

OHS Pet Loss Support Groups

Helping Yourself in Times of Grief

What is Grief?

Grief is normal. Grief is personal. The more you know about it, the better you will understand what is happening to you personally, and you may find it easier to cope with.

Grieving and mourning are not the same. Grieving is the internal reaction to loss. Mourning is the outward expression of loss — grief gone public. After mourning ends, grieving continues, usually softening over time.

Grief does not have a time limit or schedule. It takes as long as it takes.

Everyone experiences grief, but your way of grieving is yours alone. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and many factors will affect how you grieve: your relationship with the pet who died; the circumstances surrounding their death; your emotional support system; and more.

Shock, Numbness, Guilt — Grief's Early Stages

Feeling dazed or numb when a pet dies is often part of the early grief experience. This numbness usually gives your emotions time to process the reality of your pet's death.

As the initial numbness wears off, your emotions may become more exposed. Shock and denial often mask early feelings and as more feelings emerge, you might actually feel worse.

Grief is often described as an emotional rollercoaster with lots of ups and downs. This is normal. Allow yourself to feel what you feel without judging your emotions.

Guilt is a common reaction to grief, and you may feel like you could have made things better or done something to keep the deceased pet alive. You may feel guilt over unresolved conflict or have regrets about things you did or didn't do.

Writing a letter to your pet can help you move past the regrets of things you wished you had said or done.

If your pet was sick or suffering for a long time, you may have felt relief when they passed. This emotion may seem confusing, but in no way does it mean that you did not love your pet; it is natural to be relieved that a pet's pain and suffering has ended.

In the early stages of grief, you may find that you are forgetting things. Carrying a small notebook and pen can help you remember important things and help you maintain focus and structure.

You may even want to take this one step further and make a memory box or maintain a journal.

Holding in your grief or trying to hide it is likely to hurt you in the long run and make things worse. It's okay to cry, and it might even help you feel better. It's okay to be angry. You may be angry with yourself, the world, the pet who died, others, or just angry in general.

Do not compare yourself to other people who are grieving, it will only make you feel worse. You may feel you are not adjusting as well as they are, or that you are not grieving hard enough. Grief is not a competition and there is no winning.

Strategies for Healing

As you grieve, you may find yourself asking:

“Why me?”

“Why now?”

“Why this way?”

Searching for meaning is a normal part of the healing process. Some questions will have answers, others will not. Healing sometimes occurs in the opportunity to ask questions, not necessarily in finding answers.

You might find that an effective way to work through your grief is to talk about it with others. You may find solace talking to a person or group who can empathize with what you are feeling.

Grief can be exhausting and will likely affect you emotionally and physically. Pace yourself and be aware of your physical and emotional limits.

Give yourself plenty of time to do everyday activities and do not over-schedule yourself. Relax when you need to.

As you grieve, your appetite may be diminished. Maintaining a regular, balanced diet and staying hydrated will help you find the energy to work through your grief and help

your mood. Breathing exercises may help you find energy and calmness — take deep breaths in through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth.

If you are feeling stressed and overwhelmed, rather than making to-do lists, you might find more comfort in reviewing what you have done that day.

Try to take care of each day, each task, and each problem as it comes. Live day by day. Feel good about getting through the day.

You might find regular, day-to-day chores and tasks are too much to handle. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Reach out and call a friend if you are feeling low or just need to talk to someone.

Celebrate all your achievements, no matter how small they may seem. If you find it hard to do something that's normally easy like brushing your teeth, take a moment to congratulate yourself when you are able to get back into the routine.

If possible, it may be best to avoid making major decisions and changes in your life while grieving. Grief is an intense emotion that can lead to impulsive decisions that might not be in your best interest.

You don't have to rush to dispose of your pet's toys and other possessions. Do it when you feel ready. You may even find comfort in keeping one of their items as a way of remembering them. Or you may find relief in parting with all of their items. Again, grief is very personal, and the way you react to it is normal, but also unique to you.

It will take some time, and how long it takes is different for everyone, but as you progress through your grief, you will likely reach a point where you are ready to get back into your usual routine.

You might find it helpful to track your progress daily. Mark good days with a green checkmark and bad days with a red X. As more and more green checkmarks appear, you might feel happier seeing your progress. If you notice there are still lots of red Xs, you may need to try something new or make a change to help yourself.

Birthdays, anniversaries and holidays can be speed bumps on your grief journey, and may cause setbacks. Planning ahead can help you cope on these special days. You might find comfort in honouring your pet on the day. You might want to spend the day with friends and family to support you and keep your mind off of things. Sometimes trying something completely new for the day can help you cope. Often, the dread you may feel while thinking about upcoming special days may be harder to cope with than the actual days.

Attend social events if you wish to, but don't attend events because of pressure from friends or family. It's OK to say no, and it's OK to change your mind.

If possible, you may want to take your own car to events so you can leave when you wish, or you can enlist a friend to keep an eye on you and help you leave if things become overwhelming.

You may not feel like returning to work right away. When you do return, you may wish to work part time or temporarily assume a less demanding role. Discuss leave and scheduling options with your supervisor.

Plan things that you look forward to. Small pleasures such as watching a sunset, a nature walk, a massage, a favourite food can have a healing effect. Finding pleasure in the little things can be the beginning of discovering the joy of life again.

Grief is personal. Grief is normal. No matter how dark things may seem, it will get better, and there are people who will support you and listen when you need them most.

Find what works best for you, and reach out to the people who help you the most. You are not alone in your grief.