



When You Know You Will Soon Lose Your Pet: The Experience of Anticipatory Grief

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The relationship you have with your pet is unlike others in your life. Your pet is a precious companion who gives you pure, unwavering unconditional love that is rare and difficult to find. Your pet cheers you with charming antics and offers complete forgiveness amidst your mistakes. He or she doesn't care about your appearance or how much money you make. Your pet sees you at your weakest, most vulnerable moments and loves you no matter what. If you share such a deep bond with your pet, it's only natural to feel strong emotions of grief upon learning that your beloved friend may soon die.



Anticipatory Grief

When you realize you may soon lose your pet due to advanced age, a terminal illness or an injury, it's normal and natural for you to experience feelings of loss, even while your pet is still alive. This is called anticipatory grief.

Anticipatory grief stems from the realization that, now, life as you know it will change and those changes will likely be emotionally painful. Although the experience of anticipatory grief doesn't completely prepare you for the actual experience of loss, it does allow time for you to say good-bye and prepare for the future.

Although others may not recognize the impending death of your companion animal as a valid reason for you to feel such a sense of loss, the grief you feel is very real and can be overwhelming. Anticipatory grief can include any or all of the thoughts, feelings and sensations experienced during the grief process that follows death and these manifestations can affect every aspect of your life. These can include:

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Physical: crying, sobbing, numbness, appetite disturbances or other physical discomforts, dizziness, sleeping disturbances, and sudden illness

Intellectual: denial, confusion, an inability to concentrate, pre-occupation with loss, a sense of unreality

Emotional: shock, sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, fear, loneliness, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feeling overwhelmed, feeling hopeless and helpless or a desire to blame others

Social: wanting to withdraw from others or feeling a need to reach out to others in order to stay constantly busy and distracted

Spiritual: anger at God or a higher power, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, searching for meaning in a loved one's death

For a more complete description of the manifestations of grief, see the handout entitled "Normal Grief" at www.veterinarywisdom.com

What Can I Do to Help Myself?



When your pet's death is expected, it's normal for you to mentally "rehearse" the event that you know is coming, as well as its aftermath. For example, you might find yourself ruminating on questions like, "How will I handle the death?" "Will I make mistakes?" and "What will it be like for my pet?" These repetitive and unwelcome thoughts and images can increase and accelerate your feelings of anxiety, especially when the signs that your pet is beginning to decline become more pronounced.

Repeated thoughts and constant feelings of anxiety are often called the "work of worry" and, even though they can be painful to experience, this anxiety can actually be helpful to you. Finding ways to channel your anxious energy in more positive directions can motivate you to take action and make important decisions *before* your pet dies. In the long run, this preparation can help you cope more effectively with your pet's dying process and your own feelings of loss and

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grief. Making as many plans and preparations for your pet's death prior to that sad day can help ease some of your worries and allow you to be more present with your pet during his or her last weeks and days.

The following suggestions may serve as a guide for many of the actions and decisions you can take to deal more effectively with anticipatory grief.



Understand What is Normal

There is a lot of misinformation about grief that is passed along in families from generation to generation. For instance, your family may have believed that the best way to handle loss is to be strong and stoic during grief. During times of family crises, your parents and grandparents, through their behaviors and conversations, may have taught you that staying busy and keeping your mind distracted from feelings of loss is the best way to feel better and to recover more quickly.

However, while quite common, these methods of grieving can actually prolong the process of grief and cause grief to become complicated and even pathological. The grief response is unique to each individual and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. In order to avoid reinforcing misinformation about grief within your own family, it's helpful to become knowledgeable about the normal, healthy grieving process. You can do this by reading books about grief, attending a pet loss support group or asking your veterinarian to share credible grief education resources with you. The most important step, though, is to be patient with yourself and understand that what you are feeling is *normal* and to be expected. Give yourself permission to express your grief and let your emotions rise and subside naturally. Putting pressure on yourself to 'be strong' or to "stay busy" only makes your situation worse as attempting to suppress or escape your grief can be exhausting and cause you to miss out on many precious, quiet moments with your pet.

Consider the Role Your Pet Has Played in Your Life

When your pet is dying, the sense of loss and disruption you feel as you go about your normal routines is certainly painful. As you prepare to lose your pet, it's important to consider how your pet's death may also relate to other losses you may experience in the future. Grief experts call these secondary losses. Examples of secondary losses might include

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the loss of meaningful partnerships (competitive show animals, working farm and ranch animals, service animals) as well as the social relationships and activities that go with them. In some ways, these losses may be even more disruptive to your daily life.

