

ARGUS INSTITUTE

Our mission is to strengthen veterinarian-client-patient communication and support relationships between people and their companion animals.

The services offered by the Argus Institute include:

Clinic Support Program – Clinical counselors offer support to people who are facing difficult decisions regarding their pet's health. (970) 297-1242.

Pet Hospice Program – Veterinary students provide compassionate end-of-life care for pets and emotional support and education for families in their home setting. (970) 219-7335.

Colorado State University

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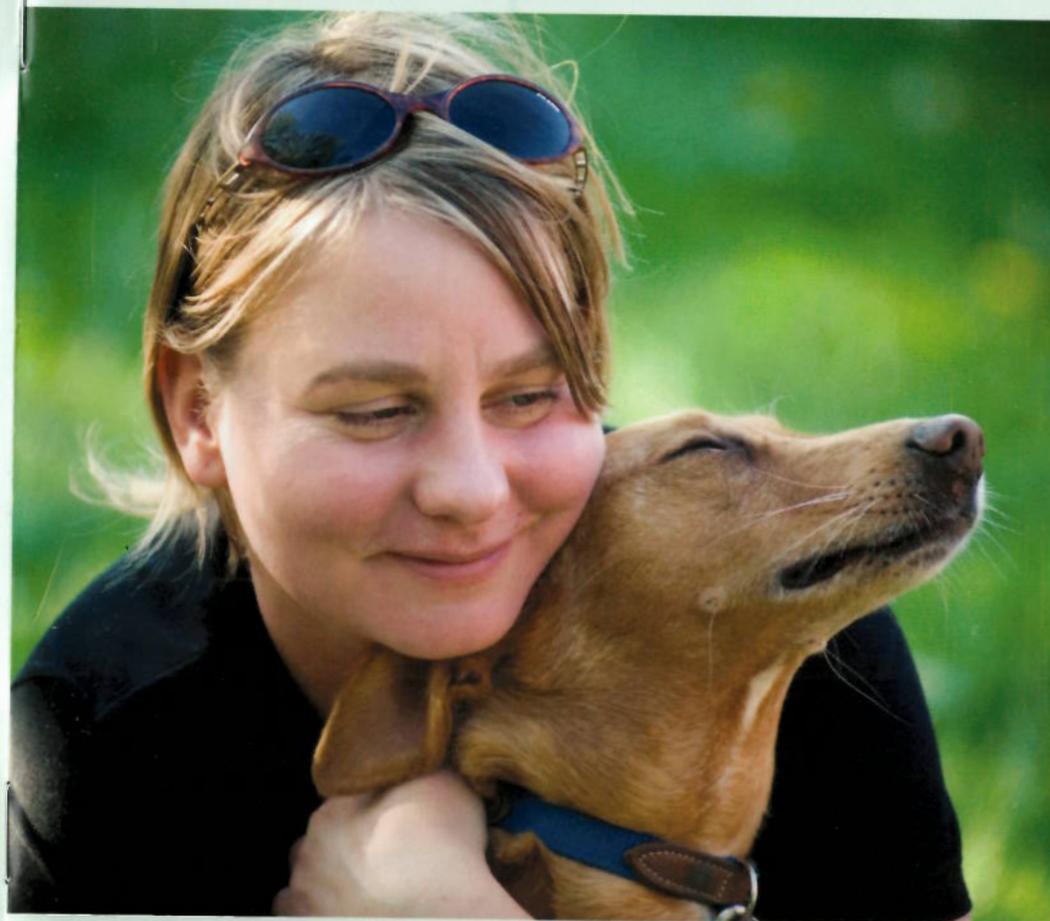
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MAKING DECISIONS

When Your Companion Animal is Sick



ARGUS INSTITUTE

Colorado State University

 VETERINARY TEACHING HOSPITAL

*Companion animals and pets
come in all shapes and sizes,
including all creatures great and small:
furry small mammals, scaled reptiles,
aquatic and feathered friends,
beloved cats and dogs,
animals with woolly and silken coats, and
beasts with hooves standing in pastures.
All with unique characteristics,
functions, and personalities,
enabling us to bond with them all.*

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*This guide is dedicated to the families,
companion animals, veterinarians, staff,
and students who have opened their hearts
and invited us to be part of their lives.*



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Lagoni, Butler, Hetts, *The Human-Animal Bond and Grief*.
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MAKING DECISIONS

