling the stress and emotions expressed by other members of the family.
- Between two and five: Children may be sad because they miss the family cat as a play pal. They may also not recognize that death is permanent and due to the heightened stress in the family, may regress to thumb sucking, tantrums and other childish behaviors.
- Between age five and nine: Children start to recognize that death is permanent, but may fantasize that death can be defied. During this age, some children may harbor resentment for having to feed or care for the family cat and may secretly wish at times that the cat would die. When the cat slips out of the house and gets hit by a car and dies, for instance, these children may be filled with guilt and it is important for parents to let them know that accidents happen and that they did not cause the family cat to die.
- Ages 10 and older: Children understand that cats and other living things eventually die, but some may have difficulty accepting that death is permanent. They may express anger or guilt or become curious about death.

Dr. Weber encourages parents and children to reach out to friends and other family members who can listen and who recognize just how sad they are about the death of their pets. She also sees the value in pet loss hotlines or pet loss therapy groups. *"Grieving for a pet is distinct from other forms of mourning,"* says Dr. Weber.



Honor Pet with a Ceremony

“There are no traditional ceremonies or social rituals for honoring a funny cat, a sweet bird, or a loyal dog,” she adds. “But a pet’s presence punctuates daily life. After the loss, the household is stunned by absence. Morning treats and night time rituals of cuddling on the couch with a purring cat are gone. The routine is shattered; the home feels empty.”

Alice Moon-Fanelli, PhD, a certified applied animal behaviorist who counsels pet owners at the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, says despite the loss they will face, people of all ages who share their lives with pets are fortunate.

“I feel sorry for people who have never had that kind of bond with an animal,” says Dr. Moon-Fanelli. “Each companion animal brings a special connection. They are part of your life in different experiences and different ages. They simply cannot be replaced. You will never go through the same experiences with the same pet at that same age again.”

A List of Age Appropriate Books on Coping

These books given children the tools they need to handle their grief. Among the titles of books that help families deal with their sadness over losing a pet include

Cat Heaven by Cynthia Rylant (*Scholastic Press*),

Barn Kitty by June Kirkpatrick (*Azro Press*),

For Every Cat An Angel by Christine Davis (*Lighthearted Press*),

The Loss of a Pet by William Sife, PhD (*Howell Book House*), and

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide for Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown (*Little and Brown*).

Please contact Ann Cadman for info on Remembrance Services at 412.847.7031 or at acadman@ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org. In addition, Marsha Koschik offers Pet Loss Support services (mkoschik@ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org or 412.847.7083). If you would like to be referred to members of the clergy for religious support, therapists for Reiki or trauma relief, or have questions about compassion fatigue, please contact Ann Cadman or Sean Compton (412.847.7060 or scompton@ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org).