



# Veterinary Wisdom®

for pet parents

## Accepting a Referral for Grief Support

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If your veterinarian has referred you to a grief counselor or pet loss support group, consider yourself lucky! Not every medical professional is so thoughtful or supportive.

Under the best circumstances, grief is difficult. Enduring your feelings of sadness without the encouragement and enlightenment of others can be almost unbearable.

Don't mistake a referral for counseling for an implication that you are "crazy" or that there is something "wrong" with you. It's nothing of the sort! Like your family M.D., your veterinarian is simply providing you with a "continuum of care" that extends your health care network beyond the expertise of his or her practice.

Even though you have the name of a qualified grief counselor or support program in your area, you may find yourself reluctant to make an appointment. It's normal to feel this way. We tend to believe that emotional problems will somehow resolve themselves with the passing of time. Sometimes that's true! But, if you find yourself feeling 'down' and uninterested in your usual activities several weeks after a loss, make that appointment!

As one veterinarian I know tells his clients, "you wouldn't walk around for weeks with a broken arm without seeing somebody who could help you with it. Why walk around for weeks with a broken heart?" There is supportive help available. If you need a place to start, visit [www.veterinarywisdom.com](http://www.veterinarywisdom.com) and consider making an appointment with an experienced veterinary grief counselor.



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## A Continuum of Care

Before you make an appointment with a helping professional, it's important for you to understand what to expect from them. Ask questions about their training, as well as their sensitivity to issues of pet loss. Some mental health professionals or members of the clergy are not 'animal people' and may not be as supportive of your feelings as you need them to be.

Here's a brief description of the various helping professionals and programs you may be referred to:

- **Psychiatrists** are M.D.s with specialty training in brain function. Along with talk therapy, these doctors may prescribe drug therapy like anti-depressants. In general, most people who are experiencing a normal grief response do not require medication. In fact, most experts agree that medicating grief can interfere with the normal, healthy progression of emotional healing. Consider your personal values and needs before agreeing to take any medication.
- **Psychologists** are not medical doctors, but they have earned a doctorate degree in psychology. There are many approaches and specialties within this discipline, so ask about the techniques and methods they use to help people deal with grief (especially pet loss).
- **Psychotherapists, marriage and family therapists, social workers, clergy members**, etc. This large and varied group of mental health professionals represent people who have earned at least a master's degree (or similar specialty training) in a discipline designed to help others cope with life issues. Ask if a therapist is licensed and experienced with issues of grief and pet loss.
- **Hotlines, website forums, and pet loss support groups.** Many of the university veterinary schools offer pet loss hotlines. While these are usually free services, their hours of operation and the skill level of their counselors can be limited (usually veterinary students who've had some basic training about grief). Again, ask for the credentials of the person who is facilitating a group, web forum, etc. If you simply can't afford the fees of a professional grief counselor, these services can be just the help you need.