

Do Companion Animals Grieve?

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Families that live together form close attachments. When a companion animal dies, surviving pets may “cling” to their human family members, be more reactive to stimuli, appear anxious or depressed, or demonstrate a loss of interest in playing, sleeping, or eating. These behavioral and emotional changes may be a temporary response to the loss, a distress response to the owners’ sadness, a distress response to changes in routine that occur as the result of the death, or an underlying medical condition.*

If you have concerns about your surviving animal’s behavior, you may consider scheduling a consultation with our Behavior Clinic at vet.osu.edu/vmc/behavior.

Look for Changes in the Social Structure

Watch for changes in the relationships between surviving companion animals; particularly if the surviving pet often looked to the other pet for direction. Such reactions may be more common in species or individuals that show more elaborate social interactions.

It can be stressful whenever members are added or lost from groups of social animals. Remaining animals may begin to show signs of separation anxiety. These behaviors include panting, pacing, whining, drooling, howling, barking, and not eating treats while alone. When your pet is alone, video can be utilized to help monitor and record stress levels.

Exercise is the best non-drug stress reliever you have available for your pet. It can also be a helpful tool in managing your grief response. Prior to beginning a new exercise program with your pet, consult with your pet’s veterinarian and your own family doctor.

There are now pheromones available, in sprays and atomizers, and collars, which may be effective tools for reducing your pet’s anxiety. DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) is a replication of the pheromone that a mother dog releases while nursing her young. For cats, Feliway is a replication of the calming cheek marking pheromone. Many veterinarians, pet stores, and pet supply catalogues have these products available.

For the most part, allow the companion animals to work out their own relationships. Punishment should be avoided as it increases levels of anxiety, fear, and aggression. Instead, try rewarding positive behaviors and interrupting undesired behaviors with obedience commands or redirection to a new activity.

Common underlying medical conditions can contribute to behavioral changes. A thorough medical examination may be needed to rule out these conditions. If you have any questions or concerns regarding changes in a surviving companion animal’s behavior, consult with your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist, or a certified applied animal behaviorist.

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Written by Brandt, J., Shreyer, T., Day, S., and Feltes, E. (2005) and adapted from *The Human Animal Bond and Grief* by Lagoni, Butler, and Hetts

*Important Health Alert

If a cat stops eating, this can be a medical emergency. Please contact your veterinarian as soon as possible.

If a dog stops eating, alert your veterinarian.

The Ohio State University
Veterinary Medical Center

601 Vernon L. Tharp Street
Columbus, OH 43210-1089

vet.osu.edu/vmc

Hospital for Companion Animals:
614-292-3551



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Adopting Again

In any family, new members join by birth, adoption, friendship, or partnership, but not always by design or plan. The time to consider adopting a new companion animal is when the entire family has had sufficient time to deal with the emotions of grief. Adopting too soon can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment toward the new family member who cannot take the place of the companion animal who has died.

Some families may decide not to adopt a new companion animal into their lives because of the emotional, physical, or financial demands involved with companion animal care. Others may feel the time is right to share their home and heart with another pet. For families who want to consider adoption, it will be important to remember that each companion animal has a special and unique personality. Take time to discuss different sizes, breeds, or colors before making a final decision. Consider the needs and temperament of any surviving companion animals. When adopting a new pet, remind yourself that getting another pet is not an act of disloyalty. After all, your companion animal was happy when you were happy.

Assistance with identifying the best match for your family (pre-selection counseling) is available through most small animal practitioners, veterinary behaviorists, and certified applied animal behaviorists.

To read more about introducing new pets, please visit indoorpet.osu.edu.

The Honoring the Bond program at The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

The mission of Honoring the Bond is to recognize and honor the human-animal bond by providing support to companion animal owners. Honoring the Bond services are available, at no cost, to clients of the Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center.

Our social workers can assist in the following ways:

- Act as a liaison between the companion animal owner and veterinary medical team
- Provide crisis intervention during difficult situations
- Assist in processing difficult decisions (quality of life assessments, treatment decisions)
- Be present before, during, and/or after euthanasia
- Facilitate family discussions with children
- Provide assessment and referral for further follow-up counseling, if needed
- Provide resources, including reading lists, websites, counselor and pet loss support group referrals, cremation/burial resources, memorial ideas, etc.

If you would like to speak with someone from the Honoring the Bond program, you may:

- Ask your clinician, student, or client services representative to contact us
- Contact us directly at (614) 247-8607
- Access our website at: vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond

