



As an author, board certified counselor, mediator, dog training coach and registered yoga therapist, I am grateful to have many opportunities to breathe, observe, share and learn with families and their dogs. Awareness, education and relationship are integrated into my life's passion of living and learning with dogs. I have the opportunity to share heart-centered stories that can be joyful and/or sad about family pets at the Dog Talk's Training and Wellness Sanctuary. Families have enlightened me to the emotional and oftentimes intense physical pain that accompanies the loss of a loved one, family member, friend or mentor in life.

Equally touching are the stories about grief surround the loss of beloved family pets. The following is a brief, but I believe helpful journey through a transition that we all share in very different, but oftentimes similar ways. Enjoy the journey knowing that your pet forgives and thanks you!

### **UNDERSTANDING THE LOSS OF A PET**

A loved one can be any being that shares your life and heart. That love knows no species boundaries. The same range and intensity of emotions are experienced. As Moira Anderson, M.Ed. states, "Grief is like a swamp without a map. It is easy to lose any sense of where we are going or where we have been. In time, as we progress through the grief-swamp to the solid ground of a normal emotional state again, that hole will change from a bitter gap to a well of pleasant memories." My opinion is that it is like trying to get through each day as if wading knee deep in mud. Every step is torture, physically and emotionally.

### **THE VALUE OF A PET (Perception)**

No matter what anyone says, thinks or interprets, we have every right to grieve the loss of a pet. The relationship is every bit as precious and meaningful as one we may have had with a human being or cherished memorabilia lost to disaster. Oftentimes, people share that losing their dog was worse than a parent, husband or friend.

Like any relationship, love is an investment of emotions, with an unlimited potential for returns. A good relationship with a pet has been shown to relieve stress, lower blood pressure, and give people a new purpose. They allow us to nurture, be needed and reward us with unconditional positive regard and companionship even during the worse situations or events in our lives. Pets are used widely in therapeutic situations to meet treatment goals.

### **EMOTIONAL REACTIONS, NOT ETCHED IN STONE**

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross lists the stages of grief in her book On Death and Dying as follows:

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|--|------------------------------------|
| <b>First Stage:</b> Denial & Isolation | <b>Fourth Stage:</b> Depression    |
| <b>Second Stage:</b> Anger             | <b>Fifth Stage:</b> Acceptance ... |
| <b>Third Stage:</b> Bargaining         |                                    |

Be mindful that there is no absolute pattern for grief. This pattern is experienced differently at various stages of life, from childhood through older adult. One may be depressed before denying that one's pet is ill, dying or passed on. Everyone will experience these stages in different combinations and intensities. Our personality, the type of relationship one has with a pet, a personal situation at the time of death of a pet, and cultural and religious beliefs all play a part in how each of us individually cope with pending loss and change. More importantly is allowing ourselves and others to cope in their own special way and time frame.

When denied an outlet, emotions do not go away ... they simply manifest in side of you, twirling around, looking for a channel to release the pain. Emotions will find that opportunity eventually, and oftentimes, unexpectedly. Unresolved or repressed emotions can keep one embittered and hurting for years. Acknowledging these emotions is a good way to begin. Writing your emotions can be cathartic. Metaphorically releasing them like helium filled balloons to the sky is another way. Sharing with supportive friends & family, who genuinely listen, helps. Seeking professional help is an alternative. Knowing when to say thank you to well meaning people who may go "over-board", then walking-away, IS YOUR CHOICE.

*Denial* may be one of the first defense mechanisms to help us on a brief, temporary basis, to avoid mental anguish. It enables us to shift our attention, for the time being, away from emotions too painful to bear. It temporarily gives us permission to "ignore reality" because impending death is often too painful to accept on a conscious level. Oftentimes, we are the caregivers responsible for others. We enter into an automaton zone, leaving behind any awareness of our needs. We are in survival mode using every ounce of our being to manage on a day-to-day basis. We become the foundation and shelter that seems to be crumbling around us.

