

PET CHAPLAIN PET LOSS & GRIEF SUPPORT RESOURCES

Created for not-for-profit grief and loss support by:



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Pet Loss & Grief Support Resources

A Brief History of Animal Companionship

Human beings have long benefited from the companionship of non-human creatures. Humans have been known to befriend dogs, cats, fish, horses and other creatures, and vice versa. The story of the social bond among human beings and non-human creatures is a long and interesting tale.

Dogs, descendants of the gray wolf, were first domesticated around 14,000 years ago (Balter, 2006). This coincides with the earliest known ceremonial burial of a dog, which was recently discovered in Germany (Morey, 2006); however, some scientists claim that it is likely that domestication occurred much earlier than this date (Vilà, 1997). Moreover, “early dog fossils from burials indicate, dogs had a special, probably partly spiritual, relationship with humans from very early on,” (Morey, p.27).

The ancient Egyptians loved and revered cats. Modern domestic cats are descendants of *Felis silvestris*, which are believed to have been domesticated as early as 2040–1782 BCE. However, a depiction of a cat, with what experts believe to be a collar around its neck, is known from a much older Egyptian tomb painting dating 2500–2350 BCE (Boettger, 1958). Also, three hieroglyphs, representing seated cats, were found on an Egyptian building block, dating 2278–2184 BCE (Malek, 1993).

Fish are also reported to be capable of socially bonding with humans, and dolphins are known to come to the aid of swimmers in distress, saving them from drowning and guiding them to safety. The ancient historian, Herodotus (484-425 BCE) wrote about a wealthy man named Arion, who was renowned for his flute playing. The man set sail on a voyage to Italy and Sicily. During the voyage, sailors wanted to steal his money and threatened to throw him overboard. Fearing for his life, Arion asked the sailors to let him play one last time. They agreed because they loved to hear his music. Arion, dressed in his performer’s costume, stood on the deck and played. When he finished playing, he hurled himself into the sea. Shortly afterwards, a dolphin found him struggling and carried him to the shore of a nearby town where the locals erected a statue of Arion riding a dolphin to honor him and the fish who saved his life. (Herodotus, History, BK I, 5b-d.)

That old television program Mr. Ed, about a talking horse, is a classic old chestnut. Of course, horses do not speak in a human language; however, they have been proven to be highly skilled at picking up physical cues from humans, even subconscious cues, and correctly interpreting their meanings. An example of this is the “Clever Hans” phenomenon, so named for a horse (Kluge Hans) that could apparently perform mathematical calculations by tapping his hoof (Pfungst, 2000). It was discovered that the horse was responding to subtle cues from the people asking questions, for example, tensed muscles and slight changes in posture, from the people asking the questions. This, of course, is not a human language in the way we understand language, however, it is body language. From the view of social bonding, the point that Clever Hans was able to accurately “read” his owner’s body language indicates that horses are capable of a keen awareness of social cues and meanings.

A Season of Mourning

“To every thing there is a season...” Ecclesiastes 3: 1-4, KJV.

As the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, life has many “seasons,” including a time to mourn. Loss of something of value may initiate a process of grief or mourning. One may mourn the loss of a person, a pet, an item in the landscape, an idea, or even hope itself. This document discusses grief and mourning as one season of your life, one season among many. It offers helpful information and resources for individuals who have lost a pet.

In Ecclesiastes, the writer recognizes many seasons of life, which might include a time for doubt, questioning, weeping, anger, frustration, guilt, intense emotion, grief, and learning how to process loss. This is part of coming to terms with the loss of a pet, which you value greatly as a beloved friend and family member. Therefore, in this season of grief, we are here to provide you with a safe harbor, a place where it is OK to grieve while others sit patiently with you, listening without words or merely reflecting back the feelings you express. You will be offered gestures of sympathy, compassion, care, and perhaps a tissue. While we do not have all of the answers and are powerless to fix the problem, we are willing to pause for a season with you in your grief and offer you the gift of our thoughtful, attentive, non-judging presence. This is very important work, and hard and emotionally draining work; however, you have access to a supportive community.

This document includes resources (Appendix A) where you will find a selected bibliography, websites, and contacts to help you continue to learn about grief and develop a support network.

Important disclaimer: This document is intended as a resource guide for pet loss support, not for professional counseling. If for some reason you believe that you need medical assistance or counseling please contact a professional immediately. See Appendix A for a list of counseling services in your area. This list is provided as a public service only and should not be construed as a recommendation for any service providers.

