

Handout: Coping with grief

Grief, whether from losing a beloved pet or a person, is a natural and necessary process which everyone faces at different times during life, and it is certainly not something to simply ‘get over’. It’s the journey we take from the point of separation from those we love to a place of settlement in our heart and mind, where we can begin gently to adapt to the new situation in which we find ourselves.

Clearly losing your beloved pet is likely to leave a huge gap in your life which may make you feel incredibly sad and perhaps lonely. To help you understand what is happening and why you feel like you do, the following guidance, which uses the **four seasons** as a way of understanding the process of grief, is offered. However, grief is personal to each person and you will need to find your own unique way through it, so just take the parts that are useful to you. For example, not everyone experiences a sense of shock immediately after a loss, as described below; in fact there can be a fleeting sense of relief from the anxiety and stress which went with caring for a terminally ill or elderly companion animal. But whatever you feel, coping with the many emotions and feelings which surround a pet’s passing can be exhausting and now it is time to concentrate on your own well-being.

Feeling shocked can be likened to finding yourself suddenly in the middle of a cold and hard **winter** where everything is frozen and unyielding. You may feel numb and detached from the reality or think to yourself that ‘this can’t be happening’. Meanwhile, your everyday routine, which of course included caring for your pet, is turned upside down. For a while, this can be disorientating, making it difficult to think clearly. Try to give yourself time and space to allow what has happened to sink in, because although your head understands that your pet has died, your heart and your feelings will need time to adjust. Sometimes grief can make you feel vulnerable and extra sensitive to things; if you feel this way, have a think about how you can protect yourself until you feel easier. For instance, perhaps you need to plan how to handle returning to your work situation and, depending on whether colleagues would understand and be sympathetic to your loss, decide if you want to tell them what has happened or if you prefer to keep things to yourself.

Practical tips:

- Some health conditions can be affected by shock and emotional upset so it might be necessary to seek advice from your healthcare professionals.
- Shock can disturb your normal sleeping and eating patterns. If this is the case, avoid stimulants like coffee and alcohol in the evenings and perhaps try some natural sleep remedies. Spend a little time breathing slowly and deeply to help you to relax.
- If you do not feel like eating much, ensure you have at least one healthy meal a day and avoid filling up on just snacks which have little nutritious value, such as crisps and biscuits.

As you begin to take on board the reality you may find you are overwhelmed by the depth of emotions you experience. This is a bit like when early **spring** appears after a long, hard winter, bringing lashings of torrential rain, melting all the ice and snow into the already overflowing rivers. It is important to give yourself the time and space to work through the many emotions – to allow yourself to *feel what you feel*. Try not to censure your feelings but release them as they arise. It takes courage to face the pain and the deep anguish – the emotions can be overwhelming, but know that these feelings *will* pass.

Practical tips:

- Rather than try to cope on your own, it can help to talk things through with someone you know will understand, such as a friend or family member or you may wish to contact an organization that offers pet bereavement support.
- Make sure you have regular hot or cold drinks, including lots of water, so that you do not get dehydrated, which would make you feel physically unwell. (It is advisable to avoid too much alcohol, because it is dehydrating).
- Be especially vigilant about taking any regular medications you are on, as it's easy to forget when you are upset.

When the turbulence passes, it's like the promise of **summer** edging out the chilly wet and windy weather, heralding better days ahead. Embrace the moments when you feel more peaceful and allow yourself to be uplifted by the small things in life, such as a warm smile from a passing stranger, or a friend calling to ask how you are. Try to spend time in nature – slow down inside and watch the birds in the sky, follow the clouds and listen to the sounds of the wind in the trees or the babble of the river. As you gently begin to adjust to life without your pet, when you are ready take tentative steps to re-engage in some of your usual activities.

Grief is often a case of 'three steps forward and two back'. Even during a warm summer there are rainy days. It's the same with grief. Just as you think that you are doing well, something can happen which triggers the pain of your loss, making you feel as if you are suddenly right back at square one again, but you are not – it is a temporary setback which will pass.

As seen in the **autumn** leaves on the trees, which gradually change their colours and state before being released back down to the earth, there is a gentle and gradual release from the pain and distress of recent times. When you feel ready, allow the happier memories to surface, remembering your pet's little quirks and facets of character that made them so unique.

Remember that you grieve because you cared. However difficult it seems at times, know that as you progress gently but surely through the seasons of grief, there comes a quiet healing – difficult to see at first but it is there. Naturally you may always miss the one you have loved and lost, but in your heart and mind you can cherish the special times you shared and the precious memories. These are timeless and stay with you forever – perhaps as little imprints on your heart.