*We may need to keep ourselves together for a variety of reasons (work, sole financial provider, parenting, drive home safely, get food, taking care of the pets, taking on sudden additional responsibilities due to lifestyle changes, etc.).*

Eventually, we all need to take time for our well-being or suffer the consequences (mental and physical exhaustion and illness). ~

It is a natural response to be *angry* when we have lost a loved one (pet or human). We all look around for someone or something to *blame*. If all of our energy is focused on anger, we will have little time to *feel the pain*. Striking back can be gratifying, particularly if someone or a situation is to blame for our loss. However, acknowledging our pain (anger) is an essential part of the grieving process.

It is natural to ask, "Why did this happen to me, my child or my pet?" Why did s/he have to die (or endure a trauma)? Rationalizing that it wouldn't have happened "if only I'd done this or they'd done that" may enter our thoughts. This is normal. Be with the thoughts. It is natural to want to seek retribution if the death of a pet is malicious. It is always helpful that we pause and take-a-deep-breath, then consider the circumstances / outcome of how we choose to respond. Whatever our particular situation is ... eventually we need to come to terms with acceptance of emotions and loss.

*In my opinion, forgiveness is a choice, but acceptance will help us move on.*

*Depression* can result from physical and emotional causes. It can range from “feeling low ... in a funk” to “emotional paralysis” (can’t get out of bed or function). Those in helping professions and volunteers know the wrath of empathy and/or compassion fatigue. It can last a few days or drag on for weeks or months. The loss of a pet is traumatic, painful and stressful. It plunges a person into a whirlpool of emotions and one may want to withdraw from the rest of the world.

Most of us have been in a situation following a death of a loved one where we feel that “no-one can possibly understand how we feel”. It’s true! No one can, but most people can empathize. Moira Anderson author of “Coping with Sorrow” describes *depression* as being like “quicksand”. You can feel as though you are slowly sinking. Seeking out help with supportive friends, family members or a professional who specializes in depression and understands the grieving process can help.

Sometimes, the death of a pet can be like a dam bursting. Suddenly, floods of painful emotions that may have been bottled up for years explode. For example, if our life is in turmoil or we are having problems in career, family situations or in a relationship; your pet may be the only stable companion in your life. No matter how bad things get, our pets offer unconditional acceptance and love, but in their own way. Thus, the loss of a pet should be viewed in the *context of your life* at the time of the loss ... not just as a single event.

### **WILL I EVER GET PAST THIS?**

Yes, in time, if you give yourself permission too. Letting go and moving on belongs to you. Life is too precious. Time and our own creative and unique ways of coping will help with the grieving process. We know because we begin to see the light flickering at the end of the tunnel. We begin to feel joy is simply breathing and doing simple things. *We look at their picture and smile instead of cry.*

Volunteering with others helps, as long as we are aware of our own process. Volunteering can create more stress or help us while we help others. It is the connection and knowing that just maybe, others may be experiencing even worse trauma and need us. It is the needing of us that can be a double-edge sword. Be careful here of awareness and knowing when to say “*I can offer this, but not that.*”

Embracing grief and emotions (all of them) and honoring our individualism can open up a place for growth. It can be a good time to create a spiritual sanctuary for ourselves. Like a wound, it may heal, but the scar will remain. Alternatively, we can choose to focus on well-being, breathing, change as positive, learning something new, meditation; anything that helps us feel grounded and centered, sane and alive.

In this blissful and peaceful state of being, we transcend to a higher place where the thought of our pet is not one of grief, but of pleasurable memories; of experiences, as part of the *circle of life*. Some of the steps to help you acknowledge your feelings about grief are:

- ☉ If you know a pet’s death is imminent, prepare yourself, children, family and friends by sharing feelings in your way. Writing notes or verbally expressing to “others” outside of the immediate circle is fine.
- ☉ Embrace your grieve ... allowing it to flow.
- ☉ Create a journal, photo album and scrapbook to celebrate the pet’s life (very helpful for children).

- ☯ Rearrange your surroundings ~ to help with immediate reminders like removing the food dish that sits beside the dinner table.
- ☯ Change your schedule (filling in empty spaces like a walk with Sage with something meaningful).
- ☯ Focus on surviving pets, and of course, children, family and friends ...
- ☯ Get another pet “only” when you are ready, not as a replacement, but as an individual, living and unique being.
- ☯ Listening and talking to others who have experienced a similar loss can be helpful (and accepting when it is not is fine).
- ☯ Seek outside help if necessary.

