

# DEATH OF A FAMILY PET

We grieve over the death of a pet. This reaction is only natural. Our feelings toward pets are so special that experts have a term for the relationship: **THE HUMAN-COMPANION ANIMAL BOND**. When this bond is severed, the sense of loss can be overwhelming.

Society does not offer a grieving pet owner a great deal of sympathy. Even a close friend may comment, "It's only a dog (cat). You can always get another one." Such a reaction would be heartless given the loss of a human friend or family member, and it is generally recognized that a person who has experienced such a loss needs the support of friends and relatives. Psychologists now acknowledge that we need as much support but get far less with the loss of a companion animal.

Veterinarians realize their final obligation to their pet patients also involves dealing with the pet owner's grief. This does not mean that veterinarians are trained as psychologists and psychiatrists. It does mean that the veterinarian who knows the owner and pet also understands the natural feelings of loss and is able to offer support.

## **HOW WE FEEL:**

When a pet dies, there is no social ritual to formalize the grief. To many, a funeral for the family pet would seem eccentric and a formal period of mourning bizarre. Even the immediate family and intimate friends may not fully understand the loss.

Still, the loss of a pet affects our emotions, and the entire more so if the pet was an integral part of the family. These feelings usually progress through several stages. Recognizing these stages can help us cope with the grief we feel.

### **The First Stage: (DENIAL)**

Denial is the initial response of many pet owners when confronted with a pet's terminal condition or sudden death. This rejection seems to be the mind's buffer against a sharp emotional blow.

### **The Second Stage: (BARGAINING)**

This stage is well documented in the human grieving process. Many times, faced with impending death, an individual may "bargain" offering some sacrifice if the loved one is spared. People losing a pet are less likely to bargain. Still, the hope that a pet might recover can foster reactions like, "If Rover recovers, and I'll never skip his regular walk never put him in a kennel when I go on vacation, never..."

### **The Third Stage: (ANGER)**

Recognizing anger in the grief process is seldom a problem; dealing with anger is. Anger can be obviously, as in hostility or aggression. On the other hand, anger often turns inward, emerging as guilt.

Many veterinarians have heard the classic anger response, "What happened? I thought you had everything under control and now you killed my dog!" Another standard, "You never really cared about Rover. He was just another fee to you, and I'm the one who has lost my pet!" Such outbursts help relieve immediate frustrations, though often at the expense of someone else.

More commonly, pet owners dwell on the past. The number of "If only..." Regrets are endless: "If only I hadn't left the dog at my sister's house"..." If only I had taken Kitty to the veterinarian a week ago."



Whether true or false, such recriminations and fears do little to relieve anger and are not constructive. **EMOTIONAL SUPPORT** is especially important here.

**The Fourth Stage: (GRIEF)**

This is the stage of true sadness. The pet is gone, along with the guilt and anger, and only emptiness remains. It is now that the support of family and friends is most important—and, sadly, most difficult to find.

A lack of support prolongs the grief stage. Therefore the pet owner may want to seek some professional help. It is normal, and should be acceptable, to display grief when a companion animal dies. It is helpful, too, to recognize that other pet owners have experienced similar strong feelings, and that you are not alone in this feeling of grief.

**The FINAL Stage: (RESOLUTION)**

All things come to an end even grieving. As time passes, the distress dissolves as the pet owner remembers the good times, not the pet's passing. And, more often than not, the answer lies in a new pet, a new companion animal to fulfill the need for a pet in the household.

