

When you have to destroy livestock

The bond between owners and animals kept for utilitarian purposes, such as for farming, is different from the bond people form with a companion animal. However there is often a deep emotional investment for the owners of livestock. Grief and loss may be experienced whether single animals or large numbers of animals die, either of natural causes, or because they must be destroyed.

The emotional reactions you experience when you have to destroy livestock can be related to many factors such as an economic loss, a sense of failure, or the dilemma of having to decide if and when to put animals down.

You may have to destroy animals for any of several reasons; perhaps after an outbreak of disease, as a result of drought, after they have been injured in an accident or after a devastating fire. Where possible farmers may find it helpful for neighbours or others not affected to put the animals down for them. The need to cull healthy animals to stop or prevent an epidemic can be particularly devastating. There can be feelings of anger towards authorities who make the decisions, and guilt for having infected animals which may infect other properties.

While the destruction of farm animals can result in the loss of financial security, it can also lead to a changed livelihood and even the loss of a farm.

Reactions to these events can evoke feelings of guilt, regret, shame, helplessness, anger, loss of control, grief, anguish and a sense of failure. It is normal and human to experience these emotional reactions.

Some people who have to put down their animals may experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress. They may have nightmares about what has happened, may feel uncontrollable anger, may have trouble sleeping and may feel that they re-experience the traumatic event on seeing something that reminds them of it. They may think about hurting themselves or others.

If you think this is happening to you, it is important that you seek help from your general practitioner.

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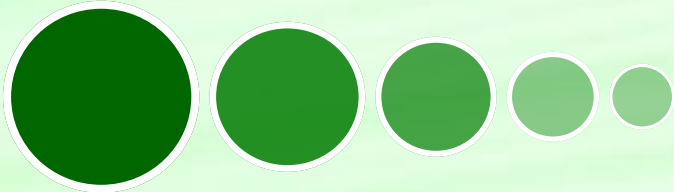
Telephone Grief Support Line

02 9489 6644

(call costs will apply)

Pet Loss

Grief reactions associated with
the loss of an animal



Grief reactions associated with the loss of an animal

Humans and their pets

Pets and their human owners often share a special bond. The attachment can be similar to, and as strong as, the feelings we have for our family and friends, and many people see their pet as a member of the family.

When you lose your pet

There are a number of ways in which you might lose your pet. Your pet may die through an accident, old age, sickness, or may have had to be euthanised (in other words 'put to sleep'). Sometimes your pet may have had to be put to sleep because you can no longer care for it – perhaps you cannot afford it, or you may have to move to a place where pets are not allowed.

Sometimes your pet will be lost, go missing or be stolen.

Feelings you might experience on the loss of your pet

The loss of a pet can be as devastating as the loss of a human who is important to us. The death or loss of a beloved animal is the end of a special relationship, and can be one of the most difficult times in a person's life.

Pets give us unconditional love and support, so when we mourn their death or loss, the emotional pain can be extreme.

For some people, their pets are their substitute children. Similarly, many people now live alone and their pets become their family. In these situations, the death or loss of a 'fur-child' can be as emotional as the void left after the death or loss of a human child.

The physical and psychological problems that people experience when a human dies can also be experienced when a pet dies. When grieving for your pet you may find that you sleep and eat less; you may have nightmares, and you may feel

that you don't want to go out as much as usual. You might spend a lot of time thinking about and longing for your pet. Some people imagine that they can see their pet, or hear it bark or meow. You may take a day or two off work or school. You might cry uncontrollably, talk to the pet as if it were still with you and panic as you come to terms with the reality that the pet is gone.

Shock, numbness, searching, yearning and disorientation are appropriate parts of the grieving process.

The loss of a pet can trigger underlying emotions in profound ways. For example, you might be reminded of other traumatic times in your life when you lost close family members or friends. Feelings of loss or abandonment from your life may resurface.

Putting your pet to sleep because it was suffering may have been the 'right' decision, but it still may involve grief and guilt – "Did I do the right thing?" "Did my pet suffer?"

If your pet is lost, goes missing or is stolen, you might be extremely distressed because the situation is so uncertain. It's possible your pet may have died, but maybe it's still alive. Perhaps your pet has been found but you don't know if the people are caring for it, or abusing it. This grief may be punctuated with hope that the animal will be found or be returned. Guilt may be felt: "What could I have done to prevent this?"

Not everyone values pets, and some people are not fond of animals at all. This can make it very difficult for them to understand the pain experienced by someone who has lost their beloved animal. You might therefore find that others could trivialise your grief or dismiss your feelings as misplaced or silly. This can make the grieving process harder for you.

Remember that it does not matter if others think you should not be upset by your pet's death. What is important is what your pet meant to you. There is no reason to feel that your grief is not justified or that it is strange. There is no need to be ashamed or embarrassed about grieving over the loss of someone whom you have loved and with whom you have shared your life – it is quite ok to feel this way.

Remembering your pet

Talking to someone who understands the human-animal bond can be very helpful. You might want to talk to a trusted friend or family member. If you talk to your general practitioner, veterinarian, priest, counsellor or psychologist, make sure you let them know how important

your pet was to you and how you viewed your relationship with it.

Have a burial or memorial service for the pet and invite family and friends who will understand and be supportive. Plant a tree or a flower in memory of your deceased pet. You may want to buy a statue or plaque. There are some services that specialise in pet funerals and memorials.

Write a letter, or an entry in your diary, or a poem expressing not only thoughts of grief and sadness at your loss but also remembering all the happy times and good memories you have of your pet.

When you are ready – and you will know when that time has come – think about adopting a new pet. When the grief is strongest, you might swear that you will never have another animal. However, many people find that in time, they are ready to share their life with another pet. Acquiring another pet does not mean you are replacing the one that has died as each animal is unique.

Other people may decide that they are not prepared to go through the trauma of losing another pet. It is up to you to decide what is best for you.

Keep a photograph of your pet in a place where you can see it whenever you want to.

Strategies

Don't be afraid to ask for help if you feel you need it. It is better to deal with your painful memories as soon as you can.

- Releasing pent-up emotions is far healthier than holding them in. If you are feeling guilty, talk about it, write it down, share it with a trusted friend - try to express it in some way.
- As a carer your days were probably very busy - there was always a reason to get up in the morning. It helps to find a new type of structure in your life. Setting daily goals can assist you in making sure that your days have a purpose.

Remember that grieving is an important part of healing the sense of loss. Be patient with yourself.