## WHAT TO TELL CHILDREN

When a child loses a pet either through death or divorce, parents (all adults) must be extra-sensitive. I focus on divorce because I was a child with pets who suffered through the confusion and fear of not knowing what was going to happen “to me or my pets.”

Divorce is a death of a relationship. Families (and especially children) grieve the loss of a lifestyle that was, while wondering what will be. It can be a scary and confusing time wracked with emotions, especially fear of the unknown.

How death is explained to children and how adult’s role model their own grief will leave a lasting impression on a child. Age makes a difference:

- ☯ Children less than 5 years old usually don’t understand death and its permanency. It’s important to be concrete, but gentle when explaining that “Buddy” isn’t coming back.
- ☯ Children between 5 and 10 usually want the gory details and often ask many questions. They are curious! I suggest answering them honestly and gently with as much information as they can handle. Journaling, photo albums and scrapbooks will help ease the pain and celebrate the pet’s positive memories.
- ☯ Children from 10 through the teenage years are generally capable of understanding the meaning of death and experience all of the emotions. They need to know that we honor their experience (all children do, at their appropriate age comprehension).
- ☯ Teenagers may shuffle feelings off, but they are suffering in their own private way. Patience and understanding is a virtue. Give them some space. Discover alternative ways to encourage them to share like sharing your own feelings.
- ☯ Honor cultural diversity (socioeconomic backgrounds and personal values). In some cultures, life on earth is a journey to a higher-place, therefore an honor!
- ☯ Many find solace in writing. Others believe that their pets will be waiting for them at “*Rainbow Bridge*” to guide them on their life’s journey.

## **DO WE EVER REALLY PUT CLOSURE ON GRIEVING?**

I don't know. I think about all of my pets from the time I was a child. Each holds a special place in my heart. It depends on the individual. I believe it helps to process grief appropriately, but that it is DIFFERENT for everyone. We place it in a soft place in our hearts for safekeeping. One may process and move quickly, while another may be process for a lifetime. Time heals, and we have our memories.

What is helpful is growing from the experience by creating a "special place" to hold our memories and experiences:

- 🐾 Loved ones including pets
- 🐾 Mentors, teachers, others ...
- 🐾 Anyone who has left a footprint (or paw print) in our heart and/or given us an opportunity to learn and grow ... those that we remember forever ~

## ***CHILDREN, PETS AND, DIVORCE!***

Grieving is an inevitable part of living, as is death, trauma and life change. Grieving can be a learning experience at any age and in many ways, depending on the situation.

There are transitions that can be difficult like when teenagers leave their pets behind for college. Fortunately, in these situations, the pets are usually loved and well taken care of.

One of the most poignant (and painful) experiences is when there are children and pets involved during divorce. Having been a child of divorce, I am keenly aware of what my dog and other pets meant to me. **THEY ACCOMPANIED ME TO MY SAFE PLACE.** Some of the scariest moments of my life were "not knowing" whether my pets would be taken away from me. I packed my little suitcase several times, not really knowing where I would go. I was always sure of one thing: my pets were going with me.

The trauma and grief that accompanies divorce affects the pets as well as the children. When possible, the best situation is to keep the pets in one household, at least for a transition time or place them where they will be safe and can be visited by the children. Otherwise, parents are not only dealing with emotional issues that go along with divorce, but the children's grief and behavioral issues of a dog (or multiple pets) who simply can't process emotions in a human way.

During divorce, parents are flooded with questions and decisions to be made for their and their children's future. In some states, families are mandated to attend mediation and for a good reason. They need a place to sort this out with facilitated guidance. Where are the pets then?