Introduction to Grief

Grief is often thought of as a difficult topic to discuss, not because it is too mysterious, strange or complex to grasp. The difficulty of the discussion springs from the familiarity of memories it calls forth to us, memories of our own losses and our own tears. When the topic of grief is raised, either people get very quiet as if you just initiated a topic of taboo, or they quote something they have heard or read, such as Kubler-Ross’s “Stages of Grief.” So in this way, grief is either nervously waved away, as one might flag off a hungry cab driver looking for a fare, or logically and rationally explained as one might recite a set of formulas to calculate the area of a trapezoid.

However, grief is neither too mysterious for us nor too amenable to formulaic responses. Grief is not any one single thing, or set of things, but a complex of emotions linked to a healthy state of being in the world called mourning. This state of being or process, sometimes referred to as grief work, involves the tasks necessary to process loss.

Models of Grief

The following table lists three primary models of grief by Granger Westberg, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, and J. William Worden:

<u>Westberg (1962)</u>	<u>Kubler-Ross (1969)</u>	<u>Worden (1991)</u>
Shock and denial	Denial	Accept the reality of the loss.
Emotions erupt	Rage and anger	Work through the pain of the loss.
Anger	Bargaining	Adjust to environments in which the [loved one] is missing.
Illness	Depression or despair	Relocate and memorialize the life.
Panic	Acceptance	
Guilt		
Depression and loneliness		
Reentry difficulties		
Hope		
Affirming reality		

Types of Grief

Grief can generally be grouped and understood as falling into various types*:

Anticipatory	Anticipatory grief begins gradually, or springs from events prior to the actual physical loss occurring. An example of this type of event which may trigger anticipatory grief is a terminal illness, such as a lingering cancer.
Sudden	Sudden grief comes on without warning. The person has had no time to prepare for the full impact of their loss. Some examples of events that might trigger sudden grief are losses due to accident, sudden illness, or maltreatment or intentional killing of a companion animal.
Endless	Endless or perpetual grief springs from circumstances that seem to go on indefinitely with no seeming resolution or end. Examples of this kind of grief are chronic illnesses and disabilities or handicaps such as blindness, hearing loss, and dementia.

Near-miss	Near-miss grief is a sense of loss that lingers from having faced death or intense hardship and survived. This grief is characterized by post-traumatic stress. Examples of near-miss grief are psychological or physical abuse, misdiagnosis or miraculous cure of a fatal disease, and surviving a serious accident.
Pathological	Pathological grief is a condition of extreme physical and/or psychological distress, which is chronic and disabling, and results in the need for medical and/or psychiatric treatment.

*Types of Grief adapted with permission from Rev. Michael Watts, Smithfield, NC.

Common Expressions of Grief and Loss

The following section lists common expressions and quotes, which are often heard from people experiencing grief and loss, and suggested explanations of the meanings underlying these expressions. Learning and understanding these verbal expressions of grief can help one to recognize grief in oneself and others.

“This is not happening.”

“I remember watching the events of 9/11 on television and hearing a co-worker say aloud as we stood in awe and disbelief as one-after-another the buildings fell, ‘This is not happening.’” When you or someone you know makes a statement such as this, in the context of a tragic event or loss, it is possible that you or they are experiencing shock and denial. When someone experiences shock and denial, the person’s mind and/or body are rallying a defense to the tragic event or circumstance, which is an attempt to cushion themselves from the intensity of the experience. This can include extreme physical and/or psychological responses. Depending upon the individual, response can vary from vomiting or numbness, to a total denial of the event and its significance. There are no limits to how long shock and denial might last; it may go on for minutes, hours, or days.

“How could I have let this happen...I should have been there.”

This is a statement that can sometimes signal self-reproach or guilt, which is a form of anger directed inwardly. It springs essentially from an unwillingness or inability to accept feelings of powerlessness in the face of tragedy. It is another way that the human mind attempts to cushion the emotional and psychological blow of a tragic loss. In this case, the mind of a person searches and researches the circumstances surrounding the event to try to remember every detail, every word or action, and discover where the precise moment(s) that they or others might have made different choices and effected different outcomes.

“I can’t believe it...how could he/she/they do this?”

This is a statement of anger directed outwardly, sometimes toward medical personnel, family-members, God or a higher power, or even the pet itself. It often can spring from a feeling of being deserted or abandoned.

“No, I can’t right now...all I can do is cry.”

There is no time limit on grief. You are where you are, and that is OK. You will eventually learn to cope with the situation and gradually rebuild your life. Re-entry into life after a tragic loss takes time. However, it can be aided through connections with supportive family members, friends, co-workers, a support group, or professional counseling. Remember, a time of grief and loss is a time to go easy on yourself and heal at your own pace.

“I never thought I would ever stop crying.”

In the fullness of time, this season of mourning will give way to another season, a season of hope and acceptance. You will gradually feel that you can begin to put your life back together again. You will never forget the depth of your experience and feelings. You may even feel some guilt for feeling good and hopeful again, but that too will diminish as you grow stronger and more confident. What will remain are the fond memories of your loved one.

