



## **SUPPORTING A FRIEND THROUGH PET LOSS**

### **Introduction**

Some people prefer to work through grief in their own way, whilst others appreciate the support of an understanding friend.

Anyone of any age can be deeply affected by pet loss, and sometimes the depth of grief takes people aback. There is often a strong degree of shock, which is especially the case with a sudden and unexpected loss. Shock can make a person feel very 'out of sorts', feeling weepy, sick, faint and weak, shaky, numb or disorientated. They may find they can't stop crying, that they are unable eat, or that their sleep is disturbed. As well as the deep pain they are suffering, there may be disbelief, guilt, anger and the need to blame someone for what has happened to their pet (the latter sometimes being directed at the vet) or often they blame themselves.

Grief itself brings its own potent mix of emotions; this complexity of feelings can make the person vulnerable, and physically, mentally and emotionally run-down. With their emotions in this raw state, they may not be able to face going to work, or dealing with anyone outside of their circle of family and close friends, until they begin to feel stronger in themselves.

### **Ideas on what to say**

As it is difficult to know what to say and how to be with someone suffering grief, people sometimes opt to avoid the situation, which can leave the person feeling isolated and alone. However, as a friend, there is much you can do to help them through this difficult time. Whilst no-one can actually relieve them of their grief, showing that you care will make a difference. Let them know you recognise the special relationship they had with their pet, and that you are saddened by their loss. You can also say that you understand why they are feeling so terribly upset, and that you are there for them.

It will be an easement for your friend to know that it's OK to show how they are feeling. It can help them to talk through the many emotions they are experiencing and, whilst they may get upset doing so, it will be a relief to get some of it off their chest. However, if they do not feel like talking, allow them some quiet space, perhaps offering to make them a cup of tea, or suggest going for a walk or doing something else that you know they usually enjoy.

### **Listening**

Be prepared to listen, as people in grief mostly need to talk to someone who understands what they are feeling. You don't have to come up with answers or prompt them to talk, just being there for them will offer some comfort.

### **When to be a little firm**

Whilst anything that alludes to 'getting a grip' is counter-productive, there are times when you may need to be a little firm with your friend. For example, you might feel you need to encourage them to drink and eat something nutritious, or to see their doctor if you are really worried about them. Use your instinct and be honest – if you are worried let them know you are concerned for their well-being and that you want to help if you can.

## Getting another pet

It's usually better not to talk about getting another pet during the early stages of grief, as some people perceive this as a betrayal of the memory of the pet they have just lost. However, if your friend says they want to do this straightaway, encourage them to talk it through with you so that together you can work out whether it would perhaps be wise to wait until they are more settled. Bringing a new pet into the home can be quite challenging and your friend might need to feel stronger before going down this path.

## Practical help

Your friend may appreciate help with a few practical tasks, such as calling their workplace if they are unable to go in for the next day or two, or contacting other people who may need to know what has happened. If they need to collect their pet's ashes from the vet a few days later, again they may value your support as this is a particularly difficult thing to do. People who have lost a dog often find going out of the house without their dog is hard as it brings back so many memories. Similarly, coming back to an empty house can be heart-breaking, so again, you may have ideas on how to support them through this.

## Making a difference

Losing someone close – whether it be a relative, friend, or beloved pet – brings grief which is, as we all know, a painful process. One of the best things you can do for your friend during this troubled time is to let them know that you understand why they are feeling so much pain, and that you are there to listen and support. However, it is important not to get stressed and put pressure on yourself in your desire to help make things better. The most anyone can do is to be there for them, and to listen. Your time is one of the greatest gifts you can offer – do this, and you will have made a difference.

## In conclusion

All the recommendations in this Support Sheet are offered as suggestions only. They result from personal experience of pet loss, from supporting others through pet grief, and from research. **However, if you are particularly concerned about the welfare of your friend, do not hesitate to suggest that they visit their doctors for advice.** Many doctors are aware of the severity of grief in pet loss and offer sympathetic medical support. Also, there are pet loss support services that offer telephone and email support, details of which can be found on our Links page.



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