## **IN THE CHILD'S MIND**

In a child's mind, the conflicts that arise from divorce are amplified very often as *BIG FURRY MONSTERS*. The emotions are too complicated for any child to have to sift through on their own. Inadvertently, most of the energy (and emotions) seems to go into the parent's decisions on liabilities and assets. Decisions around the parental and physical custody of the children are key elements of

these proceedings. Oftentimes, the child's fears of being abandoned by one or both parents, and of losing their beloved and trusted pet, are ignored. Very often, depending on their age, the children aren't even asked or involved in the proceedings. Many times, they are used as "tools or weapons", in an alliance, triangle and/or coalition between emotionally distraught and arguing parents.

### **A SAFE HAVEN WITH MY PET!**

I think this has to be a "must" consideration for all adults involved with children, divorce and pets. The same emotions of hurt, anger, fear, abandonment, and that strong feeling of loss, need to be gently addressed in a way that a child understands. They need a safe haven to express their feelings, away from the distraught parents. In that safe haven, the children need their pets for support and safety. At this point and in a child's mind, they rely heavily on the unconditional support of their pet that sits and listens for hours. The child trusts the pet, but may temporarily not be able to rely on support from emotionally distraught adults.

### **MEDIATORS, PARENTS AND ATTORNEYS (not necessarily in that order):**

Another consideration at the time of divorce is role modeling and responsibility of parents, mediators, counselors and/or attorneys involved in the proceedings/transitions where children are present. It is obvious that this is a huge and very often traumatic and confusing transition for children. Depending on the age, it can be threatening, misunderstood or copied later on in life. They are observing their parents and other people with decision-making "power". You want the child to feel empowered and loved! They need to know that their feelings, and the care of their pets, are being given a "priority" and "careful consideration".

Pets with a capital "P" should be an integral part of the divorce proceedings, with the parents first, then the children appropriately and safely included into sessions (counseling, mediation, and caucus):

- ☉ Who will have physical care of the pets?
- ☉ Who will cover expenses for their care?
- ☉ What is the best alternative to the negotiated agreement (BATNA) and most gentle transition for the Children and Pets?

Children need extra assurance that everything possible is being done so their pets will remain with them. If this isn't possible, then they need to know that their pets will be taken care of. This needs to be expressed in an age appropriate way from the parents, guardians and counselors.

***AWARENESS:*** *Oftentimes, parents may not know how to express this to the children, so offering facilitative guidance is helpful and valuable.*

### **WHAT TO TELL THE CHILDREN? SEE PAGE 4**

The impending loss of a relationship with a pet, or having the pets suddenly "disappear" out of the home, is experienced the same way as losing a pet by accident or natural causes. It is compounded by the emotional trauma of losing one or both parents. Life as the children knew it, whether healthy or unhealthy, has abruptly changed.

Many of the same tools like drawing, writing, memory books and other creative ways to express feelings, while holding onto whatever is positive, will be helpful.

- ☹️ **Best scenario:** slow transition of pets out of the home, preferably where the children can visit them and “see” that the pets are okay. Perhaps an arrangement with a family friend or relative, with the understanding that the pets will be reunited with the children later (or new location if a parent is relocating).
- ☹️ **Children and Pets will be separated:** Children and pets that have been together for even a small amount of time have bonded. If it is determined that they cannot keep the pets, they need to know how come and what will happen. They need to be reassured that their pets will be safe, **EVEN IF THEY CAN’T SEE THEM AGAIN**. They need to know they are in a good place, where they are being loved.
- ☹️ **Call a No-Kill Humane Society and/or Rescue Organization** (for specific breeds): Most rescue organizations will consider taking dogs that they know can be re-homed. Oftentimes relatives or friends in pet-friendly homes will offer to help.
- ☹️ **Worse Scenario – Domestic Abuse and Violence:** In situations where children have been removed from parental care and placed in alternative / foster homes because of domestic violence, then the pets should be removed as well and put in a safe place. It is a well-known fact that when a parent or child is being abused, chances are so are the pets! Being an advocate for pets teaches children to respect all living beings as adults ([www.lathamfoundation.org](http://www.lathamfoundation.org))
- ☹️ Trauma and grief that accompanies divorce affects the pets too! When possible, the best situation is to keep the pets in one household, at least for a transition time or place them in experienced care where they will be safe. Otherwise, parents are not only dealing with keeping themselves and their children safe, but the behavioral issues of a dog (or other fill-in / impulsive pet buys) who simply can’t process all of these human emotions.