Your pet may also represent the last link that you have to a special person, place, thing, or time in your life. Now, knowing your pet is dying, you may feel that your last link to those memories will be taken away. Loss that is associated with another, significant loss in your life is referred to as a symbolic loss. Although pet loss is a significant loss in its own right, the grief that is triggered when another previous loss is also “regrieved” can feel even deeper and more intense. One pet parent described the symbolic loss she experienced this way,

“Rowdy was an extra special dog who had a special place in my life. He was a very important link to my husband John who died two years ago. Rowdy grieved for three months and became very sullen when John died. Many times I would find him hiding and hugging John's shoe. He sensed my loss, too, and would not touch his food, nor gather up his balls in the back yard to strike up a game. When Rowdy died last May, it was particularly difficult for me because I felt that I was losing my last living connection to John and the life the three of us shared together”

Understanding the role your pet has played in your life and knowing that the loss of your pet will be significant for you in many different ways is important. Understanding that grief takes many forms and may last longer due to the nature of your relationship with your pet may help prepare you to better deal more effectively with it. It may also reassure you that your feelings of grief are appropriate and to be expected.

Ask for Assistance from People Who Understand Your Relationship with Your Pet.



It can be helpful to discuss your feelings with people who understand your relationship with your pet. Reflect on who has supported you through difficult times in the past and call on those people to help you now. Surround yourself with family and friends who can offer non-judgmental support.

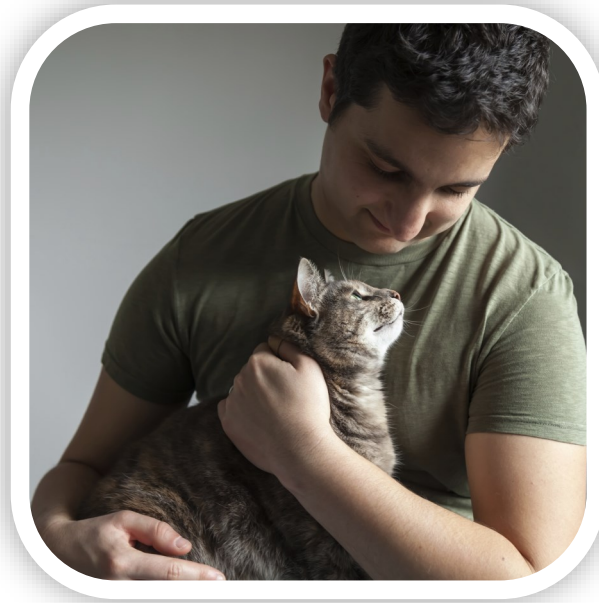
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If your pet is undergoing treatment, bring a friend or family member with you to appointments to help you understand what your veterinarian is telling you. Emotional situations can blur your perception of information, so ask your friend to take notes while listening to the treatment options and then write down any questions or concerns you may have and then discuss them with your veterinarian. Ask your veterinarian if decisions need to be made immediately. If not, allow yourself some time to make sense of what is happening to your pet and discuss options with supportive people around you. If you want to do further research about your pet's disease or condition on your own, ask your veterinarian for trusted and reliable websites and resources that can help you gain accurate knowledge.

Make End-of-Life Plans and Decisions Ahead of Time



It's not easy to prepare for loss. Yet, wisdom gleaned from research and grief experts tells us that making some key decisions **now**, before your pet dies, may allow your pet to have a more meaningful and comforting death. These decisions might include:

- who else may want to see your pet and say good-bye (an ex-spouse, children who are away at college, patients at a nursing home where you and your pet have visited)
- where you hope to say good-bye (at your home, at your veterinary clinic, or somewhere outdoors that was special to your pet)
- what you want to do with your pet's body (burial or cremation; will your veterinarian provide body care or will those arrangements be your responsibility?)

There are many other details for you to organize and make arrangement for **before** your pet dies. Examples include:

- communicating the times and dates you would like support from your family and friends so they'll be available to you
- visiting/interviewing pet crematories/cemeteries in your area and choosing one to care for your pet's body
- gathering the poems, photos, and memorabilia you'll want for your pet's tribute, memorial, or funeral. Some

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pet parents even write obituaries for their pets and post them online after their pets have died.

- taking photos of your pet beside each and every person who loves him or her and videotaping your pet during his or her daily routines. These ordinary times with your pet will be what you miss the most. It can be comforting to be able to view them again after your pet has died.



