

Exercise: Coping with guilt in companion animal bereavement

People often find they feel guilty after losing a beloved companion animal. Caring for a pet is a big responsibility and it is easy to put a lot of pressure on yourself to try to make everything perfect for them during their life and especially so when it is time to say goodbye. Because the passing of a loved one is so often fraught with uncertainties, it is not surprising that it leaves unanswered questions. Guilt can cause your mind to keep going over what happened – worrying whether you could or should have done things differently. It is important to try to find some perspective and this exercise is offered to help you to find a more balanced view.

Firstly, try to identify what is worrying you and causing you to feel guilty. It often helps to talk things through with someone who you trust to offer an unbiased and honest reflection. Make a note of any issues which you cannot get past. Once you have done that, have a think about whether there is anyone who could explain or reassure you about these points. For example, there could be something you want to ask your vet because it is worrying you or you did not understand why something happened. Or you may want to discuss things with a pet bereavement counsellor. Either way, make a note alongside the particular issue so that you can follow up on it later if you decide that it would be helpful to do so.

For the next part of the exercise:

- Take a piece of paper and draw a circle in the centre with your pet's name in it.
- Draw lines out of that central circle to several new circles to create a mind-map.
- Reflect back on your pet's life and think of the many things you did to care for your pet and to make them happy. For example, 'Took him to the beach to play ball each weekend', or 'Bought her a new comfortable bed as she got older', or 'Made sure he wasn't lonely', or 'Helped her overcome her fears', etc.
- It may take a while to get into it, but once you get going there will probably be many circles to fill in. Enjoy the process and be as creative as you want, perhaps using coloured pens or drawing little pictures to illustrate some of the points.

When you have finished, step back from it for a while and have a break. You can add more later on if you want. When you go back to your mind-map, take some time to absorb the overall picture which depicts the many ways you helped to make your companion animal's life as safe, comfortable and happy as possible. It can be refreshing to focus on the positive aspects of your pet's life and to realize how much you contributed and the difference you made.

Each time you find yourself being drawn back into the negativity of guilt, take a few moments to look at your mind-map to remind yourself of all that you did to love and care for your pet.

Grief is a difficult but necessary journey and feeling guilty is one of the uphill struggles you may encounter. When you can, allow yourself to feel uplifted and comforted by the precious memories of the time you shared with your pet, because these will bring comfort and strength to see you through the twists and turns of your grief.