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### Anticipatory Grief: What it is and How to Cope

[Andria Corso](#) June 21, 2020 2:28 PM EDT

*"I feel like we just brought one-year-old Hokie home from the shelter, and now he's suddenly a senior dog with a terminal illness. I can't imagine my life without him" ~ Debra G.*

If you're a pet owner, chances are you've experienced a thought or feeling similar to the above statement. *How do our young pets suddenly become gray-faced seniors with limited days left on earth?* If all goes according to plan, most pet owners will outlive their pets; yet, we don't like to think about their end-of-life, and we usually don't think about it until we have no choice.

Anticipatory grief is grief that begins before the actual loss of a loved one (Allen & Gore, 2020). This grief is common in pet owners dealing with an aging pet or who receive a diagnosis of a beloved pet's terminal illness. Anticipatory grief is frequently defined in research as:

"The phenomenon encompassing the processes of mourning, coping, interaction, planning, and psychosocial reorganization that are stimulated and begun in part in response to the awareness of the impending loss of a loved one (death) and the recognition of associated losses in the past present and future." (Rando, 1986, p. 20)

This is real grief that produces real feelings in pet owners. It is important for pet owners to know how to cope with these feelings. The remainder of this article will outline the triggers of anticipatory grief in pet owners, how it feels, and strategies for coping with these feelings.

#### ***When does it start and how long does it last?***

Anticipatory grief can set in when you begin noticing signs of aging in your pet such as moving slower than they used to and becoming grayer in the face. Their aging process may trigger your awareness that their end of life is getting closer to becoming a reality. The diagnosis of a pet's terminal illness may also trigger anticipatory grief - regardless of the pet's age - and may propel you into feelings of grief about the expected loss of your pet.

Anticipatory grief can be long-lasting and can go on for as long as someone is awaiting the loss of their pet whether due to old age or illness. For example, a pet owner - whose cat is diagnosed with terminal cancer and then passes away a month after diagnosis - may experience anticipatory grief throughout that last month of time that they spent together with their pet. For another owner whose dog is in a slow decline for the last two years of her life, the

anticipatory grief may be prolonged over that two-year period of time. The timeframe depends on the anticipatory grief trigger point and when the pet passes.

### ***How does it feel?***

Anticipatory grief impacts pet owners emotionally, cognitively, and physically (Cox, 2017). Guilt is a common feeling of pet owners as they question whether they are doing enough to help their pets, whether their pet is suffering, and when it will be time to say goodbye (Hewson, 2014). The pending euthanasia decision is one that causes many pet owners to feel deep sadness and despair. Having to make the decision to end their pet's life is one decision that many pet owners struggle with, and that struggle is exacerbated during anticipatory grief (Laing & Maylea, 2018).

Anticipatory grief also has physical impacts - stress impacts a pet owner's physiological state, sleep patterns, and the way they live. Many pet owners change the way they live daily life to accommodate their sick or aging pet. For example, they limit time away from home because they need to administer medication to their aging or sick pets and forego vacations to properly care for their pets. Pet owners acclimate their lives to take care of their pets and are often unaware of how these life changes decrease their own quality of life over time. Although pet owners may not recognize or feel the effects of these life limitations while immersed in their caregiving, the realization becomes apparent when they look back or reflect on what their life was like as they dealt with their aging or sick pet.

Anticipatory grief often strengthens the human-animal bond, and feelings of closeness to one's pet grow and deepen. Pet owners dedicate more time and energy to caring for their pets, tending to them physically, as well as spending more time with them in anticipation of their death. This can deepen their bond with their pet. For example, when Matt's basset hound became too frail to walk up and down a flight of stairs, he began carrying her up and down the stairs a few times a day, every day for over a year. Those daily walks up and down stairs with a 50-lb basset hound in his arms deepened his love for her and made it even more difficult to anticipate the end of her life.

### ***How can you cope?***

If you're experiencing anticipatory grief, know that your feelings are normal and justified. Even if others don't understand what you're experiencing, you are a pet-parent, and your feelings related to the expected loss of your pet are real and valid.

There are a few things you can do to help cope with your anticipatory grief.

First, take care of yourself so that you can best care for your pet. It may be easy to sacrifice your own well-being and do everything to ensure your pet is comfortable and well-cared-for; however, if you are not well, you can't provide the best care for your pet. Practice self-care by getting good sleep, eating well, and spending time in nature. Or, if you enjoy yoga, a massage, or meditation, take time for those things. You must be fully healthy to best tend to your pet's needs.

Second, feel your feelings. Whatever you're feeling - whether sadness, anger, guilt, or frustration - feel it without any judgment. Emotions are energy and need to move through your body, so that they don't get stuck and create additional stress. By acknowledging your sadness

or anger and giving yourself space to express it, either through talking to someone about it, writing about it, going for a walk, or a run to release it, you give those feelings space to move. That's part of coping with negative emotions – feel them so that they can move through your body.

Third, spend quality time with your pet. You best know your pet and know what they love to do. You also know what they can do comfortably during this time. What can they do that they love to do? Spend time doing those things with your pet.

Fourth, plan ahead, if possible. If you're planning to euthanize your pet, discuss this with your veterinarian so you know where it will happen and who will be there. Also, talk to your vet about how to know when it's time. There are several quality of life scales that you can use to assess your pet's quality of life and to determine when it might be the right time to say goodbye. Remember, you may always question whether it's the "right time," but having a plan about where it will happen and what to look for when making the decision may help with your anticipatory grief.

Finally, seek support. Many pet owners have experienced and are experiencing the same anticipatory grief as you. Attending a [pet loss support group](#) with others in a similar situation can help you cope with your anticipatory grief. The process of sharing your feelings with others who understand - because they've been there - can be extremely helpful and healing. You can also seek individual support from a professional grief counselor if you prefer a one-on-one setting.

Our pets bring so much joy to our lives, and most pet owners always wish they had more time with their fur-babies. Unfortunately, saying goodbye to them is part of the cycle of life. Anticipating that goodbye is also a difficult reality of being a pet owner. Remember - all that you feel as you await the end of your pet's life is real. It's a reflection of how much you love them and how much they love you. Be kind to yourself and trust that the love you have for your pet will guide you through and help you make the best decisions at the end of their life.

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