When Your Companion Animal is Sick

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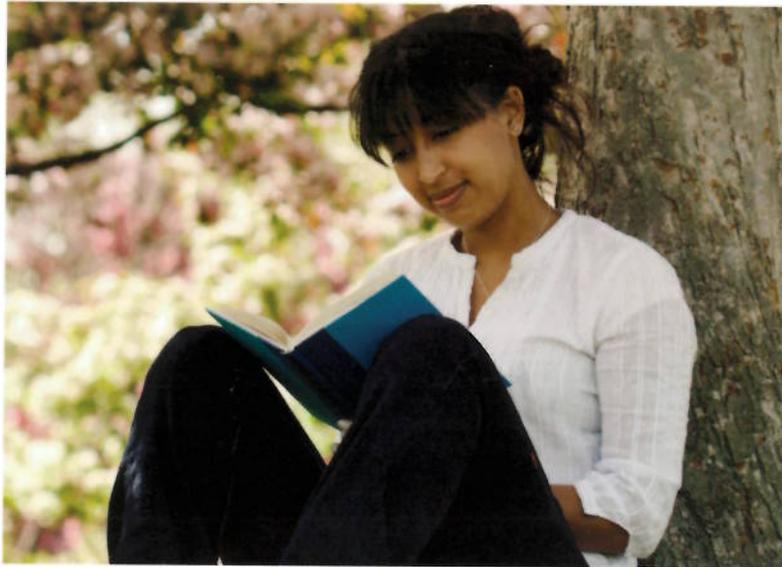
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I. Adapting to change when your animal is sick

1. My pet has a serious illness.

- **Recognize it is normal to feel overwhelmed.** It's understandable to feel shock, disbelief, confusion, fear, sadness, anger, guilt, or helplessness. These are normal responses to the realization that your special friend is sick or hurt.
- **Work with your veterinarian to gather information.** Write things down. You will face many decisions about your pet's quality of life and medical treatment. Planning will give you a sense of strength and control. At the same time, all of this information can be overwhelming. It's hard to remember everything. Consider getting a notebook; listing your questions and concerns helps keep things straight. For making decisions about treatment options, refer to Page 7.
- **Consider your pet's quality of life.** You know your pet best and are the expert on his/her quality of life. Think about the weeks or months ahead, and decide what will be important to you. Take into consideration pain versus suffering; pain is a physical sensation and can be evaluated and treated by you and your veterinarian, while suffering is your pet's inability to do the things that make your pet who he or she is. Discuss your concerns with your veterinarian. See Page 9.
- **Consider your quality of life.** It's important to take into consideration your own quality of life while managing your pet's illness. Here are some questions to ask yourself about your personal resources:
 - How much of my time will go toward taking care of my pet?
 - How much will it cost to take care of my pet?
 - What other responsibilities do I have in my life (job, parenting)?
 - Who else (partner, children, or pets) do I need to consider?
 - Which family members or friends can help?
 - What other stresses do I have in my life right now?



- **Seek support.** Reach out to friends, family, or mental health professionals who understand the special relationship you have with your pet. Consider online support groups, and connect with people who have shared similar experiences. It's normal to feel isolated during this stressful time. You do not have to go through this alone.
- **Take care of yourself.** Nursing your sick pet can be exhausting physically and emotionally. Your pet needs you to stay healthy so you can care for him or her. So, it's important to take time out for self-care. Some signs of physical stress include headaches, stomachaches, muscle tension, fatigue, overeating or appetite loss, drug or alcohol abuse, diarrhea, constipation, rapid heartbeat, and insomnia. Some signs of emotional stress include forgetfulness, poor concentration, irritability, restlessness, hyperactivity, anger, anxiety, crying, and depression. Take action to reduce your stress by prioritizing taking care of yourself physically and emotionally. Consider the following suggestions:
 - Get regular exercise
 - Eat healthy meals and snacks
 - Get enough sleep
 - Practice relaxation techniques, such as listening to calming music, meditation, or yoga
 - Journal

