



Veterinary Wisdom®

for pet parents

3 H's of Coping with Holiday Grief

Laurel Lagoni, M.S.

It's never easy to lose a beloved pet, but experiencing loss during the holiday season can make grief even more difficult to bear.

There are so many reminders of your pet—the ornament that looks just like your cat, the scraps of turkey you used to save for your dog, even the special pet gifts you see in the stores and long to buy.

When deep feelings of grief come upon you during the holidays, remember the 3 H's of coping with holiday grief.

Harvest

Gather your memories and mementos like a farmer harvests a crop.

When you lose a companion animal, you're often advised to get rid of everything that reminds you of your pet. Yet, many people find that keeping, preserving, and even displaying the objects that belonged to a pet brings them much more comfort.

If your pet's belongings bring you tremendous comfort, allow yourself to continue to live with them around you. Float roses in your dog's water bowl, buckle your cat's collar onto your key chain, encase a favorite photo, toy, and your ClayPaws® print in a shadowbox, make a scrapbook, or place a beautiful urn containing your pet's remains among your holiday decorations.

If it helps you, keep your memories close. There's no *right* or *wrong* way to deal with your memories and mementos. They are unique and personal to you. How you choose to preserve them should be unique and personal to you, as well.

Humanity

Remember, you're a human *being*, not a human *doing*.

When you're grieving, it's tempting to stay extremely busy in an attempt to distract yourself from your painful feelings of loss and sadness. Yet, this coping method will only mask your emotional pain for a short while and will usually exhaust you in the process.

Loss and grief are common human experiences. Allow yourself to be human and to express your memories and feelings as they arise. Human *beings* are meant to live in the moment and to experience a wide variety and range of emotions and sensations, whatever they might be. Grieve how and when you need to and you may be surprised at how supportive and understanding others can be.

Help

"A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle."

—Benjamin Franklin

Grieving can be lonely. Some days, it may seem like no one else can help you through the pain you are experiencing. If your grief process has brought you to a place of isolation, it may be time to turn your perspective around. Why not reach out and explore what you can do to help someone else?

People consistently report feeling better physically and emotionally when they help other people (or animals!) on a regular and frequent basis. In fact, researchers call this phenomena the "helper's high." In one recent study, volunteer helpers described the "helper's high" as a collection of emotional and physical benefits, including:

- increased energy
- reduced symptoms of stress
- a heightened sense of calm and emotional well-being
- feelings of increased self-worth
- greater feelings of happiness and optimism
- fewer bouts of depression and feelings of helplessness

During the holiday season, you can find dozens of ways to assist others, no matter where you live. Sign up to gather donations for your local food bank or volunteer at your local animal shelter. Studies tell us that emotional intensity is not required in order to benefit from helping others. Even simple acts of kindness like opening a door for someone in need of assistance or walking a busy neighbor's dog can be powerful antidotes to the loneliness and isolation of coping with holiday grief.



If you'd like to talk with a qualified **veterinary grief counselor**, ask your veterinarian for a referral or visit www.veterinarywisdom.com

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