

BEREAVEMENT - COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A PET.

Unfortunately our pets do not live as long as we do. In fact, compared with us they live relatively short lives and although we realize this, nevertheless when the time comes to say goodbye, all of us who value pets experience feelings and emotions that sometimes embarrass us, and often confuse us but which in fact follow a well recognized cycle.

The stages of mourning and grieving are universal. They are experienced by everyone to a greater or lesser extent following the loss of a loved one be it a person or a pet.

There are normally considered to be given stages of grieving but they do not necessarily follow on, one from another, nor can the length of each stage be accurately predicted in any individual case.

1. Shock

On first hearing the news of the death of a much-loved companion the reaction is one of shock. You cannot believe it and initially deny the reality of the situation. Obviously there must be an alternative explanation. In this initial situation place your trust in your veterinary surgeon's skill and honesty. Although veterinary professionals are dealing with these situations on a day-to-day basis it never gets any easier. Remember that shock followed by the stages of denial and isolation helps to carry us through the first wave of pain.

2. Anger

This commonly follows our initial shock reaction. The anger can be directed at yourself - you did not do enough, your veterinary surgeon you initially feel did not do enough or sometimes the anger is directed at the animal who is the subject of your grief. When the anger gets directed inwardly towards yourself, you are likely to feel the pain of guilt. Remember that these feelings are quite normal and are part of the grieving cycle. Do not be afraid of talking with your veterinary surgeon during this period. If you have any worries or doubts ask for explanations, it will do much to ease the pain. You feel helpless, frightened and alone and under these circumstances frank discussion at this stage will do much to help with the emotional loss of your animal.

3. Bargaining

In order to overcome your feelings of helplessness, it is not uncommon to try and strike real or imaginary deals in order to change the circumstances. "If only we had sought medical attention sooner", "if only we had asked for a second opinion", "perhaps we should have changed our pet's diet" etc. These again are all normal emotions under the circumstances but do not be afraid to discuss them.

4. Depression

This is a very common and often protracted part of the grieving process. Actually two types of depression are recognised with mourning. The first concerns the practical implications relating to the loss of the pet. Sadness and regret predominate. We worry that while caring for the animal we have just lost we have neglected our other commitments. The second type of depression is perhaps more subtle and is certainly more private. We feel isolated and unable to express our feelings. There is a general sense of confusion and an inability to concentrate on normally routine matters. A change in appetite and insomnia are also common signs.

5. Acceptance

This is the recovery stage. We can talk more freely about the loss of our pet and furthermore we realize that we are benefiting by communicating. You soon realise that you are assessing the situation more objectively and rationally. Unfortunately in the case of sudden or unexpected death, for example if our pet gets run over and killed we may never see beyond our anger or denial, however do remember that there are many people prepared to help in such circumstances, not least your veterinary surgeon.

Should I seek help?

From the foregoing it will be obvious that your mixed and confused feelings are really quite normal. Do not be ashamed of them. It is always important to talk when you have suffered a bereavement. It will help you come to terms with your feelings and accept your loss more quickly. If you feel particularly vulnerable or feel that you are having difficulty with the mourning cycle, do not be afraid to discuss this with your doctor or your veterinary surgeon, there is nothing abnormal about the reaction and it is amazing how helpful a little bit of counselling can be. Alternatively you may wish to send for some support literature. A selection is available from the Society for Companion Animal Studies, 10b Leny Road, Callander, FK17 8BA. Anyone who has suffered a pet bereavement and needs a friendly ear can ring the Pet Bereavement Service on 0891 615 285.