2. Weighing all the options.

- **Work with your veterinarian, ask questions, gather information, and write things down.** One of the most frightening things about illness or injury is the unknown. Knowing what might happen and when it might happen may help you feel prepared and in control.
- **Consider researching your pet's illness or injury.** Ask your veterinarian for credible resources. Some people find researching their pet's condition to be helpful and empowering. Others may find it too overwhelming. Everyone copes with information differently. You know yourself best.
- **Define your treatment goals.** What do you want to achieve for your pet? What are your greatest concerns for your pet? What are your greatest hopes for your pet? Make a list of what you will and will not do. Use it as a guide for decision-making.
- **Make a list of all available treatment options.**
 - **Consider the side effects of each option.** Ask what side effects may occur.
 - **Consider the benefits or consequences of each option.** Ask how the treatment will help your pet.
- **Ask how long your pet will receive treatment.** Many pet owners find it helpful to know the time frame of treatment.
- **Ask how much additional time the treatment may give your pet.** How will the treatment impact your pet's quality versus quantity of life?



1. Supportive strategies for when your animal is sick 7

- **Consider the expense associated with each option.**
- **Consider your quality of life.** Do you have the emotional, physical, and financial resources to pursue certain treatment options? How will you balance all of your demands?
- **Consider the best treatment for your pet.** The best treatment option depends on your defined treatment goals as well as your pet's temperament and quality of life.
- **Ask how quickly a decision needs to be made.** If a decision doesn't need to be made right on the spot, then give yourself some time to sort through all of the information you have gathered and talk to your support team for guidance. Sometimes the passing of time alone helps in defining a clear path.
- **Harness aspects of past successes with decision-making.** How have you approached making difficult decisions in the past? Who do you consult when faced with tough decisions? Support yourself during this process.
- **Lastly, remember that there is no wrong treatment option.** Decision-making is a challenging process. The treatment option you choose is the one that is the best for you, your family, and your pet.



3. Is my pet in pain or suffering?

It's helpful to understand the distinction between pain and suffering:

- **Pain** is a physical and emotional sensation that can be complicated to assess. Keep in mind, a pet's reaction to pain is dependent upon its personality and the degree of pain it's experiencing. The following signs might indicate that your pet is in some degree of pain:
 - Trembling or shaking
 - Panting
 - Slow to rise
 - Whining or lack of vocalization (no greeting bark or noise)
 - Decreasing or absent appetite
 - Acting out of character
 - Being restless or unable to get comfortable
 - Sitting or laying abnormally
 - Bearing no or partial weight on affected limb
 - Hesitant to be touched in painful area
 - Change in energy level
- **Suffering** is more than physical attributes, and it involves assessing your pet's quality of life. These are the "qualities" that make your pet who he or she is and are often part of the daily routine. If these characteristics are no longer present, then it might be considered suffering.

Here are some questions you might ask yourself to assess your pet's quality of life:

- Is your pet eating and drinking well?
- Is your pet able to relieve himself on his own?
- Is your pet able to move on her own?
- Is your pet playful?
- Is your pet affectionate with you?
- Is your pet interested in activities going on around him?
- Is your pet tired much of the time?
- Is your pet withdrawn much of the time?
- Is your pet sleeping comfortably?

- **Evaluate other qualities, characteristics, behaviors, or traits that are unique to your pet.** To what extent is your pet demonstrating these? You and your family might consider doing the following to help you understand your pet's current quality of life:
 - Create a list of your pet's unique qualities.
 - Keep a journal and record daily reflections of your pet's progress.
 - Mark a calendar each day reflecting if it's a "good" or "bad" day for your pet.
 - Consult a pain specialist who can help you assess your pet's level of pain or suffering.

If your pet is in uncontrollable pain or is suffering, then he/she is most likely experiencing a poor quality of life. When you have been working so hard for so long to manage your pet's illness or injury, it can be very difficult to switch gears from striving for quality of life to preparing for quality of death. Your veterinarian can assist you in this process.

4. Experiencing anticipatory grief.

It's normal to start grieving before the loss of your pet; it's called **Anticipatory Grief**. It's hard to watch your companion animal's quality of life lessen over time and to be reminded that death is inevitable.



