

PET LOSS AND HUMAN EMOTION

I sign in at the vet's office. "REASON FOR VISIT:" I write down "abscess tooth." What else could a lump under his jaw be? Turned out to be lymph-node cancer in my little Yorkie, and his days were numbered now to a few months. I was pregnant at the time, and was not happy to have one life leaving while another was coming. I wanted them both.

Pet loss can be grief on many different levels. Here are some ideas to consider:

1. **WHAT ROLE** did the pet have in the person's life? Companion, protector, confidant? What was the level of emotional dependence? Like people, the impact of the loss will depend on the nature and quality of the relationship.
2. **RESPECT THE FEELINGS:** It is important to acknowledge that the grief over a pet is "real." No one should judge the validity of someone else's feelings.
3. **UNFINISHED BUSINESS:** Any loss has the potential to trigger grief from previous loss, often at an unconscious level. Could the grief over a pet actually be "displaced grief"? If a person has had many losses in recent times, could grief over the pet also be "cumulative grief"?
4. **INCLUDE THE CHILDREN** in the rituals of pet loss. We learn early in life how to respond to grief, and this knowledge helps or hinders us in coping with later losses of people.
5. **TAKE TIME** before deciding to get a new pet. "Replacement therapy," while attractive, may actually block the grieving process, and prevent bonding to the new pet.
6. **WHAT HELPS:**
 - Send a sympathy card or note;
 - Plant a special tree or perennial for the pet;
 - Keep a journal of feelings;
 - Make a "memory album" of pictures and anecdotes;
 - Have a special drawing made of the pet, or photo framed;
 - Talk about the experience;
 - Write a poem or prayer for the pet;
 - Make a donation to an animal charity.

When the time came, I took my dog to the vet to be euthanized. I held him in my arms while the vet administered the lethal injection. An involuntary tremor went through my body as the life passed out of my little friend. Through tears I thought, "To die painlessly and peacefully in the arms of someone you love. Would that we could all go that way."

Adapted from an article by Sandy McCauley, *Haven Herald*, March 1995