

Coping with the loss of a pet



When someone we love – such as a beloved pet – dies, the loss often causes grief and intense sorrow. By physically showing your grief, you actively mourn the death of your beloved pet. This active mourning will move you on a journey toward reconciling with the loss of your pet.

What Should I Do?

Your journey of grief will not take on a prescribed pattern or look like stages. During

the period when you are actively mourning your loss, it may help to consider the following:

Acknowledge the reality of the death

Acknowledging the full reality of your loss may take weeks or months, but will be done in a time that is right for you. Be kind to yourself as you prepare for the “new normal” of a life without your beloved pet. Just as it took time to build the relationship with your pet, it will take time to get used to him or her not being there.

Move toward the pain of the loss

Experiencing these emotional thoughts and feelings about the death of a pet is a difficult, but important, need. A healthier grief journey may come from taking your time to work through your feelings rather than trying to push them away or ignore it.

Continue your relationship through memories

Your memories allow your pets to live on in you. Embracing these memories, both happy and sad, can be a very slow and, at times, painful process that occurs in small steps. For example, take some time to look at past photos, write a tribute to your pet, or write your pet a letter recalling your time together.

Adjust your self-identity

Part of your self-identity might come from being a pet owner. Others may also think of you in relation to your pet. You may be “the guy who always walked the big black dog around the neighborhood” or “the friend whose cat always jumped on laps.” Adjusting to this change is a central need of mourning.

Search for meaning

When a pet dies, it’s natural to question the meaning and purpose of pets in your life. Coming to terms with these questions is another need you must meet during your grief journey. Know that it is the asking, not the finding of concrete answers, that is important.

Receive support from others

You need the love and support of others because you never “get over” grief. Talking or being with other pet owners who have experienced the death of a pet can be one important way to meet this need.



Michelle Santoro, ACO, ACI
Bernards Township Health Department
Basking Ridge, NJ 07920
P. 908.204.3070 F. 908.204.3075
www.bernardshealth.org

Contractual Health Agency for:
Bernards Township
Bernardsville Borough
Chester Borough
Long Hill Township
Mendham Borough
Peapack and Gladstone Borough

Coping with the loss of a pet

Things to Remember

The experience of loss is different for everyone and can present unique challenges.

The deafening silence - the silence in your home after the death of a pet may seem excruciatingly loud. While your animal companion occupies physical space in your life and your home, many times their presence is felt more with your senses. When that pet is no longer there, the lack of their presence – the silence - becomes piercing. It becomes the reality of the “presence of the absence.” Merely being aware of this stark reality will assist in preparing you for the flood of emotions.



The special bond with your pet—the relationship shared with your pet is a special and unique bond, a tie that some might find difficult to understand. There will be well-meaning friends and family members who will think that you should not mourn for your pet or who will tell you that you should not be grieving as hard as you are because “it’s just a cat” or “just a dog.” Your grief is normal and the relationship you shared with your special friend needs to be mourned.

Grief can’t be ranked—sometimes our heads get in the way of our heart’s desire to mourn by trying to justify the depth of our emotion. Some people will then want to “rank” their grief, pitting their grief emotions with others who may be “worse.” While this is normal, your grief is your grief and deserves the care and attention of anyone who is experiencing a loss.

Questions of spirituality—during this time in your grief journey, you may find yourself questioning your beliefs regarding pets and the after-life. Many people around you will also have their own opinions. It will be important during this time for you to find the answers right for you and your individual and personal beliefs.

Excerpted from: <https://www.avma.org/public/PetCare/Pages/pet-loss.aspx>



Michelle Santoro, ACO, ACI
Bernards Township Health Department
Basking Ridge, NJ 07920
P. 908.204.3070 F. 908.204.3075
www.bernardshealth.org

Contractual Health Agency for:
Bernards Township
Bernardsville Borough
Chester Borough
Long Hill Township
Mendham Borough
Peapack and Gladstone Borough