

Why Does Pet Loss Hurt So Much?

By Martha M. Tousley, RN, MS, CS. From No-Kill News, winter 2001

People I encounter in pet grief support groups are often shocked to discover how bad they feel when their pets die. Statements such as “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I didn’t feel this bad when my grandmother (acquaintance, friend, relative) died” are common. And so the question arises, why do so many of us feel the loss of a companion animal so intently and is it normal to feel this way?

There is no question that companion animals are becoming more valued in our society than they were just 20 or 30 years ago. Statistics indicate that more people in the United States today have pets than children, and most pet owners regard their pets as members of the family.

How we react to the death of any family member – human or animal – depends to a large extent on the part they’ve played in our daily lives, the significance of our relationships with them, and the strength of our attachments to them.

Although we bring animals into our homes for many different reasons, the reason people most often give is the companionship our pets provide. (Nowadays even the word pet, which implies ownership of one creature by another, is used less often in the professional literature than the term companion animal, which implies mutual friendship.)

In some ways the companionship of animals makes up for the traditional support systems our culture has lost along the way. In today’s modern, mobile society, more people are childless, single, divorced, widowed or never married. With both parents working outside the home, more children return to empty houses after school, and older folks live alone and farther away from their extended families than ever before. For those who are homebound, pets may be their only social contact.

With their constant presence, availability and devotion, pets are our best source of unconditional love, becoming for many of us the ideal child, parent, mate or friend. They listen without judgment or reproach, and never give advice. They accept us exactly as we are, regardless of how we look or feel or behave. They forgive us readily and never hold grudges against us. No matter how much change we must endure in our unpredictable lives, our pets are always there for us.

Animal companions weave themselves into the fabric of our daily lives. We live and relax in each other’s company. They are there when we awaken in the morning, rely on us to toilet, feed, water, exercise, groom and play with them, greet us joyfully when we come home to them and may even sleep with us in our beds at night. We touch them, stroke them, pet them, hug them, kiss them, tell them our troubles and share our deepest secrets with them. Beyond companionship, animals also serve many other functions in people’s lives, none of them trivial or without value. Medical researchers are learning that people with pets are healthier and happier. Touching, holding, caring for and playing with pets – even watching animals in their natural habitat – can actually lower a person’s blood pressure, decrease heart rate, alleviate stress and loneliness, and even encourage regular exercise. For shy or withdrawn people, pets act as conversation pieces in otherwise awkward social situations. Patients in rehabilitation units who are comatose or autistic have been found to respond to visiting animals even though humans haven’t been able to reach them. Companion animals lift the spirits of the sick and elderly as they visit them in hospitals and nursing homes, and willingly serve as eyes, ears or hands for the disabled.

Studies show that we’re likely to be even more highly attached to our pets if we’ve nursed them through a chronic illness or rescued them from certain death; if we associate them with important times in our lives or link them with significant others who are no longer with us; and if we’ve relied on them to support us or get us through a crisis.

How attached we become to our animals is as individual as we are, but the bonds that we have are valid, worthy of understanding, and serve to explain the intense pain we feel when those bonds are broken.

As you think about the role your animal played in your life and all the wonderful things your pet offered you, consider how you might answer questions like these:

- How did my pet come into my life?
 - How did my pet get his or her name?
 - What was special about my pet?
- What did we do for fun?
- What special moments/life events did we share/endure together?

When cherished companion animals are taken from us, we need to take some time to think about and remember how closely we were attached to one another. It is only when we identify how much our friends mean to us, and recognize how very much we've lost, that we begin to understand why pet loss hurts so much.