

*When Its Time
To Say
Goodbye...*



Coping With The Death Of A Pet

Peter Green

Introduction

Death is not a subject that anyone likes to talk about. This means that most people find it very hard to cope with when they experience the death of a loved one. It is an established fact that the level of grief a person experiences when faced with loss is proportional to their level of attachment to that person or animal. This is why many people feel more distressed over the death of their pet than they do over the death of a family member they are not close to. This results in feelings of confusion and often guilt for many people. Added to this is the problem that often people feel they cannot share their grief over the loss of a pet with others because it seems socially unacceptable, especially to those who do not share a love for animals.

Over the years, I have witnessed hundreds of euthanasias and have seen and experienced a whole range of emotions from stoical indifference to uncontrollable sobbing. I have become acutely aware of the need for people to have some support when dealing with the loss of a pet through either natural death, euthanasia, or by a pet getting lost and never being found.

At our clinic we have been looking at ways of providing some support for our clients in these situations and this booklet has been produced as one way to offer some help. On the next page, I have dealt with some practical issues concerning death and burial. The next section is a collection of articles giving a few people's accounts of their experiences with the death of their pets. I trust you find them helpful.

At the back of the booklet is a list of pet loss grief support resources that you may find helpful.

Peter Green



Euthanasia

Euthanasia is performed by the injection of an overdose of anaesthetic. If an animal is in pain or is uptight, we will often give a tranquiliser first to settle it down before placing a catheter into a vein and giving the final injection. After the injection is given, the animal will go to sleep, just as during an anaesthetic and then, because it is an overdose, the heart will stop and the animal will die. Occasionally there may be some involuntary muscle movements or gasps for a few moments after death. The animal's eyes will remain open and the body will stay warm for some time after death.

Burial

There are various means of disposing of a body after death. We encourage people to bury their pets at home if this is practical. For many people, however, this is not practical and so we provide a burial service where pets are buried at an EPA licensed property near Geelong.

There are also some Pet Memorial Gardens that provide individual burial plots for animals for a much greater fee.

Pets may also be cremated if people so desire. Pets are individually cremated in EPA approved cremators and ashes are returned in a receptacle of your choosing—a metal cylinder, wooden box or ceramic urn. For more details, please contact the clinic.

Memorials

Many people like to have some lasting memorial for their pet and we certainly encourage this as it can help in the healing process of grieving.

We have constructed a memorial wall and garden at the clinic where you can have a brass plaque put up in memory of your pet. You are welcome to visit the garden at any time.

Other memorials can include planting a tree or shrub at home; having your pet cremated and keeping the ashes; a memorial donation to an animal charity; writing down your special memories of your pet and adding photos and other keepsakes like collars and tags.

Coping With A Pet's Death

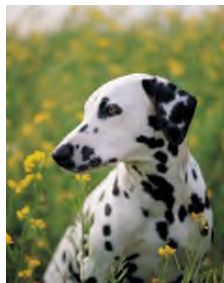


Death signifies the end of a life, and for the survivors it brings an end to a loving, supporting relationship. A great deal of research and its resultant literature has addressed the issue of adjusting to the death of a human being, but very little has been written on coping with the death of a pet. Most experts believe that the subject is not important enough to be studied, but for children, the elderly, and anyone who becomes deeply attached to a pet over a

long period of time, such an event can be extremely traumatic.

The sudden death of a pet may have a violent emotional impact and is probably more difficult to accept than the eventual demise of an elderly animal. Yet some animals live so long that we almost believe they will go on forever, and their deaths also come as a great shock. In the case of the pet and owner who have grown old together, the death of the pet often signifies to the human that his or her own death is approaching, and thus may have a great psychological impact. But in general, since most people are never fully prepared for death and have difficulty acknowledging its existence, the unexpected death is particularly devastating.

Unfortunately, many pets do meet unexpected deaths. Even the most conscientious pet owner cannot prevent diseases such as cancer that strike animals as well as humans. Animals with less careful owners may be killed by cars, accidents, poison, other animals, or even preventable diseases. Regardless of the cause of death, one feels grief at the loss of a beloved companion.