Oftentimes, adults emotionally latch on to the pet during times of separation and divorce. The pet is a soft place to fall. Children can act out their anger and frustration toward the pet.

I have worked in situations where the dog is being chosen to fill the void as partner, playmate, child-sitter and much worse (the target of residual abuse). The dogs (and other pets in different ways) adapt to changes extremely well, but not without a price.

In my experience, many dogs become confused and overprotective. A sweet mellow canine companion is suddenly called upon to take on the responsibility of therapist, protector, mediator and resource guarder. To certain breeds (mixed included) there can be suppressed, hard-wired drives that will be triggered and kicked into overdrive. Always err on the side of caution and seek professional help

## TEN TIPS FOR HELPING (for grieving)

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Mediators, counselors, attorneys (others) involved with families in transition, where pets are involved, can make similar suggestions, but within the realm of their professional code of ethics / standards and practice.

1. Being present and supportive, without being pushy, makes a huge difference.
2. *Genuine Listening*: Offering: "I can only imagine what you are going through; it is different and personal for all of us; I've lost a pet too" can help.
3. *Encouraging* a friend (or child) to express grief by writing, drawing or other creative form.
4. Assuring that it is safe and confidential, allowing them an opportunity to express emotions.
5. BOOKS (age appropriate) as a gift can be helpful.
6. Acting as a buffer ... offer to accompany a friend to the Vet, suggesting a memorial service, errands, offering to help cook dinner one evening.
7. If pets are involved in a divorce proceeding, offering to care for the pets.
8. Going to a movie, theater, yoga class, having a cup of coffee/tea as a gentle distraction.
9. Sharing insights that you have gained on coping with grief after death or divorce.
10. Sending a condolence card.
11. Making a donation in the pet's name to an appropriate charity.
12. Sharing your pet, if your friend seeks the desire for the company of another animal.
13. If you think it will be well received, using a special talent of your own to make a memorial for the friend (frame a favorite picture, calligraphy, a poem, needlepoint).
14. Understanding, especially if you are the employer of an employee who has lost a pet. Being considerate and offering them a day off and time to adjust to their loss.

## PITFALLS / BLUNDERS TO AVOID

1. Take a deep breath and consider "what or how would I like someone to say and do to me at a critical and emotional time like this?"
2. Rushing out and buying your friend a new pet will not help. The selection of a new companion is a personal one.
3. Saying "good-bye" happens in different ways for different people. Avoid statements like "you should have been there when s/he was put to sleep". This is a personal. Sometimes being there is the worst emotional choice for the person and the pet.
4. Let them know you are available without forcing them into action.
5. Don't take it personally if your friend doesn't want to come anywhere near your happy, bouncy, living pet.
6. Don't dismiss your friend's (or anyone's) pain with glib statements such as "time heals all wounds" or "you'll get another pet" or "you'll get over it".
7. Don't regale anyone with horror stories of a "friend's pet who is dying of cancer" to fill up space. Sometimes, it is better to be silent. They don't need any horror stories. They are living through one.
8. Don't let yourself be sucked into family arguments. Know your limitations. If you sense that the loss of a pet is creating stress on family relationships, step back and lend your support from a distance with sympathy cards, donations or phone calls. .



9. Don't measure everyone's experience by your own yardstick! If a friend seems to be reacting differently from the way you reacted or whose grief is lasting longer than yours did, allow it! If your friend is putting on a brave face, there are gentle ways to draw them out. You might try sharing, "how you cried for three days when your dog died or how you thought the world was coming to an end."
10. Consider all of the above as applied to families going through **divorce**, where children and pets are involved, plus the consideration of knowing when you may need to intervene.
11. Professional counselors, mediators and health care professionals can help. Contact your family practitioner for referrals and/or support groups when you need assistance for yourself and/or family and family.

As you share someone else's pain and empathize with their loss, you may wake up one day to find that you have passed through your own misery and come out a stronger, more understanding person for it. It's one more amazing and special benefit pets bring to our lives.

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