



COPING WITH GUILT IN PET BEREAVEMENT

What is guilt like? Guilt often arrives on its own account to burden us when we are in the very vulnerable state coping with a recent loss. Guilt brings the uncomfortable sense of feeling that things aren't quite right and makes us question everything, sometimes over and over in our minds, bringing up 'what if', 'should have' or 'shouldn't have' and suchlike.

Why do we feel this way? Bereavement, indeed loss of any sort, causes shock, distress, anguish, disbelief, and anger – a whole emotional roller-coaster. Our normal every day routine is shattered and we face the difficult task of having to rebuild life in a new way, adapting to the changed circumstances, which of course is very challenging. It feels like the rug has been pulled from under our feet leaving us in a vulnerable, shaky state making us doubt and question everything to do with the circumstances leading up to the loss. It's as though this uncertainty leaves the door open to the unwelcome visitor called 'guilt' which arrives with a ton of unwanted baggage that weighs us down with all sort of negative thoughts.

What does it cause?

- 🐾 Feeling more guilty if we stop thinking about the pet we have loved and lost or if we find ourselves smiling or laughing
- 🐾 Recurring worries about having fallen short in some respect
- 🐾 Not being able to settle to the loss
- 🐾 Feeling a weight or cloud over us that never seems to lift
- 🐾 Not being able to move on
- 🐾 Not wanting to move on
- 🐾 Feeling that we don't deserve to be happy ever again

What can you do about it? Like all unpleasant things, you need to bring into the open what you're thinking and feeling so that you can see what is really going on. Once you see and recognise guilt for what it is, you can begin to deal with it. There are different ways of coping with guilt – here are some ideas:

- 🐾 Understand that guilt serves no useful purpose whatsoever, and therefore ask, 'Do I want to spend the rest of my life carrying around this useless feeling?'
- 🐾 Work it through and out of the system by talking to someone you trust – a friend, a member of the family or a counsellor. This way you externalise it. Whilst it remains bottled up inside it will sooner or later develop into something much bigger than it actually is
- 🐾 Accept that even when you've done your best in difficult circumstances, there are times when it will never feel enough

An important aspect of coping with guilt is to reason through what actually went on and establish a balanced view of the circumstances – it is so easy to fall prey to negativity, when in fact there may be a number of positive things which are not getting a look in! To do this you have to step away from the emotional turmoil surrounding guilt and get an objective view. Here are a few tips to help in this:

- 🐾 Looking back over the time you shared with your pet add up the many small things you did that showed how much you cared (and there will be many)
- 🐾 Realise that even if you weren't able to fulfil all that you might have wished for your pet, at least you did your best
- 🐾 Consider what you can learn from this recent experience to take forward as new wisdom (and maybe even share this with others in similar circumstances in the future)

Finally: Remember that guilt serves no positive purpose, and it is important to work through this so that in time you will be able to move on through the grief process towards healing and settlement.

This fact sheet only offers tips on coping with guilt in pet bereavement. If you feel you need professional counselling, your GP may be able to arrange this or at least point you in the right direction.



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