As with the death of a human, several stages of emotion follow the death of a pet.

The first reaction is usually shock, numbness and disbelief. A typical behaviour is denial of the truth, even though the evidence is plain. Often in the case of a terminally ill pet, the owner rationalises that it is a temporary condition that will clear up with a change in diet or medication. It may be difficult to accept the fact that nothing can be done medically, for people have the same blind faith in the veterinarian that they have in the family doctor - surely he or she can cure anything.

The next reaction is often **anger**, which may be directed at oneself (for not having been more careful or alert), at the veterinarian (for not being able to save or cure the pet), or at another person or animal involved in the death. It is not even unusual to become angry at the pet for being so thoughtless as to die or get killed.

Both denial and anger are especially intense in a pet owner who must decide whether to have an animal euthanised. Although a positive decision will minimise the animal's suffering, it leaves the owner with the guilt of having caused, or at least authorised, the pet's death .

The third stage, usually termed **grief**, is characterised by depression, preoccupation with memories of the pet, and painful thoughts and feelings. It is during this stage that people declare they will never have another pet because losing one is too painful. Bereft owners may find themselves putting down the bowl of food at the usual time, listening for the familiar meow, or opening the door in response to a nonexistent bark, all of which serve to deepen depression.

The final stage is **acceptance**. As is true in the case of human death, not everyone reaches this stage. It is possible to find individuals still blaming the veterinarian, the driver of the car, or themselves years after the event. But for most people, time and the realisation that the death cannot be reversed bring some degree of acceptance. On the other hand, many pet owners try to conceal their grief, fearing that others will think them foolish for being upset by the death of

an animal. Hiding one's true feelings only prolongs the grief process. It is much better to express emotions honestly and openly. One aid in coping with the death of a pet is simply to be aware of these normal stages. While not everyone experiences all of the feelings in this exact order, the pattern is fairly common.

When humans die, relatives and friends usually rally around with support and sympathy, which helps the bereaved through the initial reaction period. Unfortunately, such support from friends usually is not forth-coming in the death of a pet, though other animals in the home often appear to sense the loss and give all the sympathy they can, in the way of extra love and attention.



After the death of a person, the funeral service appears to be an important factor in helping survivors cope with the grief process. While it is possible to have a religious ceremony and burial for the pet, most owners do not, and are denied whatever comfort such rituals bring. Perhaps a memorial donation to a humane society could serve as a substitute, creating the feeling that others are aware of the death and are sympathetic.

Occasionally there is the feeling that some small measure of good has come from a pet's death. A veterinarian may ask to do an autopsy, hoping to learn something that will help save other animals. By giving his or her permission, the owner may take comfort in having made such a contribution. Like physicians, many veterinarians have trouble coping with an animal's death and hide their discomfort with a matter-of-

fact demeanour. A sympathetic attitude on their part can be most helpful to the bereaved pet owner.

After a period of adjustment, many people decide that they would like another pet. Finding one that resembles the dead animal and even using the same name are probably not good ideas. Besides prolonging the feeling of grief, this subjects the new pet to constant, often negative comparison with the previous one. In most cases it is probably best to replace the lost pet, filling the void created by the death. The owner may wish to secure the new pet from an animal shelter, thus saving a life and again giving some positive meaning to the death of the previous pet. Some owners keep several pets of various ages, so that as the older ones die, younger ones can be acquired and there is a sense of continuity.

Probably the unhealthiest reaction is refusing to replace the pet, but keeping the toys, bowls, and dishes as though the animal were still present. Called *fantasy* by experts on death and dying, this behaviour only serves to prolong the grief period. Substitution (described earlier), withdrawal (often the initial reaction never to have a pet again), repression (forgetting even the name of the pet) and rationalisation (that it was only an animal) are all poor ways of coping with the death of a pet.

Many parents express concern about how to tell children of the death and how to help them adjust to the event. The proper approach depends to a great extent upon the age of the child.