- **Myriad emotions.** Common anticipatory grief emotions include anxiety, anger, denial, or guilt: anxiety about having to say goodbye to your pet, anger that your pet is sick, denial about the seriousness of your pet's condition, or guilt about things you believe you may have done that contributed to your pet's condition. See Pages 19-21.
- **A special relationship.** Your relationship with your companion animal is unique, and you may be anticipating the following losses:
 - **Source of unconditional love** – pets are so accepting.
 - **Life witness** – pets move with you through years of your life, and they witness parts of you that you may not allow others to see. Your pet may have been your faithful companion through life transitions, such as moves, new jobs, divorces, births, and deaths.
 - **Multiple routines** – you share daily routines in your pet's life, including feeding, walking, playing, holding, and talking. You may find yourself longing for the activities you do together.
 - **Primary companion** – your pet may be your closest social companion, and you may rely on him/her for support and love.
- **A time to adapt.** Anticipatory grief is a normal and necessary part of the grief process, and so is the emotional pain. Take grief "vacations," and focus on the time you do have with your companion animal by sharing special moments together. Listed below are some ideas for celebrating your relationship with your pet:
 - Take pictures and fill an album, make a collage, or carry them with you.
 - Tell stories about your pet.
 - Do one special thing with your pet every day.
 - Videotape your pet doing anything and everything or record his or her "voice" on tape.
 - Write down your special memories of your pet – keep a journal.
- **A time to prioritize.** Consider spending more quality time with your pet. This may mean investing less time and effort trying to cure him/her. This is an intensely personal decision that varies with person, animal, and illness.

- **Take into account your quality of life and that of your family.**

It can be physically, emotionally, and financially stressful to take care of your sick or injured companion animal. It's normal to feel guilty when you take your needs into consideration. It's important to be honest with yourself about feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, frustrated, or resentful in relation to taking care of your pet.

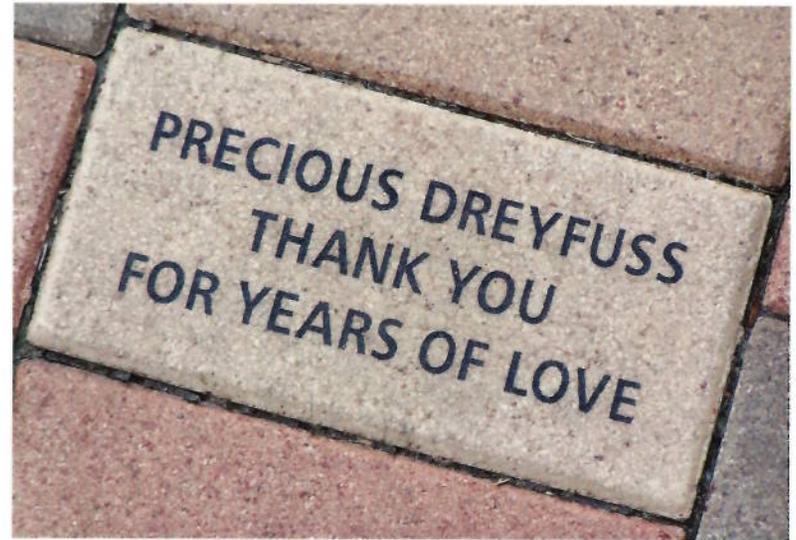
- **Consider seeking support from a local pet hospice program.**

Staff in such a program could provide emotional, educational, and medical support for you and your pet. Consult your veterinarian for further information.

6. Preparing for euthanasia.

Making the decision to assist in the death of your companion animal may be one of the most difficult decisions you make in your life. It is helpful to do as much planning and preparing ahead of time as possible. Gathering information about euthanasia helps some people through this tough decision.

- **Ask your veterinarian to describe the methods and details of the euthanasia procedure.** This should include the medical technique, as well as support available to you and your family. You may have a specific veterinarian in mind to conduct the procedure and may need to plan around his or her schedule.
- **Decide whether or not to be present during your pet's euthanasia.** This is a very personal decision. For some, it may seem too difficult to be with your pet. For others with emotional support, family-present euthanasia may help ease the grief over the loss of your pet.
- **Decide who else (if anyone) you would like to be present during the euthanasia.** In most cases, euthanasia can be scheduled so spouses, children, and even other pets can be in attendance. If you wish to be alone during the procedure, you may want a family member or friend to come to the appointment with you so you will have support before and afterward.



