

Animal Friends Presents When Pets Grieve

Our pets demonstrate many emotions every day. But, can our pets experience a complex emotion like grief? Grief is a reaction to the sudden absence of something or someone who brought comfort and satisfaction—and many pet owners will attest that their pets show stressed behaviors when they lose a loved one.

Research is now confirming that our dogs, cats and rabbits, not unlike humans, experience symptoms of grief when they lose a beloved human or pet companion. Grief has even been observed in wild species. Elephants have been seen caressing the body of a deceased companion. Some researchers report stories of pets who constantly search for a deceased loved one, or even animals that no longer want to play or eat when a companion dies.

At Animal Friends, we recently received a call from a couple whose dog lost their lifetime canine companion. Both dogs grew up together and spent all of their time together. When one of the dogs passed away, the surviving dog started showing some very unusual behavior. She began crying all night, had accidents in the house and lost her appetite. Our team at Animal Friends explained to the couple that their dog was one of the many sad examples of animals who grieve for a loved one. As a pack animal, the dog was mourning the loss of a fellow member of her family pack.

This dog showed some of the typical symptoms of grieving. Grieving pets will often act as if they are searching for something, become restless or lethargic, will lose their appetite, have accidents in the house, cry or not want to play.

Just as you would comfort a grieving friend, you can help your pets cope with grief. First and foremost, keep your grieving pet's routine as normal as possible. This may be difficult if a pet has lost his or her primary caregiver, but it is essential to keep or create a routine that is as normal as possible. Second, do not reinforce any behavior changes. If they stop eating, don't keep altering their diet. Don't overdo their attention if they are not used to it, as it may lead to new problems, like separation anxiety.

If you still have multiple pets at home, allow them the time to form a new hierarchy in the house. Make certain to not get a new pet until you are ready. If you aren't ready, an attempt to bring a new pet in the home could backfire. Try pet-sitting for a friend or family member if you think you may be ready to bring a new pet into the home. This will give you the chance to figure out whether you're both willing to welcome a new pet in the home.

If you find nothing works for your pet, speak with your veterinarian. Your vet can help you decide whether prescription medicine will be effective to help calm and relax your pet.

In the end, it takes time to heal wounds, and you may find it takes a great deal of time for both you and your pet to adequately grieve. Remember that animals are very sensitive to human emotions. If you are upset, your pet will likely sense this, and more anxious and unusual behavior result. If you are finding it difficult to deal with the loss, you may find it helpful to speak with a bereavement counselor and attend a Remembrance and Celebration Ceremony at Animal Friends.

Both humans and animals find it hard to say goodbye, but with love and understanding, we can work to help our animal friends cope with loss.

To learn more about Animal Friends' Remembrance and Celebration Ceremonies, call 412.847.7031 or visit www.ThinkingOutsideTheCage.org.