

## **Help in Healing the Hurt** by Kathie Maffitt

Anyone who has loved and owned a pet will at some time experience pet loss. How it affects us and how we deal with it depends on many factors, including the situation leading to the loss and our own emotional makeup. We are almost embarrassed to mourn our lost pets, especially when we are exposed to human death and loss daily via the television or newspapers. We don't allow ourselves to grieve and so the hurt lingers unresolved. Reading this will, hopefully, help you sort out your feelings and examine your loss.

One problem in our society is that there is no way to put a value on our animal companions, other than fair market price. This, for most of us, just isn't a meaningful accounting. Years ago there was an outbreak of Newcastle's Disease in Southern California. All birds who even might have been exposed were confiscated and destroyed. A blue and gold macaw, who had greeted his pet-shop owner every morning for eighteen years was one of the casualties. Could the pet shop owners get another macaw? Probably. Could she replace her beloved pet? No, never. The newscaster reporting the story mentioned a reimbursement of \$2000 to the bird's owner, the market price at the time. It hardly seemed fair.

Basic human needs are satisfied by our pets. We love them. We care for their physical needs. We spend money on them that could be well spent elsewhere. We talk to them. We kiss them. And they, in return, need us, manipulate us, and just love us, unconditionally. This love makes us get up in the night to open the door, change litter boxes and birdcages daily, recover the destroyed sofa and fight fleas. If you need to wash your hair, forget to feed him, or blame him for something he didn't do, your pet still loves you. When you lose that gift, you have really lost something worth having. You are allowed to cry, feel awful, and hate the whole world. It's permissible.

In recent years, animals of all kinds have garnered attention for their value in aiding those mentally and physically challenged with communication and response. Prisons sometimes allow inmates to keep pets as a way to rebuild social skills. The elderly often depend on pets as sources of comfort and affection when families have grown and gone. Children see pets as their allies in a hard and hostile world of misunderstanding. It is this value that must be considered.

People are sometimes disturbed by the strong negative emotions they feel following a pet's death or disappearance. We almost feel guilty, as if we should only feel this distraught over the death of a human friend or relative. For many of us, our pets are our best friends. Grief is the normal reaction to any loss; a theft of money or property, for example. Death is the greatest thief, isn't it?

There are many feelings that accompany a grief reaction. We have emotions ranging from anger at our pet for leaving us to guilt at not having done more to save him. These stages of grief are typical and natural. At first, there is a numbing disbelief that may immediately follow the loss. This is a protective measure taken until the reality of the situation can be faced. When this realization hits us we may feel guilty, angry, depressed, lethargic, and disoriented. These feelings, as painful as they can be, should not be buried, but dealt with. Denial of grief will most likely prolong it.

There are several ways to cope with hurt feelings and a broken heart. Talking to an understanding and sympathetic friend is helpful in reestablishing daily routines. Looking at photos and going to your pet's favorite play spot invite memories to be mulled over and cherished. A discussion with your veterinarian concerning the circumstances leading to your pet's death can help resolve uncertainties you may have.

The important thing is to allow yourself the luxury of time. Grief and mourning have no set time limit. Each person dealing with a loss is different. We shouldn't compare ourselves to one another. If you feel you are having an abnormal grief reaction, it might be wise to seek counseling, rather than suffer in silence. It doesn't mean you are going crazy. Talking with someone you trust; a friend, doctor, or pastor will help you understand your feelings.

If the loss of your pet occurs suddenly through accident or similar mishap, you have been caught unprepared. With no warning, you are likely to suffer intense and profound grief reactions. If you think the accident might be your fault, you feel guilty; if you blame someone else, you are angry at that person. There is a feeling of horror and frustration that makes you replay the scene over and over in your mind, wishing for the chance to go back in time and change what happened. Even the best-trained or most predictable animals can be impulsive. It only takes once.