- **Think about the physical details of your pet's euthanasia.** When should it take place? Where should it take place; at home, or at the clinic, or outside in a garden?
- **Determine how you will care for your pet's body.** Some body-care options include burial at a pet cemetery or at home, individual or group cremation, or having your veterinary clinic take care of the body.
- **Consider the option of a necropsy.** A necropsy is an internal exam performed after death in which major organ systems are evaluated with the potential of answering questions you may have regarding your pet's illness or injury.
- **Decide how you want to say goodbye and memorialize your pet.** This step is key to helping you manage your grief, sorrow, and sense of loss. Include your family in this process, especially children. See Pages 16-17 for more information about how to talk to children about euthanasia. Consider planning a memorial service. You may want to dedicate a piece of music or reading for your pet or plant a tree. Perhaps you would like to make a clay imprint of your pet's paw or cut a clipping of fur to save.



7. How to help my children?

Children have their own special relationships with their pets. Like adults, children's grief is related to the strength of the bond between the child and his/her pet, as well as the child's age. It's important to help prepare children for the loss of your family's companion animal. The following suggestions may be helpful:

- **Provide support and education.** Losing a family pet may be the child's first real experience with death. The death of a pet can be a significant loss, and children need consolation, love, and support. It's important not to trivialize the loss. The loss of a pet may present an opportunity for your child to develop healthy coping skills that will serve them well throughout their lives.
- **Be mindful of your child's grief process.** Your child's response to the pet's death will depend upon his or her age and developmental level. Children 3 to 5 years of age see death as temporary and potentially reversible. Between the ages of 6 and 8, children begin to develop a more realistic understanding of death, but still may see it as reversible. They may feel responsible for the death because of their thoughts or wishes. Let children know that the death is/was not their fault. Generally, it is not until 9 years of age that children realize that death is permanent and final.
- **Be honest about your pet's illness and death.** Avoid euphemisms like "put to sleep." This can be frightening and confusing to children

who are also "put to sleep" at night. Use words like, "Fluffy has died," or "Because Fluffy is sick or can't get better, we are going to help her to die, because we love her."

- **Involve children in decisions surrounding the pet's illness, treatment, and death.** The child may feel valued and have an opportunity to better understand their feelings of loss.
- **Involve children in the euthanasia process.** Appropriately educate children on what will take place before, during, and after the procedure. You might say, "Only animal doctors use this special medicine for animals to end their pain and suffering." Very young children need repetitive explanations outlining that when a pet dies, it stops moving, doesn't see or hear anymore, and won't wake up.
- **Involve children in goodbye ceremonies/memorializing activities.** It's important that everyone in the family be encouraged to find a meaningful way to say goodbye.
- **Take into consideration that children express grief differently than adults.** Provide alternate ways for children to express their grief such as drawing pictures, writing poems, and expressing emotions through play.
- **Avoid protecting children from the pain of grief.** Be honest with them about the pet's illness or death. This will help your child understand the feelings you are experiencing as well.
- **Try not to hide your own grief from your children.** Adults are role models. Children can learn healthy expressions of grief and coping behaviors. Allowing children to see your emotions helps them understand that each family member is important and irreplaceable.
- **Be aware that after one loss, children commonly fear other losses.** A little reassurance goes a long way in calming their fears.
- **Maintain your routines as much as possible.** After a loss, provide security and stability for your family.
- **Explore children's literature.** Reading books with your child may help explain what is happening to their pet. Use stories as a starting point for discussions regarding illness, death, and euthanasia. (See www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu for a list of books for children.)



III. Coping with loss

8. What is grief?

If your pet has a serious illness or a critical injury and is facing death or has died, then you are grieving. Grief is a normal and natural healing response to loss. No two people grieve the same way. Men and women may grieve differently, with individual paces and styles. The actual experience of the loss is similar for each, but the expression of emotions associated with the grief can be very different. Some may try to stay busy and distracted, while others may need to talk and cry when they grieve. Being patient and kind with your own process and that of others can help all involved. Remember, there is no right way to grieve and no timeline for when grief is complete.

The emotions you feel during times of grief can be painful and are influenced by the strength of the bond with your pet, the role your pet plays in your life, the circumstances surrounding your pet's death, previous experiences with loss, and how your family deals with loss.

Listed below are some common signs of grief. Use these descriptions to remind yourself that the fatigue, confusion, and sadness you continue to feel are normal and expected during this process.

