

*Grieving Your*  
**ANIMAL  
COMPANION**

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This booklet provides you with practical strategies for healing after the loss of an animal companion and answers some of the most common questions about grief. I hope it helps you as you mourn the death of your pet.

*Sincerely,*  
Jason Troyer PhD



## **Why Is My Reaction So Strong?**

You may be surprised by the intensity of your grief after the death of your pet. But we can sometimes forget how deeply we have bonded with our animal companions. Our relationships are built on daily, physical contact and a deep emotional connection.

Over the course of your pet's life, you may have gone through big changes such as job transitions, retirement, having children, new relationships, or starting over in life in some way. Through all of this your animal companion was by your side and continually showered you with unconditional love and acceptance. Your pet was always ready to listen and never judged you. The truth is that many of us are closer to our pets than we are to many family members. Your friends and family who have never had this connection with an animal companion may not understand your reaction. But other animal lovers will know that your grief is fully justified.



## Most Grief Reactions are Normal

Most reactions to the death of a pet are normal. For example, it is not unusual to find yourself looking for your dog or even calling out to him before remembering that your dog has died. It makes perfect sense to feel pangs of grief when you see your cat's favorite spot is empty. Seeing other people with their animal companions may be a painful reminder of what has been lost. You may be unable to stop crying. These are normal reactions to the death of your pet – don't let anyone tell you differently. Of course, just because they are normal reactions doesn't mean they won't be painful.

## What About the Stages of Grief?

The most widely known theory of grief is Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's Stages of Grief. Her stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, have been frequently depicted in television shows and movies. A common assumption is that Kubler-Ross's stages are the 'right' way to respond to death – but this is a false assumption. Grief reactions are very individualized – they do not follow only one pattern. Just as your relationship with your animal companion was one-of-a-kind, so too will be your grief process.



## Grief Reactions after Euthanasia

You may experience a variety of reactions related to the difficult decision to euthanize your pet (i.e., ‘put to sleep’). You may feel guilt at having to make this decision even if your pet was in terrible pain or was incurably ill. You may be second-guessing yourself about the timing of your decision. But you may also feel relief after the death of your pet – especially if your companion needed extensive medical care near the end of life.

There are no magic words that will remove your conflicted feelings after choosing euthanasia. But I will bet your decision was made in partnership with your veterinarian and that it was a decision you didn’t take lightly. If you decided to euthanize your pet, then you valued your pet’s needs over your own desire to keep them with you. I believe that all pets want their human companions to feel at peace over the decision to euthanize. Imagine your pet could respond to you right now – I’m sure they would say, “It’s ok. It was the right decision.”



## How Long Should My Grief Last?

Unfortunately, many people expect grief to be something that we ‘get over’ in a matter of days or weeks. This expectation to rush through grief is even more pronounced when an animal companion dies because many people cannot appreciate the special bond between humans and animals. Most people find that their grief will slowly lessen over the first several months. Your grief may last a year or more, and you may feel that a part of you is always grieving your companion.

## Honoring & Remembering Your Pet

Grief experts used to think it was important to eventually ‘let go’ of the deceased. Therefore, the assumed goal of grief was to forget the deceased. We now know that this is not a healthy and adaptive way to grieve. Instead, it is healthy to maintain some connections with the deceased (humans and animals). It can be healthy and normal to have ‘continuing bonds’ with our animal companions after they die. Here are some ways you can continue to honor and remember your animal companion.

### *Do Something Meaningful with your Pet’s Ashes*

- ❖ Inter your pet at a local pet cemetery
- ❖ Spread your pet’s ashes at a meaningful location such as a favorite walking or playing area
- ❖ Keep your pet’s ashes in a meaningful urn or other container
- ❖ Incorporate a portion of their ashes into jewelry or other keepsakes



## *Create Visual Reminders of your Pet*

Creating a photo album, scrapbook, memory book, video montage, or other ways to remember your pet can be a helpful way to honor your companion.

## *Volunteer for and/or contribute to an animal organization whose mission you support*

Many grieving people find it helpful to do something active as part of their grief response. They feel the need to ‘do something.’ Volunteering for a local organization or providing financial support can be a wonderful way to honor your pet.

## *Keep a special reminder with you*

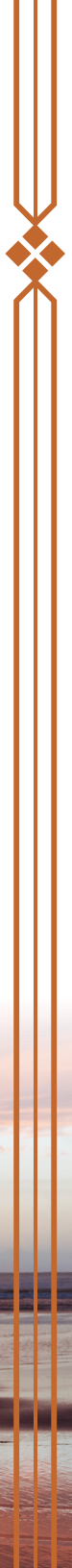
Carry a reminder of your pet like a significant piece of jewelry, a figurine that looks like your pet, your pet’s tags, or something else of significance – as a way to continue to feel close to your pet.

There are many different ways to honor and remember your pet. It doesn’t matter if other people don’t understand why a specific item, action, or ritual is significant for you. As long as your way of honoring your dog doesn’t hurt you or others and doesn’t cut you off from other important relationships, then you should choose ways to remember your dog that are meaningful to you.



## Final Thoughts

Grieving the death of an animal companion is a normal and healthy reaction. Our pets are such an important part of our daily lives. They love us, accept us, and want to be with us. So when people tell me that we should not grieve the death of our animal companions, I feel sorry for them because I know they have never been blessed with a close relationship with an animal. As difficult as it is to lose a pet, we can feel blessed to have shared our lives with our animal companion.



## Need More Help?

Visit [www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com) for helpful videos and articles to help you heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. These resources cover topics such as:

- ❖ Helping children as they grieve
- ❖ Healing after the loss of a spouse, parent, child, and other loved ones
- ❖ Dealing with traumatic losses due to suicide, overdose, and accidents
- ❖ Recognizing signs that you may need professional help
- ❖ A step-by-step video program to help you through your grief

### About the Author

Dr. Jason Troyer earned his master's degree in counseling and his doctorate in counseling psychology. He is a published author, grief researcher, and former college professor and therapist.

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