When children are involved in a pet loss situation, there are some special considerations. The death of a family pet may be the child's first experience with death of any kind. The child may be angry at his parents or the veterinarian for being unable to save the pet's life. He may feel guilty, depressed...all the regular adult reactions and emotions. There is a chance the child may worry about being abandoned by his loved ones. He may reason that if his pet can die and leave him, why not the people he cares about? It helps to reassure the child in a way that is appropriate to his age, that this will not likely happen. Whatever the circumstances, never lie to your child about what has happened. If you try to protect your child by saying "Fluffy ran away," your child would spend a very long time waiting for Fluffy to come back, and feel betrayed by you when he finds out the truth. Reassure your child that grief and sadness are okay and allow him to express his feelings, whatever they are. Discuss your pet and communicate your understanding of the child's feelings. Showing your own grief may help your children express theirs. Be aware that pre-teen or older children may have difficulty in expressing sorrow over the loss of a pet, even if the animal belonged to them.

One of the most difficult situations a pet owner can face is the question of euthanasia or "putting the animal 'to sleep'" or "putting down." (I hate those terms because they can be confusing, especially to children, who may think that anesthetizing an animal for surgery will kill it.) This is an issue you should discuss with your veterinarian and concerned family members before the decision must actually be made, if possible. If your pet has been diagnosed as seriously or terminally ill, you should consider the quality of your pet's life. If there is more pain than not in your pet's day-to-day existence and the future prognosis is not good, euthanasia is an alternative your veterinarian may offer. Your pet probably has given you much happiness. You could repay the debt by ending your friend's pain. It is a hard decision; we have been taught that killing is wrong. If the pain of an incurable illness can be controlled by medication, and you can afford it, by all means do it. Ask your veterinarian what he would do if the animal were his. You are probably undecided about staying with your pet during the procedure. If you want to stay, then do. Being there you will see that it is a painless death and there is no awareness of dying on the animal's part. It may help you to think about that later. The important thing is that you be comfortable with your decision. If you have explored all alternatives, you will know you put forth your best effort for your friend.

My cocker spaniel, Casey, was 12 years old when she developed malignant tumors. After three surgeries, she seemed well, then developed an uncharacteristic cough. X-rays revealed an inoperable lung tumor. Our family was preparing to move across country by car the following week and I feared losing her in a strange town with strangers around me. I decided to say goodbye then, rather than lose her in some unknown place. It seemed like a sudden decision. It was a sudden decision. I wasn't prepared. I held her in my arms and cradled her head. I told her how much I loved her and what a good dog she was. When the veterinarian gave her the injection, I was still holding her. I felt her relax against me and her head drooped. Then she was gone. I looked at her face. She looked like she was sleeping, like the thousand times she had fallen asleep in my lap. The veterinarian mumbled something about a time to live and a

time to die. He was upset and I was crying. I went home and packed up her collar, leash, placemat and bowl I had made her with her name on it. I still have them, nearly twenty years later. I thought the pain would never stop. But time did help, and I can speak of her now without tears and know I did the right thing.

Preparing a final resting-place or having some kind of memorial service puts a period on the final sentence in your pet's story. There is comfort in knowing you've taken care of last things. Several alternatives are available including backyard burial, cremation and public pet cemeteries. Talk this question over with family members, taking into account your financial abilities. Be sure to ask for the input of your children. Funerals may seem less frightening and mysterious if the child is involved in your plans for your pet. Writing a eulogy or tribute allows for unaided emotions to be vented. A memorial marker or stone is fine if you desire it, and a message of your own composition can be very satisfactory. Conversely, if you do not feel the need for any memorials, then please do not feel you are an uncaring pet owner. Each of us must handle this as our own heart dictates.

Sometime in the future you will probably begin wondering about getting another pet. This will be a decision that is yours alone and you will know when you are ready. Be sure that you do not actually try to replace your lost pet. This is impossible. There will never be another pet like the one you lost, so it is best to treasure the memories of that animal and then move into a new relationship with the new pet. Value your new pet for himself, and don't be disappointed if he doesn't want to sleep at the foot of your bed the way your other pet did. Give yourself ample time to adjust to a new personality. If your enjoyment of your new pet causes a twinge of guilt, realize that your pleasure in your new pet is not a betrayal of your old pet, but a tribute.

If you do not care to get another pet, it is perfectly all right. Sometimes it is only that particular pet you were fond of and not dogs, cats, or birds in general. If you are unsure, you probably aren't ready. Give yourself time. You will be able to think of your lost pet without pain. Sorrow, perhaps, but the hurt will be softened and replaced by happy images of life. Remember them, with love.

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