

GRIEVING A PET

Our pets live relatively short lives. For many of us who love our pets, their death can affect some of us even more than the death of a relative or friend. The death of a pet leaves few people totally untouched.

A pet may come to symbolize many things to each of us. It may represent a child, perhaps a child yet to be conceived or the innocent child in us all. It may reflect the ideal mate or parent, ever faithful, patient and welcoming, loving us unconditionally. It is a playmate and a sibling. It is a reflection of ourselves, embodying negative and positive qualities we recognize or lack in ourselves. The same pet may be all of these, alternating between roles on any given day or for each member of the family.

When a pet dies, we expect that our pain will be acknowledged, even if it is not shared, by our relatives, friends and colleagues. Though the bond between you and your pet is as valuable as any of your human relationships, the importance of its loss may not be appreciated by other people. The process of grieving for a pet is no different than mourning the death of a human being. The difference lies in the

value that is placed on your pet by your family and by society as a whole.

Your grief may be compounded by lack of response from a friend or family member. Realize that you do not need anyone else's approval to mourn the loss of your pet, nor must you justify your feelings to anyone. Do not fault anyone who cannot appreciate the depth of your grief for a pet. The joy found in the companionship of a pet is a blessing not given to everyone.

Seek validation for your pain from people who will understand you. Speak with your veterinarian, a veterinary technician, groomer or another pet owner. Ask for a referral to pet grief support groups or veterinary bereavement counselors in your area. The death of a pet can revive painful memories and unresolved conflicts from the past that amplify your current emotional upheaval. Seek comfort in the support of professional counselors or clergy.

This is an opportunity for emotional growth. Your life was and will continue to be brighter because of the time that you shared with your pet. This is the best testament to the value of your pet's existence.