Physical

Crying, sobbing
Tightness in chest
Fatigue, sleep disturbances
Restlessness
Shortness of breath
Loss of appetite

Intellectual

Denial
Experiencing hallucinations
Sense of unreality
Preoccupied by loss
Need to reminisce

Emotional

Sadness, depression
Anger, irritability
Desire to blame others for loss
Embarrassment
Guilt
Overwhelmed

Social

Withdrawal/isolation
Reluctance to ask for help
Dependence on or rejection of others
Need to find distractions from grief

Spiritual

Bargaining with God to prevent loss
Angry with God
Renewed or shaken religious beliefs
Paranormal visions/dreams about the loss

The death of a pet is hard to bear, and can be especially overwhelming if you also are experiencing the following:

- Recent other losses
- A history of multiple losses
- No previous significant losses
- Little support from family and friends
- Feelings of guilt or responsibility concerning the death
- Been witness to a traumatic death

If you feel your grief is complicated, unmanageable, or prolonged, you may want to consult a professional who specializes in grief and loss.

9. Letting go of guilt.

Feeling guilty results from feeling responsible for your pet's condition. For many pet owners, guilt is a common feeling even when there was nothing they could have done to prevent the situation. You might feel guilty when you find out your pet has a terminal disease or injury, because you believe you should have noticed your pet's symptoms earlier. Others feel guilty if they take finances or other personal circumstances into consideration when making treatment decisions. Still others feel guilty about decisions they have made that may have contributed to their pet's condition. No matter what the circumstances, guilt has a way of keeping you stuck in the grief process. So, it's important to work through it and let it go.

Here are some suggestions:

- **Realize it's normal to wish you could have done more or to wish you had made an alternate decision.** It's normal to question your decisions or behaviors because you love your pet. Beating yourself up for these "if-onlys" does not change what has passed. It's more helpful to recognize you are human and to forgive yourself for not being perfect.
- **Remember you did what you thought was right at the time.** You did it with the intention of love.

BEEZER'S TOP TEN REASONS NOT TO FEEL GUILTY

(Compiled by Beezer the Black Lab from the Bridge and sent back to Earth.)

10. Jeez! If you're born, you die. Think about it, Dad.
9. Fear is the real enemy, not kidney disease. Fear is curable. I'm with you right now, just invisible. I'll be waiting at the Bridge when you arrive. Don't be afraid. Trust me.
8. Live with balance. The list of what went "right" with my life is so much bigger than the list of what went "wrong." My body died from kidney disease, but my spirit always soared because of you.
7. Honor my earthly life and memory. Does feeling guilty help you remember all our good times, adventures and mutual love?
6. Live with Presence! Don't despair about yesterday. Don't fear tomorrow. Otherwise, you'll miss out on the Gift of Today.
5. Thank you for taking my pain into your heart on that last day. I'm so proud of you for that selfless act.
4. Didn't you always forgive me when I made a mistake? I forgive you for any mistake you made during my illness. You made the best decisions possible with the information available at that time. All I took with me on my final earthly journey was our love. Please accept my forgiveness and release the guilt.
3. Pat yourself on the back in between crying. Your effort to treat me was a supreme act of humanity, love and compassion. Our relationship was never more meaningful than during my illness. Please recognize your character and commitment. I do.
2. Guilt is what you humans do to punish yourself for not being perfect.
1. You didn't have a cure for a fatal disease. My body stopped working because of this fatal disease, not because of something you did or did not do.

"Doug & the B Brothers"

© Doug Koltavy

May 1, 2005

www.beezerandboomer.com



Doug with Boomer and Beezer

10. Healing through grief.

Grieving the loss of a pet is hard work. Grief is an emotionally and physically exhausting experience. The only way to heal the pain is to move through it, and that takes time. During this time, it's important to take care of yourself. Below are some suggestions to help you cope.

- **Give yourself permission to grieve.** Express your sadness; moving toward it is the only way to lessen the pain. Find outlets to express your grief: write about it, cry it out, talk about it, and work it out through exercise and projects.
- **Realize that it is normal to grieve deeply for a pet.** Losing a pet is a significant loss. It's normal when you've sustained a great loss to feel debilitated for awhile. So take all the time you need to heal.
- **Cut yourself some slack.** Grief is hard work. You may have trouble sleeping and may not feel like eating. As a result, you may lack focus at work or be forgetful. Be kind to yourself, as it is normal not to perform your best during this time.

