

How to Cope With a Pet's Death

Every morning Minerva, one of our pet Nigerian Dwarf goats, would come bounding out, eager to gobble down a Fig Newton followed by a breakfast of hay. Suddenly this past weekend, Minerva seemed a bit off, she was not eating as well and the next morning she was dead. It was both shocking and horribly sad.



By Bonney Brown

When my beloved cat Mogli died three years ago, I had just gotten home from a work trip and though I knew he was living with several serious health issues, his sudden decline was heartbreaking. The awful decision to euthanize him that day haunts me still. Had I done enough for him? If I had noticed health issues sooner, might he have lived longer? Was today the right day to end it for him?

There is just no easy way to lose a beloved pet.

While everyone experiences the death of a pet differently and grieves in their own way, it is not uncommon for the experience to be intense. According to an article from the journal *Society & Animals*, the death of a pet can be “just as devastating as the loss of a human significant other.”

What can help you cope with loss?

Here are a few tips from experts:

- Express yourself. Calling a friend to talk about your pet or writing down your memories and feelings can help.
- Create a memorial. When Butch (who I had adopted when I worked at Best Friends Animal Society) died, I had my favorite photos of him framed. One friend had her beloved dog's ashes incorporated into a beautiful blown glass key chain. Planting a tree or hanging a wind chime are other ways to memorialize your friend. There are some wonderful free online pet memorial sites where you can post photos and memories.
- Read about pet loss. Readers and fans of audio recordings can sometimes find solace in books, and there are many on the topic from which to choose. One book to check out is “[The Pet Loss Companion](#)” by Ken Dolan-Del Vecchio and Nancy Saxton-Lopez.
- Help other animals. Making a memorial donation or volunteering at a local animal shelter can give meaning to the death of a pet. When one friend's cherished Akita died, she decided to go to the animal shelter to help dogs. While there, she noticed that the cats seemed overlooked (her dog loved cats) so she started a rescue group for cats and channeled her grief into helping them.

Helping children and other pets to cope with loss



For children, the passing of a pet may be their first experience with death and they can feel guilt or fear in addition to grief. Explanations such as "put to sleep" or "went away" can be confusing. Two helpful books for children are *When a Pet Dies* by Fred Rogers and *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst.

Other pets in the household may grieve, too. Some experts suggest that it helps other animals in the household to have the opportunity to see and sniff their deceased companion. Spending extra time with the surviving pet can help both of you.

When is it time to get a new pet?

How will you know when the time is right to get a new pet? That's a very personal decision and there is no right answer – some people are ready almost right away, others need substantial time. The time needed does not reflect on the bond with the departed pet, it has more to do with how different people cope with loss. Whenever that time comes for you, remember that many dogs, cats and other animals are waiting in local animal shelters for someone to love them and perhaps that person could be you.

Bonney Brown is Co-Founder and President of Humane Network. She created and sustained a 94% communitywide save rate as Executive Director for Nevada Humane Society, which had more than 10,000 annual animal admissions. And she was National No More Homeless Pets Director, COO and Communications Director for Best Friends Animal Society.

