
Grief After the Loss of a Pet

When an animal has been woven into the rhythm of everyday life

Pet bereavement is real grief

A pet can be companion, family member, source of routine, emotional regulation, physical contact, safety and unconditional familiarity. Their presence may shape the whole day: waking, feeding, walking, medication, sitting together, coming home and going to bed. When they die, the absence is often felt in the body as much as in the mind.

The grief can be intensified because other people do not always recognise its depth. Comments such as 'it was only a dog' or 'you can get another one' can leave someone feeling they have to justify why they are devastated. The relationship was real, so the loss is real.

What may be lost at the same time

Companionship	The animal who was simply there, often without demanding explanation.
Routine	Feeding, walking, medication, grooming, bedtime and familiar daily cues.
Touch	The weight beside you, fur, warmth, movement and physical closeness.
Purpose	Being needed and responsible for another living being.
Social connection	Walks, neighbours, pet groups, veterinary staff or routines outside the home.
A witness to your life	A companion who may have been present through illness, relationships, bereavement or major change.

You do not have to reduce the importance of the relationship just because it was with an animal.

This guide explores anticipatory grief, euthanasia and guilt, sudden loss, the empty routines afterwards, children and other pets, grief that others minimise, memorialising, deciding whether to have another pet, reflection work, books, UK support and a message from Maggie.

Anticipatory grief, euthanasia and the questions that follow

Grief may begin before death when a pet is ageing, seriously ill or living with a condition that is gradually reducing quality of life. Owners can become hyper-alert to appetite, breathing, movement, toileting, pain and behaviour. Every good day may bring hope; every difficult day may bring fear.

Making an end-of-life decision

Euthanasia can place an enormous emotional responsibility on the person who loves the animal most. Even when a veterinary professional explains that suffering cannot be adequately relieved, the owner may still think: Was it too soon? Did I wait too long? Did they know I loved them? Did I make the right decision?

These questions often reflect love and responsibility rather than evidence that the decision was wrong. It can help to write down what was happening medically, what the vet explained, what changes you had observed and what you were trying to protect your pet from. Hindsight can make uncertainty feel like failure when, at the time, you were making a decision with the information you had.

Being present - or not being present

Some people stay during euthanasia; others cannot, or circumstances make it impossible. There is no single final moment that defines the entire relationship. Years of feeding, comforting, playing, protecting and being together are not erased by what happened in the last minutes.

Sudden or traumatic loss

An accident, unexpected collapse, missing pet, attack or emergency veterinary event can leave traumatic images alongside grief. The mind may repeatedly replay the event or imagine alternative outcomes. When the circumstances of death dominate all memories of the animal, trauma-informed therapy can help separate the way they died from the much larger story of how they lived.

Guilt after death

Owners may blame themselves for symptoms they missed, a gate left open, treatment decisions, money, timing or ordinary moments of impatience. Ask what you genuinely knew then, rather than what you know now. If factual questions remain, a veterinary conversation may be more helpful than repeatedly trying to solve them alone.

Love sometimes asks us to make decisions we desperately wish we never had to make.

The empty house: routines, children and other animals

Pet grief is full of small shocks. You may wake at feeding time, listen for paws, avoid looking at the empty bed, reach for the lead or expect them at the door. These automatic responses are part of a brain and body adjusting to a routine that has suddenly changed.

Changing routines gently

You do not need to remove every reminder immediately. Some people need the bed, bowl or lead to stay for a while; others need them moved. There is no correct timetable. If a walking routine supported your own wellbeing, consider keeping the walk even though it will feel different at first.

Children and pet loss

For a child, the death of a pet may be their first close experience of death. Use clear language appropriate to their age. Avoid saying the pet 'went to sleep' if that could create fear around ordinary sleep. Let children ask the same question repeatedly, draw, write, make a memory box or choose a way to say goodbye. They may move quickly between sadness and play; this is normal.

