

Grief in Dogs and Cats

- Based on observed changes in behavior, it is thought that some dogs and cats grieve after losing a close human or animal companion.
- Dogs and cats seem to show a wide variety of responses to losing a companion.
- As in people, signs of grief in pets usually improve with time. However, there are things you can do to help your pet through this difficult period.

Do Dogs and Cats Really Grieve?

Whether animals feel emotions in the same way people do is a mystery. However, their behaviors are commonly interpreted as reliable expressions of mood—for example, relaxed, fearful, or aggressive. Based on observed changes in behavior, it is thought that some dogs and cats grieve after losing a close human or animal companion. In 1996, the ASPCA conducted a study of mourning in companion animals and found that more than half of dogs and cats had at least four behavioral changes after losing an animal companion. Many of these changes, such as eating less and changes in sleep patterns, were similar to behaviors exhibited by grieving people.

If you have recently lost a pet and other pets in the household are acting differently, it is possible that they miss the deceased pet and are experiencing grief.

Signs of Grief

Like people, dogs and cats seem to show a wide variety of responses to losing a companion. Behavior changes observed in the 1996 ASPCA study included:

- Eating less
- Restlessness or sleeping less
- Acting sluggish or sleeping more
- Vocalizing (barking, howling, meowing) more
- Avoiding contact or play with other family members
- Becoming “clingy”
- Seeming disoriented or confused

However, these behaviors are also signs of illness in pets. If your pet is exhibiting any of these behaviors, call your veterinarian and schedule an appointment to rule out health problems.

Some animals appear to look for the missing pet, or, if the deceased pet was taken to the veterinarian to be euthanized, they may wait by the door or window for him or her to come home.

Other changes in behavior among surviving pets may reflect shifts in relationships, especially if the deceased pet was a dominant member of the household.

As in people, signs of grief in pets usually improve with time. However, there are things you can do to help your pet through this difficult period.

Helping Your Pet Deal With the Loss of a Companion

Again, as in people, signs of grief in pets usually improve with time. However, there are things you can do to help your pet through this difficult period.

- If your pet is eating less or is not eating, encourage him or her to eat by making food more appealing. For example, slightly warming canned food can make it smell better to pets. However, be very careful to not overheat food, which can burn your pet’s mouth. If your pet refuses to eat at all, call your veterinarian.
- Spend extra time with your pet, whether on walks, during grooming, or playing games.
- Provide distractions for your pet. Hiding toys in his or her favorite places and putting a little dry food inside a puzzle toy are a couple of examples. Try not to accidentally reward behaviors that you do not want to continue. For example, do not try to distract a howling pet with treats, or the pet may learn to howl

Losing a Pet

for treats. Wait until the pet is quiet, and then give him or her your attention.

- If the deceased pet had a favorite blanket or toy, leave it in the house for a while so that other pets understand that the missing pet is not returning.

Because you are also feeling the loss of your pet, it can be hard to concentrate, and your behavior can

affect your other pets. Spending extra time bonding with them can help both you and them.

Whether and when to get a new pet is a very personal decision. However, trying to quickly “replace” a pet’s companion is usually not recommended. Pets already in the household may regard a new arrival as an intruder. Consider whether you and your pets are ready for a new family member.