

## **Handout: Caring for a grieving pet**

Bereavement, whether from losing a person or a companion animal, is a difficult and painful time which can affect animals and birds as well as people. This handout is to help you care for a pet who may be mourning.

Generally it is considered helpful to allow a surviving pet to see and sniff the body of the pet that has died, if that is possible in the circumstances. But you may wish to double check this with your vet if you are not sure whether it will help or not. For example, it might be counterproductive when an animal has got used to not seeing their companion

because he or she had been at the vet surgery for some time or has undergone extensive medical or surgical treatment which could have caused an unfamiliar scent.

A pet that is mourning or missing a companion might appear:

- Less interested in their food.
- Withdrawn and disinterested in what is going on around them – less enthusiastic about what they would normally enjoy.
- More anxious and reactive to things than usual.
- More vocal – a dog barking at any little noise which normally would be ignored.
- Unsettled during the night-time when they normally sleep easily.
- Unusually anxious when left alone for short periods.
- Pacing around and looking for their companion.
- Over-grooming, perhaps causing mutilation, such as feather plucking or licking paws until they are sore.
- Either seeking attention or avoiding human contact.
- Soiling in the house.
- Unusually aggressive to other animals or people.
- Unusually destructive.

If such changes in behaviour are noticed it is important not to escalate the animal's reactivity and stress levels by admonishment or any form of punishment. **Please note that if an animal has become unpredictable in behaviour, children and vulnerable people should be kept safe and all interaction needs to be supervised by a responsible adult.** The loss of one animal in a multi-pet household can also trigger some squabbling between the remaining pets as a new hierarchy is established. Be aware that animals and birds can be affected by human emotions: the natural upset following bereavement can also have an impact on your family pet, so it helps to keep things as stable as possible within the home.

While it is sensible to allow some time for the surviving pet to adjust to the loss, if you are at all concerned about their health or behaviour, or if it seems prolonged (more than a few days) or severe, you need to consult your vet. This is because they may have developed an underlying medical problem which has occurred coincidentally or possibly been triggered by the recent upset. This is particularly important if you are caring for an equine who has just lost a bonded companion, so keep a very close eye on whether they are eating normally and report any concerns to your vet without delay.

#### **Tips on supporting a bereaved pet:**

- Keep your pet to its routine as far as is possible, as this helps to stabilize things, although some slight adjustments might help to perk them up, such as walking a dog on a different route or giving a cat a new toy.
- If they are not interested in their food, try offering them something more appetizing that is easily digestible.
- Although a little extra care and attention may help, and it is a good opportunity to enrich their environment, it is best to avoid over-fussing a distressed animal.
- If they have soiled in the house, do not react but just make sure that they have plenty of opportunity to toilet outside on a regular basis and praise them accordingly.
- Continue to keep an eye on your pet and be aware that they may not respond normally to commands, so you might need to keep a dog on a leash when out walking, or keep a cat in overnight for a while to prevent them from searching for their lost companion.

- If they seem destructive, ensure that they have safe toys to chew and remove anything that you do not want damaged or which could be hazardous to the pet.
- If they are being more vocal than usual, keep your voice calm and try to avoid shouting.

Obviously, this is not an easy time for either people or animals. But by understanding what is happening to your pet and seeking veterinary advice when needed, you will be able to help them to adjust.