



Veterinary Wisdom[®]

for pet parents

Normal Grief

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Grieving is most often thought of as “having a good cry”, but the true experience of grief is so much more than that.

When you’re grieving, every aspect of your life can be affected. In fact, the grieving process can make you feel like you have lost control of your own thoughts, emotions, and even your sanity!

If you’ve experienced the loss of someone dear to you, like a beloved pet, it’s important to remind yourself that the sadness and heaviness you feel is due to your grief. Why? Because, after several days and weeks, you may lose track of your grief process and forget to attribute the changes you are experiencing in your moods, relationships, and energy levels to grief. Instead, you may begin to worry that there is something “wrong” with you like a dreaded disease or even a mental illness. Remind yourself (and others!) that grief can last a long time and be disorienting. Ask others (and yourself!) to be kind and patient with you.



Grief differs from person to person, yet there are many normal, predictable reactions to loss. You may feel the presence of grief in your physical body, in your thoughts, and in your social, emotional and spiritual life. Signs of grief can occur before, during, and after a loss and can persist from days to months and even years. (photo from bigstockphoto.com)

Grief happens to all of us, but it isn’t a topic we are usually comfortable discussing. Grief is the normal and natural response to loss. Allowing yourself to grieve is actually allowing yourself to heal. Grief is not a disease, even though the thoughts and feelings that accompany it are often referred to as “symptoms”. Some common and universal “symptoms” of grief are described at the close of this article.

Please be gentle with yourself as you grieve for your pet. It might be a good idea to put this handout on your refrigerator or carry it with you in your purse or billfold. Use it to remind yourself that the “symptoms” you are feeling are due to the grief you are experiencing. And, remember, you won’t feel like this forever...

Physical

crying, sobbing, wailing, shock, numbness, dry mouth, a lump in the throat, shortness of breath, stomach ache, nausea, tightness in the chest, restlessness, fatigue, exhaustion, sleep and appetite disturbance, body aches, stiffness of joints or muscles, dizziness, fainting

Intellectual

denial, sense of unreality, confusion, inability to concentrate, feeling preoccupied by loss, experiencing hallucinations concerning the loss (visual, auditory, and olfactory,) a need to reminisce about the loved one and to talk about the circumstances of the loss, a sense that time is passing very slowly, a desire to rationalize or intellectualize feelings about the loss, thoughts or fantasies about suicide (not accompanied by concrete plans or behaviors)

Emotional

sadness, anger, depression, guilt, anxiety, relief, loneliness, irritability, a desire to blame others for the loss, resentment, embarrassment, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, feelings of being overwhelmed or out of control, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, feelings of victimization, giddiness, affect that is inappropriate for the situation (nervous smiles and laughter)

Social

feelings of withdrawal, isolation and alienation, a greater dependency on others, a rejection of others, rejection by others, a reluctance to ask others for help, change in friends or in living arrangements, a desire to re-locate or move, a need to find distractions from the intensity of grief (to stay busy or to over-commit to activities)

Spiritual

bargaining with God in an attempt to prevent loss, feeling angry at God when loss occurs, renewed or shaken religious beliefs, feelings of being either blessed or punished, searching for a meaningful interpretation of a loved one’s death, paranormal visions or dreams concerning a dead loved one, questioning whether or not souls exist and wondering what happens to loved ones after death, the need to “finish business” with a purposeful ending or closer to the relationship (a funeral, memorial service, or last rites ceremony)