

GRIEF IN DOGS AND CATS

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THE LOSS OF A PET

Because our pets cannot speak, we don't really know what they are thinking. We must base our interpretations of their emotional state on their behavior – what they do in certain situations and under specific circumstances.

When a person experiences the death of a human loved one, we may know they feel grief based on what they say. Very often, however, it is how they react, what they do that tells us they are suffering. They lose their focus, become listless and disoriented, don't eat and become disinterested in what is happening around them. They may cry or go without sleep or they may sleep more.

An animal that is experiencing the loss of another animal companion may react similarly. "Some animals can actually become depressed when they lose a loved one," says Monique D. Chretien, MSc, AHT, Animal Behavior Consultant. "They show symptoms similar to humans such as loss of interest in their favorite activities and sleeping more than usual. However, sometimes dogs and cats hide and sleep more than usual when they are ill, so you should consult with your veterinarian before seeing a behaviorist if your pet exhibits symptoms such as these."

Your pet may lose his appetite, become disoriented, or become more clingy. If the deceased pet was taken to a veterinarian to be euthanized, the grieving pet may sit at the window for days watching for her return. Animal behaviorists commonly call this emotional state, separation anxiety. On the surface, the pet's behavior is similar to that of a person experiencing grief over the loss of a loved one.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals conducted a Companion Animal Mourning Project in 1996. The study found that 46% of cats ate less than usual after the death of another cat companion. In some extreme cases, the cat actually starved to death. About 70% of cats meowed more than normal or meowed less. Study respondents indicated that surviving cats changed the quantity and location of sleep. More than half the surviving pets became more affectionate and clingy with their caregivers. Overall, the study revealed that 65% of cats exhibited four or more behavioral changes after losing a pet companion.

If your pet shows signs that she is grieving the loss of an animal or human family member, provide her with more attention and affection. "Try to take her mind off it by engaging her in a favorite activity," says Chretien. If she enjoys human company, invite friends that she likes to visit and spend time with her. Use environmental enrichment techniques such as balls filled with treats to help keep her busy. Hide toys at her favorite spots for her to find during the day.

If your pet is too depressed over the loss, she may not respond to extra activity right away. The old saying, "Time heals all wounds," has meaning for your pet, too. "Time is one thing that may help," says Chretien.

If your dog is barking more or whining, distract her. Don't give her treats to distract her or you might unintentionally reinforce the barking. "Giving attention during any behavior will help to reinforce it so be sure you are not reinforcing a behavior that you don't like," says Chretien. "Give attention at a time when your dog is engaging in behaviors that you do like, such as when she is resting quietly or watching the birds. As the pain of the loss begins to subside, so should the vocalizing as long as it is related to the grieving process."

You may also want to consult with your veterinarian regarding drug therapy to help decrease your dog's anxiety, advises Chretien.

If you are thinking about adding another pet, wait until you and your surviving pet have adjusted to the loss. Forcing your pet to get to know a newcomer will only add stress to her already anxiety-ridden emotional state. And be patient. Your pet may miss her companion as much as you do.