

Grief and Mourning the Loss of a Pet

Many of us are familiar with the “five stages of grief,” the model introduced by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 book, **On Death and Dying**.

It describes, in five discrete stages, how people deal with grief and tragedy, which for many of us includes the loss of a beloved pet.



The five stages are:

Denial ~ Anger ~ Bargaining ~ Depression ~ Acceptance

These stages resulted from Kubler-Ross’s research with dying people, not the stages of grief over loss. Although we all go through similar stages with all change or trauma in our lives, it is important to understand that these stages aren’t linear or sequential.

Myths about the five stages of grief:

*We go through stages in order or sequence.
It is necessary to do so in order to heal.*

The Five Stages Defined

Understanding the five stages of grief can help you understand what you or family members are experiencing upon loss of a pet.

- 1 Denial**
Denial is an immediate and generally fleeting reaction characterized by disbelief and numbness. You “know” your pet has died, but your heart is not quite ready to accept that reality. Denial may be felt particularly in the event of a sudden, traumatic, or unexpected death.
- 2 Anger**
The feeling that someone or something is to blame for a pet’s death is a common response to loss. Anger can mask other feelings, such as guilt, fear, helplessness, or despair. Ask your veterinarian questions and let him or her help you understand what occurred that caused your pet’s death. Your veterinary team will understand your need to grieve and will not take your anger personally.



The Five Stages Defined

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You may want to honor the bond you shared with your pet by:

- ◆ Creating a scrapbook or picture collage
- ◆ Donating time, money, or resources to an important cause
- ◆ Holding a memorial service
- ◆ Writing a letter to (or from) your pet, writing poetry

3 Bargaining & Guilt

This phase of grief often happens while discussing treatment plans or options as a pet is very ill or close to death. You may try to “bargain” to feel you have some control over an outcome you dread. The finality of loss and death is difficult to accept when it means the loss of a loved one. You may attempt to somehow “rewrite the script” by promising interventions or contributions we’ll make if only we can change the outcome, such as *“If Max lives, I’ll exercise her every day and quit feeding her from the table.”*

Guilt may be the most common grief response to a pet’s death. You may even feel as though you have “murdered” your pet, or took the easy way out, or made the decision too quickly. Guardians of pets who die of old age or illness will question why they didn’t respond sooner, or feel badly because their pet died alone. Accidental or premature deaths may make you feel guilty (“If only I hadn’t opened the door,” or, “If only I’d been more careful.”)

To deal with guilt, try to remember how much you gave your pet and got in return. Think about what your pet would say about your life together. Remember that cancer, the car, old age, etc. caused your pet’s death, not a lack of love and devotion from you.

4 Depression

Depression is another common grief response. Signs of depression include feeling quiet, sad, or lethargic. Sleep disruptions and changes in eating habits are other frequent signs. When stuck in depression, it is difficult for people to imagine ever moving past it. You may be surprised at the intensity and duration of your emotions, but be assured that depression is not a sign of weakness. One of the best counters to a depressed state is taking some sort of action.

If you are still feeling too sad to do any of these activities, give yourself permission to take more time to heal. Your pet was, after all, a huge part of your world and it takes time—sometimes more time than we can anticipate—to feel better.

5 Acceptance

As time goes by, you will likely find that the signs of grief are fading. The pain of loss is not as profound and begins to lift.

If your feelings of depression last for more than a few weeks after the loss of your pet or are impacting your overall quality of life, it is time to contact your physician.