Unconditional Love
Grieving the Loss of a Pet

A free grief resource from
The Parmenter Foundation
We hope this brochure can serve as a helpful, quick guide for you, your loved ones, and your pet. For additional end-of-life planning information, please visit: parmenterfoundation.org

From a dog or a cat, to a horse or a goldfish, the loss of any pet is likely to foster grief.

No two people will grieve the same way -- not even in the same family -- and even you may not grieve the same way from moment to moment. You will experience ups and downs.

At first, you may not be able to imagine ever feeling better.

A good place to start is by accepting that your grief is normal.

Recognizing the grief you feel is the final expression of love for the pet you have lost.
Healing Projects

Things you can do to help alleviate your grief and replace negative imagery about the end of your pet’s life with positive thoughts:

- **Create rituals or remembrances** for your pet, such as a funeral or memorial service where you share your favorite stories about their life.
- **Place the pet’s photos or ashes in a special place** to create a sort of shrine for them.
- **Create a keepsake** from their collar or favorite toy, such as a keychain or piece of jewelry.
- **Express yourself** through artwork or scrapbooking.
- **Plant a memorial tree or flowers**. You can even use your pet’s food bowl as a planter.

The grief you are feeling may be connected to other aspects of the loss. You may have lost your daily routine, such as going for walks, playing, snuggling, or other activities with your pet that brought you joy.

The loss may also be a reminder of other life events; your pet was there with you through specific milestones and challenges.

The pet’s loss may even stir up unresolved grief from a previous loss of a friend or family member.

Talk about what you are feeling and cry about it. Do not try to bury your feelings.

You may consider talking to a professional, such as a therapist, clergy member, or your veterinarian.

Veterinary social workers have specific training for this grief and can provide tremendous resources, including books, support groups, and other activities.

And when you’re ready, be with animals. Holding, petting, or interacting with something furry, feathered, or scaled can often be the best therapy.

**Why am I so sad? What can I do?**
**About the Authors**

**Kelly Drescher Johnson**  
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**Grief Counseling Specialist**

Kelly's position provides her with the opportunity to support pet owners, as well as other veterinary professionals, in a variety of circumstances surrounding pet loss and compassion fatigue.

Her approach is a hybrid of support and education. While her work is primarily focused on being present through difficult times, she also brings an understanding of how trauma affects the brain in regards to thinking and emotions.

Additionally, Kelly offers weekly group grief care sessions for anyone struggling with the loss or imminent loss of a beloved pet. Kelly is a certified Pet Chaplain through the Association for Veterinary Pastoral Education, a certified Trauma Professional, and a certified Grief Counseling Specialist. It should be noted that Kelly does not provide clinical therapy as a part of her services.

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The grief you feel may also be infused with guilt. That guilt may be tied to euthanasia or to the circumstances of your pet’s death.

Guilt always comes with questions: did I do the right thing? Did I do enough? Did I do something that led to my pet’s death?

These questions can start a feedback loop of guilt, doubt, and grief.

When these “lesser angels” appear and whisper questions of guilt into your ear, break the feedback loop by thinking of all the positive things you did for your pet, and the wonderful life you provided them.

Remind yourself that caring people feel guilt; people who are not caring or lack empathy do not. Then ask yourself these two questions:

1) Given the information I had at the time, did I make the best decision I could?

2) Did I make that decision out of love?

The answers to these questions will almost certainly be, “Yes.”

It’s important to forgive yourself. Think of all the times you have forgiven your pet, your children, your friends and loved ones for things large and small. You deserve that same forgiveness.

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Be kind to yourself.  
You did your best.
About the Authors
Susan Holt, DVM, PARS-C
Veterinarian
Pet Loss Grief Recovery Specialist

After 8 years of practice in California, Dr. Susan Holt decided that she wanted to be closer to family and moved back to the South Shore in 2017. Since then, she has continued her work in general practice. Shortly after arriving home, Dr. Holt decided she wanted to do more for the community. Offering at-home euthanasia was her way of giving back to the community as she knows all too well how difficult this time can be. To further help pet owners, Dr. Holt also became certified in Pet-Loss Grief Recovery by the American Institute of Health Care Professionals. Dr. Holt is very grateful that she can help make the process of losing a pet a little easier for both the pet and the family. She is very thorough in explaining the process, loves to hear all of the fun stories people have had with their pets, and is a great ear and shoulder to cry on. She, too, lost her best friend at home and is forever thankful she had that opportunity to make her boxer, Kiva, comfortable at home during her final moments.

There’s another component to coping with grief after losing a pet: some people will get it, and some people will not. Other pet owners are more likely to understand your feelings, especially those who knew your pet and their importance to you. Many others -- even loved ones or your own spouse -- may not understand the impact at all. They may even become impatient with the amount of time it takes you to grieve. They may say things they think are comforting that only add to the pain. Or they may tell you to “get over it” or tell you to just get another pet.

Social media can make this worse. People are more likely to say something online they would never say to you in person. Even social media groups on pet loss, if not moderated well, can turn into toxic environments that will hurt, not help.

It’s all right to tell people how you’re feeling. You may even be able to educate them about the relationship between a pet and its owner. But if you are not able, it’s ok to tell a person they’re not being helpful and disengage. Make an effort to spend time with those who get it. Support groups (either virtual or in-person), moderated by trained and compassionate professionals, may be extremely helpful in your grieving process.
How can I move forward? When is the right time?

At some point, you will confront what to do about your pet’s things. You do not need to tackle this until you are ready.

If you’re having a hard time with this, start by moving the items to a new location in the house for a few days, to see how it makes you feel.

You might feel better giving a favorite toy or blanket to another pet owner, or donating the items to an animal shelter. Again, making a keepsake of one of these items is a great way to honor your grief and your pet.

The day may come when you decide you are ready for a new pet. This is a very personal decision. Some people might be ready in six months; others, six days.

You must first make sure you have resolved your grief, so as not to make any permanent decisions based on temporary feelings.

It’s vital to keep in mind that no two pets -- not even of the same breed or from the same breeder -- are the same.

You can never replace the pet you lost. However, you can begin a new journey with a new companion, bringing unique joy and unconditional love into your life.
The Parmenter Foundation provides support for compassionate end-of-life care and bereavement programs in MetroWest Boston. We invite you to learn more about our mission and legacy, as well as how we help bring HOPE to MetroWest residents and their families during end-of-life and bereavement.

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