Children under the age of two apparently have no concept or fear of death, but will miss the presence of the pet. Immediate replacement is perhaps the best course of action, as the child will be caught up in the excitement of the new pet.

Children aged three to five view death as a temporary separation. It is important to stress the fact that the pet is not lost and has not run away, but is permanently gone,

neighbourhood, calling the pet, anticipating its eventual return.

From ages five to nine, children think of death as a punishment. This may be a problem if the child was responsible for the care and feeding of the pet and sometimes forgot his or her responsibilities. The child may feel that the death of the pet was his or her fault, especially if the parents had threatened to get rid of the animal when the child was negligent. The child must be assured that the parents did not cause the pet's death nor was death punishment for poor care.



After the age of nine, children seem to have a realistic, adult concept of death as an inevitable, permanent, biological process. It is at this point that parents can begin to convey whatever religious or philosophical concepts about death they believe are most appropriate for the child. Children will want to know if pets have souls, go to heaven and are eventually reunited with their owners after death. The answers to such questions usually depend upon the convictions held by the parents on these matters. Participating in a burial service for the pet, if possible, often makes the child feel better and serves as an introduction for future funerals of relatives and friends. Allow the child to grieve openly for as long as he or she needs to.

For the elderly, the death of a pet is often the loss of one's only companion, or the equivalent of a life-long friend, and should be viewed as such. Replacement is often impossible because the owner may be facing a change in living conditions (moving to a nursing or retirement home, an

apartment, or living with children), or there may be the fear of what will happen to the pet if the owner should die first. Although each case is different and must be handled individually, the situation should never be minimised and viewed as only the death of an animal, and therefore of little concern.

Because the life span of most pets is considerably shorter than that of their owners, it is inevitable that one day most pet owners will face the problem of adapting to the death of a pet. How well we handle such trauma is indicative of how well we cope with human death, and of our views on our own eventual deaths. It is, of course, possible to avoid the grief and sorrow that accompany an animal's death by not allowing pets into our lives, but in the final analysis, perhaps the pain of loss is a small price to pay for years of loving companionship.



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From "Animals" (The Massachusetts SPCA)

Only the Love Remains

On March 5, editor Jane Hutchison and her husband, Sheldon, had their first dog, Patches, euthanised. The following story describes the feelings and emotions surrounding this most traumatic event

I've read the books, the brochures and the articles on how to handle grief at the death of an animal companion. My mind knows, maybe even accepts, the facts. Patches is dying. We don't know how much time is left, but it can't be long. The arrangements have all been made. She will die at home, surrounded by the people who love her most. Her veterinarian will give her the final injection that will take her life. We mustn't let her suffer. I'm an intelligent person, I understand what must be done.

My heart is another matter. It does not understand. It cannot accept. It cannot envision life without the little dog who has been part of me for more than 13 years. It aches to see her struggle, to watch her condition deteriorate. It feels the frustration of trying to entice her to eat, of cleaning up after her increasingly frequent accidents, of being so very tired because when she cannot sleep at night, I also remain awake. "Anticipatory grief" they call it. It's most common among those whose animals suffer some terminal illness, whose deaths are prolonged. I see over and over again in my mind her death, her lifeless body, wrapped in my old blue sweatshirt which she so loves. Can the grief that comes after her death be any more intense than this? A silent, anguished scream forms in my throat. I sit in my office and cry, going through each day as an automaton. How will I know when the time is right? How can I take her life? How can I ask my friend, who has worked so hard to make Patches well, who became my friend because Patches and I spent so much time at the veterinary clinic, to now take away the very life she worked so hard to save?

"She'll tell you when she's ready." "She'll make the decision for you." But will she? She's a fighter . . . she survived

disease. As long as she fights, how can I give up on her? She's thin, her muscles are weak and atrophied, she shakes uncontrollably at times. She gets disoriented, and the places where her fur was shaved have never regrown their soft, white coat. On her face she wears the remnants of thrice-daily medications. Her eyes most of all show her sickness. If, as has been said, eyes are the windows to the soul, I do not want to see what they reveal.