Prepare Yourself to Face the Decision about Euthanasia

Even though it's difficult, now is also the time to talk with your veterinarian about euthanasia so you understand what you and your pet are likely to experience. Every veterinary clinic performs euthanasia in a slightly different way. Some provide 'client comfort' rooms for privacy and others are able to come to your home. Some can even provide hospice care programs and regular, palliative care for your pet.

Dealing with end-of-life decision making can be an emotional roller coaster. Everyone, pet parents and veterinary teams alike, struggles with the timing of euthanasia. Just when your pet's health and energy seem to be declining for the last time, he or she often rebounds and has several good days in a row. During this time, you may let your emotions slip into denial, becoming convinced that your pet is making a miraculous recovery. Then, the "roller coaster" turns a sharp corner and your pet's condition once again deteriorates. That's why, when you must make decisions on your pet's behalf, you are always wondering if your pet has more good days ahead.

If you haven't experienced a pet's euthanasia before, you can benefit from solid, concrete information that tells you what to watch for and what to do in order to make decision making more manageable. Here are three techniques that may help you decide about the timing of euthanasia.

- **Review Your Pet's Medical Condition**

Gently remind yourself about the reality of your pet's condition and prognosis, as well as the medical procedures that will be necessary to sustain life. If there are specific medical signs such as seizures, disorientation, or tenderness in the abdomen that are likely to occur as your pet nears death, be sure to watch for them. It is also helpful to keep a list of the dates and times these signs occur so you know when they become more frequent and consistent.

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It's also helpful to understand the difference between pain and suffering for your pet. Pain may cause your pet to cry out if you touch or try to move him or her. Usually, that kind of pain can be medicated, but suffering is much harder to remedy. If your pet is suffering, his or her eyes will probably tell you. Pupils may be dilated and the eyes may appear glossy. Also, he or she may not pay attention to sounds or movement in the room respond in any way when you talk or touch him or her.

Remember, it's the disease or injury that is taking your pet's life, not you. Euthanasia means "good death" and is, in reality, a gift you can give your pet when there is no longer anything you can do to restore your pet's health and happiness.



- **Seek Another's Perspective**

If you are caring for your pet at home, you may not notice your pet's gradual decline. It can be very helpful to ask a trusted friend to visit your pet once a week and report any changes they may see. After all, you see your pet every day, but your friend will see him or her sporadically. Since your friend won't see your pet decline gradually, the deterioration caused by an illness, advanced age or an injury will seem more dramatic. A friend will most likely notice if your pet has lost a considerable amount of weight or muscle tone or if your pet is far less responsive than he or she was the previous week. This input will help you stay grounded in reality.

- **Define the "Bottom Lines" that May Determine Your Pet's Quality of Life**

"Bottom lines" are signals that your pet's condition and quality of life have become intolerable. Bottom lines are different for everyone. For some people, the bottom line is their pet's lack of interest in drinking or eating or in going for walks. For others, it is the agony of watching their pet struggle to breathe or it's when their pets seem confused or anxious and pace, pant, or vocalize more than before. For many pet parents, the bottom line is their pet's incontinence or the inability to walk or to get up from the floor on their own. Take some time to get an idea of what the bottom lines might be for you and your pet. Please remember that any criteria you set aren't hard and fast rules. They only serve to ground you in reality and alert you to the possibility that your pet's life may be nearing the end.

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As you deal with thoughts and feelings of anticipatory grief that accompany caring for your dying pet, you may not feel able to think straight. You may feel as if you are lost or moving more slowly, as if you are making your way through a thick fog. Everyday activities may seem difficult because you have so much pain weighing on your mind and heart. During this time, you may feel that you would benefit from time away from your everyday world to take care of yourself, but you may also feel embarrassed about that desire.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, removing other pressures from your life (taking a day off from work, putting other commitments that can wait on hold) can go a long way toward helping you cope with your pet's impending loss more effectively. After all, very few of us are so organized and well-adjusted that we can actually plan to invite grief in and make room for it in our busy, daily lives. Instead, grief usually imposes itself upon us, disrupting our routines and adding to our already overcommitted schedules.

Please remember that you live and work in the modern world and it's very difficult to carry the burden of grief without lightening the load in other areas of your life. So, take a day, or several days, along the way to openly express your grief-related thoughts and feelings. Cry, write in a journal, talk with a friend, visit a grief counselor or simply reminisce about your pet's life. Along the way, be sure to eat healthy meals and get enough rest.

However you choose to take care of yourself, remember that caregiving for a dear, beloved pet is an emotionally and physically demanding endeavor. Yet, you have likely faced many difficult times in your life before and survived them. Believe in yourself and know that you will do this again. Follow your instincts and know that they will serve you well.

For more information visit the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdompetparents.com.