- **Identify your own personal coping strategies.** Recall past losses you have experienced and review how you got through them.
- **Pick a meaningful way to memorialize your pet.** Make a scrapbook, plant a tree, write a poem, or donate money in your pet's name to a charity for animals. You may even want to volunteer with your humane society or rescue group.
- **Take time for you.** Seek out the healing effects of small pleasures: baths, afternoon naps, favorite foods, and long walks.
- **Take good care of yourself.** Get extra rest, eat healthfully, drink lots of water, and exercise moderately.
- **Surround yourself with supportive family and friends.** Let others help you. Limit your exposure to people who do not seem to understand the significance of your loss and may be less supportive.
- **Seek out professional help and/or support group.** It can be helpful to talk to others who have gone through similar situations, especially if you are experiencing a complicated grief process. Your veterinarian may have resources for you.
- **Expect the first year to be the hardest.** Lots of "firsts" (holidays, birthdays, and vacations) without your loved one may be difficult.
- **Allow yourself to backslide.** Grief is a roller coaster. Try not to get discouraged with the ups and downs of your emotions. Know that this is normal; be gentle and forgiving with yourself.
- **Other pets may grieve too.** You may notice behavioral changes in your other pets, such as decreased appetite or energy, isolating themselves, or increased vocalization. This could be due to their own grief or even responding to yours. Maintaining their daily routines can help them adjust. Just like you, they may need time to adapt. If problems occur and you are concerned, consult with your veterinarian.

11. Signs I'm feeling better.

Moving through grief can feel like slow motion – sometimes it is difficult to see signs of feeling better. Below are some clues that you are beginning to work through your grief.

- **You are in touch with the finality of the death.** You know in your heart that your beloved pet is truly gone and will never return to this earth.
- **You can review both pleasant and unpleasant memories.** In early grief, memories are painful because they remind you of how much you have lost. Later, it feels comforting to remember.
- **You are less sensitive to some comments people make.** You realize that painful comments made by family or friends are not meant to hurt you or devalue your feelings.
- **You can reach out to help someone else in a similar situation.** It's healing to be able to use your experience to help others.
- **You have not thought of your pet in some time.** When this first happens, you may panic, thinking, "I'm forgetting." This is not true. You will never forget. You are giving yourself permission to go on with your life.
- **Your eating, sleeping, and exercise patterns return to what they were before.**
- **You no longer feel tired all of the time.**
- **You have developed a routine or a new schedule in your daily life.**
- **You can find something for which to be thankful.** You always knew there were good things going on in your life, and now they have new significance.
- **You have patience with yourself through "grief attacks."** They are becoming further apart and less frightening and painful.
- **You look forward to getting up in the morning.**
- **You acknowledge your new life and even discover personal growth from experiencing grief.**

(Adapted from Fitzgerald, H., August 2, 2002. *You know you are getting better when ...* from <http://americanhospice.org/working-through-grief/you-know-you-are-getting-better-when/>)

12. Should I get another pet?

When to adopt a new pet after a much-loved companion has died is a dilemma for many people. Consider the following factors:

- **Try not to rush into decisions until you have time to sort out your feelings.** Well-meaning family, friends, and even veterinary professionals may suggest a new animal as a means of comfort and support.
- **Examine your motivation to get a new pet.** Be mindful of "replacing" the one that died. Try not to compare your new pet with the memories of your deceased pet. You may be disappointed. It is important to consider the needs, behaviors, and lifestyle of a new animal and how they may differ from those of the animal that died.
- **Another pet may help you heal.** For some people, the companionship of a new pet may be comforting during this difficult time.
- **Grieve the loss of your beloved pet.** Be aware that you may not be able to bond with the new pet right away. The desire to adopt a new animal immediately following the death of pet can be driven by the need to avoid the pain of grief. Give yourself time to heal the loss first as it may help you truly welcome a new pet with open arms.
- **Check in with the entire family.** Be sure everyone is ready to commit to the new relationship. The time frame is different for everyone. Bringing a new pet into the family before all members are ready can hurt or offend them by implying that the pet's death is relatively insignificant and that loved ones are easily replaced.
- **Consider becoming a "foster parent."** By fostering an animal through a local humane society or a breed rescue group, you'll provide temporary housing for an orphaned pet, who is awaiting permanent adoption. You'll provide a necessary service while testing your own readiness without a long-term commitment.
- **Decide if you are ready for a new companion.** If you are adopting to avoid the grief over the death of your previous pet, you might give it some additional time. If you feel you have grieved and want to open yourself again to a new relationship, your heart is probably telling you that you are ready.