Why We Go Through Grief

Grief is related to our desire for some one or some thing. When someone we love dies, our love for them continues and we desire their physical presence. In spite of some of the psychological literature that seems to indicate that grief happens in stages, it does not. A person’s grief is a unique experience, as different as the individual experiencing it. While no formula can entirely capture or fully describe the experience, there are some things that can help.

Help for Grieving Persons

Typically, a support group setting is a place where the skills of active listening can encourage other participants to tell their story. Everyone can be an active listener.

Active Listening

Active listening is the keystone of successful support groups. It creates an essential atmosphere of openness and encourages participation such that others have a willingness to share and listen. All participants should learn and practice active listening. The key elements of active listening are:

- **FOLLOW** where the speaker leads: **F**ace the person, **O**pen your posture, **L**ean **L**ightly forward, **O**pen your eyes, **W**ait for them to speak.
- Paraphrase what you hear: Restate the speaker’s message with fewer words. Try to get more to the point. Focus on following and correctly restating the speaker’s verbal explorations.
- Clarify the meaning: Aim at identifying what is being said, bringing vague material into focus, getting more information and correcting your interpretations.
- Check your perceptions: Focus on verifying and correcting your interpretations and assumptions. Allow the speaker to evaluate or clarify his/her feelings and meanings. Aim at testing your understanding.
- Summarize what you have heard: Focus on organizing major themes and messages, putting key ideas and feelings into broad statements. **DO NOT** add new ideas or attempt to offer a solution.

- Express sympathy: Focus on the speaker's feelings to show that you have heard them.

Basic Advice for Grieving Persons

Sometimes the best advice is given by many of the twelve-step programs, "take it one day at a time." In addition to that advice, here are some helpful tips:

- Stay in relationship (or seek relationships): discuss feelings such as loneliness, guilt, anger, and sadness openly and honestly with people you trust: co-workers, friends, fellow students, instructors, family members, and professional personnel.
- Maintain your hope that this grief will pass and that you will feel good again.
- Talk to your priest or clergy member. Remember, however, that the loss of a companion animal is not always well understood. Seek clergy who will understand and acknowledge your feelings.
- Join a support group. For the loss of a companion animal, support groups can be located through local veterinarians, rescue organizations, shelters and veterinary hospitals. See Appendix A for more information.
- Eat well, get plenty of rest, and exercise regularly.
- Above all, be patient and kind with yourself.

Myths of Pet Loss

Well-meaning friends, and sometimes even professionals and clergy say things that sometimes seem thoughtless and unhelpful to grieving people. Although they want to help, sometimes they do not. The quotes below are commonly heard phrases, and mostly the unhelpful variety. What grieving people really need is someone to listen and acknowledge how terribly bad they feel. They need someone to acknowledge the life they shared with their special friend. Sometimes they need to get angry and yell, and they need to cry. The following statements should be avoided:

"It's just a pet." This is a common response to many people who grieve the loss of a pet. For someone grieving this loss, it is painful to hear. Many pet owners relate the experience of pet loss as being much more painful and difficult even than losing a parent. The reason may be that often our pets are closer to us, dependent on us, and child-like; therefore, the experience of losing a pet can feel to some like losing a child.

"You can get a new pet." Sometimes, well-meaning people will tell you to get a new pet believing that pets are interchangeable, much like cars and bicycles. They are not. Pets are a relationship. You cannot replace this relationship any more than you could replace a lost child. True, you may some day decide to get another pet, but it will never replace the lost relationship with this pet.

"Focus on the happy times." This comment is an attempt to draw a grieving person away from, and out of, thoughts of their loss, and focus them on happier things. Although it is well meaning, it ignores the fact that memories of the good times are not enough when you have lost someone you love. You don't want memories of them; you want them.

"You have other pets." Each pet is unique and irreplaceable. Even though someone has another pet, or many pets, it cannot lessen or erase the pain of losing this special pet.

“Think of all the wonderful years you had.” This does not acknowledge the feelings that they should have had many, many more years together. This life had only just begun. There were plans for much more life and expectation of a future together.

“Hang in there. You will feel better.” When all you want to do is cry and scream about how incredibly unfair this is, it’s impossible to imagine feeling good again.

“Let me know what I can do to help.” Saying this to someone who has just had this type of loss is much like saying it to a drowning person. They are struggling to find something, anything to grasp onto. If they could think of something, they probably have already tried it. What you can do is take time to listen, and then do it again.

“All things work together for the good to those who love God.” This is one Bible verse that is best avoided, especially for someone who has experienced a loss. If they love God and still had this happen, then maybe they did not love God enough (or so the logic goes). If they do not love God, at least not right now; or if they don’t believe in God, this can sound like an accusation.

