

The Journey of Grief

Written by Terry Branson ©



If you are reading this, you are a pet parent that has just lost, or is contemplating the loss of a beloved family member. And we understand that there are many emotions going on in your mind right now. Part of our job, in walking this journey with you, is to give you permission to feel all of these things. Just two of these emotions are grief and mourning.

When we talk about grief and mourning, it is important to define the difference between the two.

Grief is what you think and feel on the inside when your pet is approaching the end of life or has died. It is one of the most normal and natural emotions that we can feel; yet it is one of the most misunderstood. Grief is a normal and, unavoidable reaction to the loss or anticipated loss of a beloved pet. Although the situations may differ, the grieving process is the same whether the loss is a pet, family member or any other loss situation in your life. The only difference is the intensity of the grief. The following are ways the grief symptoms may appear:

- Physical: crying, sobbing, shock and numbness, dry mouth, shortness of breath, stomach ache or nausea, tightness in the chest, restlessness, fatigue, exhaustion, sleep disturbance, change in appetite, body aches, stiffness of joints or muscles and dizziness or fainting.
- Intellectual: denial, sense of unreality, confusion, inability to concentrate, feeling preoccupied by the loss, a need to reminisce about the pet or to talk about the circumstances of the loss or diagnosis, a sense that time is passing very slowly, a desire to rationalize or intellectualize feelings about the loss.
- Emotional: sadness, anger, depression, guilt, anxiety, relief, loneliness, irritability, a desire to blame others for the loss, resentment, embarrassment, feelings of being overwhelmed or out of control or feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.
- Social: feelings of withdrawal, isolation and alienation, a greater dependency on others, a rejection of others or rejection by others, reluctance to ask others for help or a need to find distractions from the intensity of grief (to stay busy or over-commit to activities).
- Spiritual: bargaining with God in an attempt to prevent the loss, feeling angry at God for the suffering or death, feelings of being punished, searching for a meaningful explanation from the experience, wondering about a pet's soul and if you will see them in heaven and a need to find a way for closure to the relationship.

Mourning is the outward display of grief by talking to others about your pet, finding ways to honor them and expressing how much they meant to you. This mourning can be done in many ways. Just a few suggestions are:

- Have a gathering of friends at a favorite park where you and your dog loved to walk. Take balloons or bubbles and release them in a ceremony commemorating your beloved pet's spirit and let the balloons and bubbles carry your love as they float to the sky.
- Set up a memorial table in your home. Flowers, food bowls, leashes and favorite toys can all be a part of this memorial.
- Add an imprint of your pet's paw to your Christmas tree decorations this year. The first year is always the hardest.

- Plant fresh catnip in your flower bed in honor of your favorite feline.

Understand that it is healthy to both grieve and mourn the death of your fur baby. You love this animal and they are a family member. They provide unconditional love, companionship, and emotional support. Psychologists have long reported that the loss of a pet is as traumatic as the loss of a human member of the family. Medical research has shown that loving a companion animal, petting them, taking care of them and talking with them can lower blood pressure, reduce depression and improve the quality of life for the pet owner. To not grieve and mourn this loss would not be natural.

The journey of grief is not about progressing through “stages”. It’s about many emotions that you may experience. These include anger, denial, confusion, guilt, extreme sadness and depression. You may feel an immense emptiness and loss of purpose. You may also feel “numb” and not “feel anything.” These emotions and feelings may be experienced together, separately or not at all. These are better to be thought of as “waves of emotions,” that come and go, but lessen over time. The journey is as individual as the person. However, you will grieve in some fashion and recognizing the physical and emotional signs of grief and healthy resolution of these emotions are vital for the emotional health of you and your family.

You have taken the first step to healthy progression through the grief process by recognizing that there is guidance available. By letting our staff at Beyond the Rainbow accompany you on your journey you will arrive at the destination where wonderful memories will replace the darkness of grief.

**“If ever you need to find me, we’re never far apart.
If you look Beyond the Rainbow, and listen with your heart”**

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