

HELPING A FRIEND WHO IS HURTING



When someone we love loses a special companion animal, we may not be sure what we can do to help. If anything, we feel helpless, since we know there's nothing we can do to bring the pet back. We can't take away the pain of the loss. We have no answer to the question, "Why?"

Sometimes another person's loss reminds us of our own past losses - or of ones we ourselves eventually must face. If we've never been as strongly attached to a pet as our friend or family member was, we may not consider the loss as significant as it really was to them. If we've yet to experience the loss of a special friend or loved one, human or otherwise, we may not be familiar with how painful such grief can be. And some of us were raised in families that didn't express feelings openly, so we never learned how to comfort others.

Sadly, for fear of saying or doing the wrong thing, many of us shy away from the person who's grieving, or we never go beyond saying "I'm sorry." What else can we do to help a friend who's hurting when a cherished pet is lost?

What You Can Do to Help

Just Be There. You don't have to say anything. Your presence says more than any words can say. If it's appropriate, a hug or pat on the shoulder conveys what words cannot.



Listen Actively. Pay close attention. Ask about the facts, and expect to hear the same story over and over again. Repeating is helpful for the griever and acts as a pain-reliever. Let silences and crying happen. Offer suggestions rather than advice. If something similar has happened to you, share - but don't compare- your experience, and do so only if asked. Keep the focus on your friend's grief, not your own.

Accept Strong Feelings. Strong feelings like anger, guilt and sadness are common and appropriate in grief. Know that feelings expressed go away, while those that are "stuffed" will fester and boil over eventually. Accept whatever you hear, and hold your friend's feelings in confidence.

Offer Help That's Specific. Asking for help is difficult for one who's grieving. Rather than saying, "Let me know if there's anything I can do," explain what you're willing to do and ask if it's acceptable. You might offer to go with your friend to pick up the pet's body or cremains, for example, or you could help dig the grave or plan a memorial.

Extend Condolences And Inform Others Of The Loss. A card, note or letter expressing sympathy or sorrow over the loss of a pet doesn't require an answer; it can be re-read many times, and it can bring great comfort for weeks, months, even years afterward. Inform mutual friends about the loss and together find ways to honor the lost pet's memory (e.g. making a donation to a pet grief support service or a favorite animal charity or organization; purchasing an urn or memorial marker.)

Gently Suggest Outside Support. If needed. If whatever you have to offer your friend doesn't seem enough, you can say something like this: "As much as I care about you, I'm unable to give you the help you need and deserve." Encourage your friend to contact a pet grief support service helpline or support group, or to seek professional help.

Be Patient. Grieving takes time, and there is no specific time-limit for grief. It's an emotional roller-coaster, with all of its ups and downs. There will be good days and bad ones. (Sometimes we want our loved ones to hurry up and feel better so that we can feel more comfortable in their presence.)

What Doesn't Help

Answering Spiritual Questions. Losing a loved one usually leads us to question why God lets bad things happen to good people. Don't feel as if you have to supply the answer. Far better to let your friend find his or her own answers to such spiritual questions. Instead, you can honestly say, "So many things in life cannot be explained, and I guess this is one of them."

Surprising Someone With a New Pet. Your friend needs to finish with the loss of this pet before expending energy on another. And for some, getting a new pet too soon would seem disloyal to the lost pet.

Offering Platitudes and Cliches. These are the thoughtless, hurtful, trivializing comments we've all endured at one time or another:

"It was only a dog (cat)."
"You can always get another."
"I know exactly how you feel."
"You'll get over it in time."



Expecting Gratitude For Your Efforts. A person who's in pain is focused inward, self-absorbed and has little room for gratitude. When you offer help, be sure that it is wanted, and don't feel hurt or rejected if it's not.

Avoiding The Topic. We may think that not talking about another's significant loss is a way of protecting him or her from painful memories. Consider that a grieving person is thinking about very little else anyway, and to avoid the topic is to talk about everything but what really matters to the grieving person! To be sure, memories stir up strong feelings, but they aren't necessarily painful ones.

Being present for someone who's grieving is one of the most generous, compassionate gifts we can offer. When we acknowledge another's loss with comfort, support and understanding, we feel connected in a very special way - and we come to know ourselves a whole lot better as well.

© by Marty Tousley, CNS-BC, FT, DCC
Reprinted with permission of the author
tousleym@aol.com
<http://www.griefhealing.com>



*For death is no more than a turning
of us over from time to eternity.*
~ William Penn


**Pet Loss
Care**
memorial center

**250.984.1933
Toll free 1.800.653.6710**

www.petmemorialcenter.ca