Am I doing this for her, or for me? Do I love her so much I will do any-thing to keep her alive, regardless of the cost? Even if she tells me when she no longer wants to go on living, will I be able to recognise her message? Will I be willing to accept her message? She still has good days, or at least times of the day when she appears alert and active. Maybe the final decision can be postponed just a little longer. Maybe something dramatic will happen to tell me with great certainty that the time is right.

At my veterinarian's suggestion, I take a few days off work to spend at home with Patches. She can't go for long walks with me, but she seems comforted just lying beside me on the couch. Her breathing is becoming increasingly laboured. Her abdomen is becoming distended as it fills with fluid. Her appetite is gone, despite the appetite stimulants. I lay down on the floor beside her, where she rests on a pile of blankets. With my ear against her chest, the congestion in her lungs is obvious. When I pick her up, she coughs and wheezes. I could call my veterinarian at home tonight . . . but maybe things will be better tomorrow. It'd only been two days since the vet said she didn't think Patches was suffering, and that in her opinion the time had not yet come to euthanise her.

Patches spent a restless and sleepless night. Unable to breathe comfortably while lying down, she sat or stood up all night. In the darkness, I saw her looking at me, in a way she had never looked at me before. Sadly, I understood what she was telling me. "Mama, I hurt. I love you so very much, but I can't sleep, it's hard for me to breathe, and I don't want to eat. It's time to let me go." Eerily, my husband came to the same realisation when he awoke.

I walked through the morning rain to the veterinary clinic. "I need to see the doctor when she's free." I sat in the waiting

room, the words I was about to utter echoing in my mind. As the doctor led me into an exam room and closed the door, the words came rushing out. "I think it's time." After listening to my description of Patches' condition, the doctor said quietly, "I can be there between 2:00 and 3:00." Between 2:00 and 3:00? So soon? "Let me check with my husband. He wants to be there, too." This was it. The final decision was made. In less than 4 hours, my precious Patches would be dead.

There was so much to do in the few remaining hours. I felt detached, as though observing someone else. It was as though I was watching a movie playing at high speed. It wasn't Patches, but some other dog. Patches would eat nothing but tortilla chips, so she was given all she wanted as her final meal. Feeling like a villain preparing to poison someone, I ground up three phenobarbital tablets and dissolved them in water. These were given to her orally at 1:30, gently, with much love and many tears. Because her legs were so sensitive to needles as a result of numerous catheters and blood tests, our vet suggested the tablets first, to make her sleepy. Then the fatal injection could be given without distress.

At 2 pm, the doctor arrived. A fighter to the end, Patches resisted the drug's effects. As I held her on my lap, my husband knelt beside us. We spoke reassuringly to her, choking back the tears. Finally, as the medication took effect, her breathing became even more laboured. The doctor was there in an instant, kneeling in front of us, large syringe of pink fluid in hand. As she gently extended Patches' hind leg and inserted the needle, the little dog stopped breathing. Peace at last . . . for her. For us, the torment was just beginning.

As she rested on my lap, head on my chest, her expression was one of great peace. No more did she ache from the cancer consuming her. No longer did she struggle to breathe. The decision was correct. After thirteen years and two months of devotion and love, she deserved the peace that only death could bring. Her fur was as soft as when she was a puppy and I buried my face in it. "She's only asleep, she's not really dead. She's going to open her eyes and look up at me any time." The reality of her death had not yet hit. Her friend and

companion of 12 years, Samantha, curled at my feet, as if waiting for Patches to get up. Or was she protecting her friend? Seeming to sense that something was amiss, Sam remained strangely quiet.

Patches was buried with her favourite sweatshirt, in a spot warmed by the sun. As she was laid to rest, it began to rain, as though the heavens, too, mourned her loss.

For days afterward, I went to the bedroom to check on her upon returning home. Old habits linger a long time. Waking up at night, I would raise from my pillow to look at her. Is she comfortable? Is she warm enough? "Bye, Patch. 'Bye, Sam." The familiar words, said countless times as I left the house, slipped out before I realised what I had said.