Other pets in the home

Animals may respond to changed routines, the absence of another animal or changes in their owner's behaviour. They may search, vocalise, sleep differently, eat differently or appear unaffected. Maintain predictable care and seek veterinary advice if there are persistent changes in eating, drinking, toileting, behaviour or health.

When other people minimise the loss

Disenfranchised grief is grief that is not fully recognised or socially supported. Pet bereavement can fall into this category. You are allowed to choose carefully who you talk to. A person who understands the bond may be more helpful than someone who insists on ranking losses.

Work and everyday responsibilities

Concentration can be poor, particularly if the pet was part of home-working life or daily emotional regulation. If possible, reduce unnecessary demands for a short period and plan for triggers such as returning home to an empty house.

The silence after a pet dies is not 'just an empty house'. It is the absence of a relationship that used to live there.

Remembering them and deciding what comes next

Memorialising does not need to follow a particular formula. The most meaningful remembrance is often something connected to the actual relationship: a photograph, collar, favourite walking route, planted area, framed paw print if you already have one, donation, memory box, written story or simply continuing a routine that mattered.

Keeping and sorting belongings

There is no deadline. Keep what carries meaning and let go of what does not when you are ready. You do not need to keep every object to prove the love was real, and you do not need to clear everything away to prove you are coping.

Should I get another pet?

There is no correct waiting period. Some people cannot imagine another animal for a long time. Others find the absence of animal companionship unbearable and are ready sooner. A new pet is not a replacement because a new relationship cannot duplicate the one that ended. Ask whether you have the emotional, practical and financial capacity to meet a new animal as themselves rather than expecting them to fill the exact shape of the previous pet.

Reflection pages

What I miss most

The ordinary thing I keep expecting them to do

A guilt thought that keeps returning

What did I actually know at the time? _____

What was I trying to do for my pet? _____

Three memories I want to keep close

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

A way I would like to remember them

What would I say to them if I had one more quiet minute?

Support, books and a message from me

UK support

Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service offers confidential support for people grieving a pet. **Ralph Site** provides information and emotional support around pet loss. Your veterinary practice may also be able to discuss end-of-life decisions, unanswered medical questions and local bereavement resources.

If the loss has triggered persistent traumatic memories, severe depression or an inability to function, speaking with a GP, counsellor or psychotherapist may be helpful. If you feel unable to keep yourself safe, seek urgent help through NHS 111, urgent mental-health services, 999 or A&E; as appropriate.

Books

Wallace Sife - *The Loss of a Pet*. Explores the particular emotional experience of companion-animal bereavement.

Alan D. Wolfelt - *When Your Pet Dies*. A gentle guide to mourning and remembering an animal companion.

Mary and Herb Montgomery - *Goodbye, My Friend*. Addresses grief following the death of a pet and the bond that preceded it.

Therapeutic understanding

Pet loss can be understood through established grief concepts including attachment, continuing bonds and disenfranchised grief. Person-centred therapy can provide a place where the relationship is taken seriously rather than minimised. Trauma-informed work may be appropriate after a frightening death or emergency. Where guilt is dominant, CBT-informed exploration can help distinguish hindsight, responsibility and self-blame.

A message from me

People sometimes feel they have to apologise for how much they are grieving an animal. I do not think you should have to. A pet can be beside you through the parts of life that other people never see - the ordinary mornings, difficult evenings, illness, loneliness, changes in relationships and all the quiet moments in between.

When they are gone, it is not only their body that is missing. It is the routine of loving them. The sound, the movement, the responsibility, the way they looked at you, and the fact that another living being expected you to come home.

If you had to make the decision to let them go, try not to let one painful decision become the whole story of your relationship. The story is also every meal, walk, stroke, game, veterinary visit, worry, welcome home and ordinary day when you cared for them.

And if another animal eventually becomes part of your life, you do not have to make space by removing the one who died. Hearts are capable of holding different relationships without replacing them.

Their life mattered because the relationship mattered.

Maggie

Space to Breathe Therapy

This guide is for education and emotional support and is not a substitute for individual veterinary, medical or psychological advice.