“At least your pet is out of pain now.” Although this is a very common thing to say to someone who has had a major loss of this kind, it is one to avoid. This comment serves only to remind the person that their pet is gone, the last thing they want to think about.

“You will see your pet at the Rainbow Bridge.” This is not much consolation to a grieving person who wants their pet back now, when the death is not yet seen as hopeful expectation, but raw pain and injustice.

“Time heals all pain.” When every minute is an hour, every hour a day, and every day a week, how can this be much consolation, especially when the thought of facing one more second, much less the rest of one’s life without the loved one, is terrifying?

“That is too much money to spend on a pet.” In this day of advanced veterinary medicine with the same treatments now available to humans and animals, sometimes the only thing standing between someone and their pet’s health is money. For many pet owners, nothing is too high a price for a beloved pet, and you cannot put a price on love.

THANATOPSIS by William Cullen Bryant

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,

Old ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning—and the Barcan desert pierce,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,

And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,—
Comes a still voice—Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place
Shalt thou retire alone—nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings,
The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre.—The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun,—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round
all,

Save his own dashings—yet—the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.
So shalt thou rest—and what, if thou withdraw
Unheeded by the living, and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plod on, and each one as before will chase
His favourite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come,
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glide away, the sons of men,
The youth in life's green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron, and maid,
And the sweet babe, and the gray-headed man,—
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those, who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, that moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

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Appendix A

Websites

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement: <http://aplb.org/>

Delta Society <http://deltasociety.org/>

Grief and Loss Resource Center: <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/grief/grief.html>

Grief Healing <http://griefhealing.com/>

Pet Chaplain, Inc. <http://www.petchaplain.org/>

Pet Loss Support <http://pet-loss.net/>

Books for Adults

- Caring, Letting Go Without Guilt: A Compassionate but Straightforward Look at Pet Euthanasia by Dottie Steinbach, Willow Bend Publishing, 1997
- Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet by Moira Anderson, Second Edition, Peregrine Press, 1996
- Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet by Gary Kowalski, Stillpoint Publishing, 1997
- Pet Loss: A Thoughtful Guide for Adults and Children by Herbert A. Nieburg and A. Fishcher, Harper & Row, 1982

Books for Children

- Always and Forever by A. Durant, Doubleday, 2004
- Explaining Death to Children by Earl Grollman, Beacon Press, 1967
- The beautiful way to explain death to children by B. Mellonie, and R. Ingpen, Lifetimes, Michelle Anderson Publishing, 1983
- The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst, Atheneum, 1971
- The Fall of Freddie the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia, Henry Holt and Company, 1982
- When a Pet Dies by Fred Rogers (“Mr. Rogers”) Putnam and Grosset. 1998

Grief and Loss Resources in North Carolina

Support Groups

Asheville:
Christy Gunther, MA
382 Montford Ave., Asheville, NC
28801
Meets at Unitarian Universalist Church
of Asheville
One Edwin Place, Asheville, NC 28801
828.258.3229

Hillsborough:
Unicorn Bereavement Center
Triangle Hospice
919.644.6869

Raleigh:
Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to
Animals (SPCA)
SPCA-Curtis Dail Pet Adoption Center
200 Petfinder Lane
Raleigh, NC 27603
(919) 772-2326

Wake Forest:
Counseling for Pet Loss Issues Support
Group
Suzanne Brady, MSW, LCSW
919.801.0337

Counselors

Apex:
Lifescapes Counseling
Amy Benton Moulds, MEd, LPC
Jennifer Terry, MS, LPC
Karen Juntilla, MEd, LPC
Marshall Glover, MEd, LPC
Rhonda Sutton, PhD, LPC
919.303.0273

Asheboro:
Pet Bereavement Counseling
Judith Stutts, PhD
336.625.1400

Carrboro:
Bree Kalb, LCSW
919.932.3908

Cary:
Ruth Echols, MAEd, LPC
919.244.1885

Greensboro:
Peggy Haymes, Mdiv, MA
336.378.0801

Pinehurst:
Tina Markoff, LCSW
910.715.6013 or toll-free 866.861.7485

Raleigh:
Lynn Kurisko, MEd, LPC
919.810.7848
Andrea Shapiro, LCSW
919.781.2020
Robin Forgione, MEd, LPC
919.784.0508

Wake Forest:
Suzanne Brady, MSW, LCSW
919.801.0337

Winston-Salem:
Rev. Susannah Crolius
336.716.4745
Peggy Haymes, Mdiv, MA, LPC
Susan Lautemann, MAEd, LPC
336.750.0706

A Selected Bibliography on Grief

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