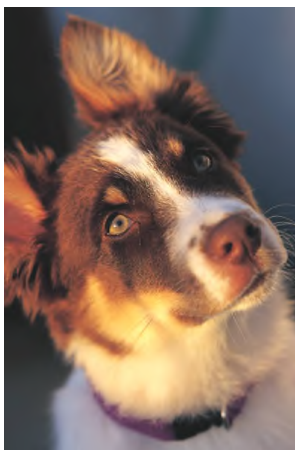
The ultimate act of love, the final act of kindness. So why did I feel so guilty? I wouldn't let her suffer. I did what was best for her. Did I wait too long? Not long enough? Is there something else I could have done?

Despite the assurances of our veterinarian and others that we did the right thing, that there was nothing more to do for her, the guilt continued to haunt me. Did I have her euthanised because I was tired, physically and emotionally? Did I make the decision when I did for the convenience, rather than for her sake? A subconscious anger churned with the guilt and the hurt. My readings had prepared me intellectually for these feelings, but that made them no easier to accept. I wanted no part of the other two dogs in the family. I realised later that I resented them for still being alive, as well as wanting to avoid the pain feeling close to them would ultimately bring.

Her body is gone now. All that remains are the photographs, the memories . . . and the love. Patches was special in so many ways. She was our first dog. It was as a result of adopting her that I began my long involvement in humane work. She taught me so many things. She was intelligent, fun and very patient through all her medical exams and treatments. She became a favourite of the staff of the clinic where she was a regular visitor the last few months of her life. She trusted us so much that she accepted with great dignity, whatever we did. Never an outgoing dog, her love of family was obvious in a quiet, unobtrusive way.

Much has been written about dealing with the grief and other emotions that accompany the death of a beloved animal. My feelings were not unique, and understanding them made them no less painful. Most important in getting through the difficult days following Patches' death was being able to share my feelings with others who understood. No one ever said, "She's only a dog. You can always get another one." My friend/veterinarian was a great help immediately following the euthanasia, just by being there to listen. Being able to take time off from the demands of work, taking a long drive alone, going for a hard run, sharing tears and memories with my husband and receiving the sympathy and support of family and co-workers all helped. It was also important to realise that mourning the death of a beloved family member, whether human or non-human, was natural. I was not embarrassed by my tears . . . I hurt, and the tears were a natural part of hurting.

Eventually we will take another unwanted dog into our home. No dog can ever replace Patches, but sharing with another dog the love she left us seems the only fitting way to honour her memory. Although Patches is gone, her spirit, her memory and her love will always remain with us. Sleep well, little one.



Matter of Life and Death

By Melinda Sacks

There was a death in our family last month. We've had the funeral and are beginning to recover, but I still miss seeing Christina's cage on the kitchen counter every morning.

Christina was our pet rat. If you've never had a pet rat you might think it somewhat repulsive. But actually, the little rodents are clean, smart and friendly. Hamsters bite. Guinea pigs are incredibly stupid. Rats, in my experience, make great pets.

We got Christina as a baby shower present for our 5-year-old daughter when our son was about to be born. The idea, said my co-workers who gave us the rat, was that our daughter would have a little friend of our own, a new responsibility that would make the transition to big sisterhood easier.

To tell the truth, I am the one who ended up cleaning the cage, giving the rat food and water and taking her out to hold her. I was the one who brought her into the kitchen when her room got too cold. But my whole family liked Christina a lot.

"Christina is getting old," I told my daughter. "She may not live a lot longer."

"Will she die today?" was the question every morning.

It wasn't long before our rat started wheezing and listing to the left. After all, she was 2 years old, the average life expectancy for pet rats.

I fed her some natural animal cookies, the only thing she would eat. Then I called the Humane Society for advice. It turns out that twice a week there is a euthanasia service for \$10. Volunteers even stay with the pet and stroke it. What a job! If someone is having a really difficult time coping with the loss of a pet they can join a pet loss support group offered by the Humane Society. Local psychologists will lead a group of grieving animal lovers through a discussion of how to cope and whether or not to get another pet.

"People don't realise how strong the pet-human bond is" says Stacy Hill of the Humane Society of Santa Clara Valley. "A lot of people don't understand how attached you get to your

animals. They say “oh, so your dog died. So what.”

The Humane Society has euthanised everything from rabbits and mice to Great Danes.

The end for our pet came the following Wednesday night. The rat was looking particularly ragged and thin. She appeared to be too sick to wait for the Humane Society hours, so I called the South Peninsula Emergency Animal Clinic, where we have become regular customers. Usually we are there for our dog’s \$250 bee sting or our cat’s \$160 fight wound.

Would they see a pet rat? Yes, they told me to bring her in for an examination. I packed Christina into a comfortable bed and sent my husband off with her to the clinic. This is the kind of task he is always assigned at our house.

Then I sat down to worry. Had I done the right thing? Who was I to decide when the rat should die? What if she would have lived with medical care? (When I was a kid, my family paid \$60 to have a tumour removed from our pet rat, Snoopy. Everyone thought we were crazy.)

It wasn’t long before my husband returned empty-handed. I think he even had tears in his eyes. “She was a nice pet.” he said.

The next day I faced the task of telling our daughter the bad news.

“You know Christina has been sick,” I began. “Last night Daddy had to take her to the doctor and she died.”

Silence. Then lots of sniffles. “Well,” said my 6-year old pragmatist, “at least I’ll have something good to share at school on Thursday.”

Some people say that raising pets and eventually coping with their death is a good way to teach children about life. These are the same people who say things like “This hurts me more than it hurts you,” and who tell you to eat all your vegetables.

I have put the rat’s cage in the garage. I’m planning to give it away. We are one family who will not be getting another small, short-lived pet. I don’t want to go through this every two years. Our next pet will be a tortoise, or maybe an elephant.



Pet Loss Grief Support Resources



* Argus Institute

<http://www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu/grief.htm>

Contains pages with grief resources , including resources for families with pets, a recommended reading list and artistic memorial resources.

*Tufts Veterinary School Pet Loss Support Hotline

<http://www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss>

Contains grief literature including articles such as *Top 10 Tips on Coping With Pet Loss*, *Explaining Pet Loss to Children*, and *Do Dogs Mourn*

*Petloss.com

www.petloss.com

Created by pet owners for pet lovers who are grieving over the death of a pet or an ill pet

*Pet-loss.net

www.pet-loss.net

A pet loss support webpage with articles such as *Emotions of Pet Loss*, *Defining Quality of Life*, *Pre-Loss Bereavement*, *Surviving Loss*, *Conquering Guilt*, *Creating a Memorial*, *Getting a New Pet*, and *Some Questions on Loss*

***In Memory of Pets**

www.in-memory-of-pets.com

A personal website that has become a non-profit organisation. It contains poems and pets' families' stories.

***Association For Pet Loss Bereavement**

www.aplb.org

A non-profit organisation webpage with topics on aftercare, children and pet loss and support facilities

***Petplace.com Pet Loss**

<http://www.petplace.com>

Search under "Pet Loss" or specific species eg "Dog Loss"

Internet Support Groups

***Petloss.com Chat**

<http://www.petloss.com/digichat.htm>

***Animal Love & Loss Network**

<http://alln.org/alln/chatroom.shtml>

Telephone counselling

Griefline Tel: (03) 9596 7799

Telephone counselling. A free service. Counsellors are happy to talk about pet loss as well as human loss.



Rainbow Bridge

Just this side of Heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.
When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone
here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge.
There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they
can run and play together.

There is plenty of food, water and sunshine and our friends are
warm and comfortable.

All the animals that had been ill and old are restored to health and
vigor; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong
again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times
gone by.

The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing:
they each miss someone very special, someone who was left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one
suddenly stops and looks into the distance.

His bright eyes are intent; his eager body begins to quiver.
Suddenly, he breaks from the group, flying over the green grass,
faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend
finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be
parted again.

The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the
beloved head, and you look once more into those trusting eyes, so
long gone from your life, but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross the Rainbow Bridge together...

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