

Heal from Pet Loss

“Make peace with your grief, rebuild your life”

Claire Chew, M.A., Grief Recovery Specialist, Pet Bereavement Expert
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We have all experienced emotional pain in our lives. Grief is a universal experience. It is impossible to go through life without experiencing sadness, disappointment, and grief over life events. Today, I want to share with tips you can begin using right away to begin healing that pain.

If you are experiencing a recent pet loss, chances are your heart is broken. You might be riding the waves of intense emotions feel like a roller coaster, feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, regret coming and going when you least expect it.

Conversely, you may be feeling numb, withdrawn, depressed. Guess what? This is ok too. The truth is, there is no correct way to grief. Grief is not linear. What you may be feeling may not apply to someone else. Everyone is different. Grief cannot be compared.

First, I want to tell you a little bit about myself so that you can get to know me and be able to trust what I am about to share and how I came to be doing this work.

My Story

I recall the day I first met Sophie. I woke up one morning deciding it was the day I was going to get a dog. I had never had a dog but have always wanted one. I really had no idea where I was going to look. I felt guided that this was going to be THE day. My compass was a list of animal shelters in the Los Angeles area. Starting from the beach area, I made my way through shelters from the west and headed east. I made many four-legged friends that day. But none spoke to me like she did.

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There are some who say that we don't pick our animal companions. They pick us. This was the case of Sophie. It was in the afternoon when I found myself in East Los Angeles. The last stop of the day, I did not know what I was looking for. She was a ball of white fur on the docket for euthanasia based on her mixed Staffordshire terrier race. Sitting at the end of the kennel, she walked towards me and peered up with dark solemn eyes. Then she leaned in, her fur pressing against the chain link. A soul of goodness who somehow ended on the wrong side of the tracks. These are the details of our first meeting. It was love at first sight. We were blessed with nine years together.

A defining moment that shaped my life's work was when my Sophie died. Sophie was more than a mere companion, she was my confidant, friend, family, a fresh sight for sore eyes after a long day's work - an endless supply of laughter, joy, loyalty and friendship. We were inseparable and an experience of unconditional loving I never had. We celebrated holidays together...4th of July camping trips, Christmas with her doggie stocking lining the mantle and the milk bone Easter egg hunt with dog park pals in the backyard.

Sophie was a great teacher. Through all of life's peaks and valleys, she was a gentle reminder of the simpler things that mattered. When the time came for her time on earth to end, it was filled with peace, grace and many tears. I commemorated Sophie's life with friends, each one sharing memories of how Sophie affected them and how she inspired them to get a pet of their own.

I transferred the death of Sophie into creating Luxepets, an exclusive collection of luxury keepsakes to cherish, celebrate and commemorate a pet's impact on our lives. Stores began calling to purchase the grief products and seeking advice for their grieving clients. The counseling call came. I answered the call, returning to obtain my masters in Spiritual

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Psychology from the University of Santa Monica. Through this, I was able to heal the parts of me that was affected by the multiple losses I've encountered in my life. The turning points in my life have shaped me into the person I am today. But it is these tools that has made all the difference in how I choose to live my life.

Grief is not linear. It has a beginning but no end. Integrating your loss means helping you feel better, finding a new meaning of living, by not having your circumstances claim you. It means learning to acknowledge it is perfectly ok to feel sad from time to time and talk about this feeling but longer be attached to the pain. It means taking small actions steps in moving from the valley of darkness to rebuilding your life. I learned from Sophie's death, and other losses that although this was the path I had taken, it does not have to be this way. And that's why I am here today to assist others in making peace with their grief.

Let us start by sharing with you some practical tools so you can begin healing your grief right now.

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Tip #1) Give yourself permission feel your loss about your beloved animal companion.

Many of us live most of our waking moments in our head, making daily decisions that keeps us afloat, juggling work, family, personal responsibilities. When we experience a loss, it often creates a storm in our mind that sometimes causes things to get foggy. Our hearts are filled with such a deep pain, that it causes our heads to cease making sense. Lists of to-dos become scrambled, we forget where we were supposed to pick up that dry-cleaning or mail that letter. This is normal. The more we try and put a lid on the pain we feel, the more it surfaces. The storm that continues to brew inside our minds. Sometimes, it comes forward in the form of anger. Other times, we cry at the drop of a hat without a reason. We end up obsessing about what happened, rewinding the tape inside our heads over and over again. These are the ebbs and flow of grief. There really is no way around it. We may decide to replace the loss with a temporary fix like favorite foods, alcohol, or throw ourselves into our work as forms of escape from our pain. These may work for a while, and inevitably, we find ourselves back to the waterhole of grief again.

I invite you, as off the beaten path as it may sounds, to feel your own pain. Close your eyes, take a deep breath and open your heart to the pain. Feel it. The longer we deny ourselves the dignity of feeling our pain; how this loss has forever changed your life, the more we feel alone and isolated. Isolation begets isolation. Know that as a society, we haven't been graced with the skills of suffering.

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You are not alone. It takes great courage to open your heart to your pain. When we can begin to walk through the valley of darkness rather than around it, we begin to heal. Be self-honoring in your pain. It is to be respected and nurtured. Yes, I know, that sounds crazy doesn't it? If you look closer, you may discover that feelings of pain and loss is what we try to escape most in western civilization. Feel pain? Take something to placate it. Buy something to replace it. Numb it with food, drugs or alcohol.

Your heart is broken. However many times have you ended a relationship or situation and told yourself that you were never going to do that again? Yet months or maybe years later, you find yourself down a similar path, wondering how you ended up here again.

Your grief. And the surrounding emotions you carry around it.

It will gently come round again, nudging you with gentle prompts until you begin to take notice. It may show up unexpectedly.

Exercise:

As you read this, what feelings are coming for you around the loss of your animal companion? Sadness, anger, guilt, betrayal, regrets? Can you sit with them?

If you keep a journal, write it down. If you don't consider starting a journal and keeping a log of your feelings, even for 5 minutes a day.

Can you allow the tears to well up and flow if they need to? If you feel your heart shutting down, the first step is recognizing the door is closing. It is then you can choose to keep it ajar this time. You have a choice.

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Tip #2) Be committed to your healing, be open to change.

I know, this is a hard one. Trust me. As you begin feeling into your pain vs. running away from it, the deep hole in your heart will slowly begin to fill up. Unlike what most people think, grief is not something you can “get over”. It is not a disease to be cured. Rather, I like to think of it simmering on the stove like a soup or a stew. Over time, the flavors, memories of the past will mix with the present. The soup will only become richer with your experiences. By being open to the pain, you will learn to integrate the sadness, process the anger, receive the flowing tears, and keep your heart open to living your daily life and caring about what matters to you.

What does this look like? It is the difference between sitting on the couch watching a television show about exercise and getting off the couch and trying it out for yourself. Choose to be a participant in your own mourning.

Since your animal companion’s departure, life as you’ve known it has shifted. How can you support yourself during this time of change?

Exercise:

Find a quiet place to sit. What would it look like to be committed to your healing? How has your life shifted since the loss of your animal companion?

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Sometimes, creating new rituals aid in healing the loss of the old.

-If you usually got up at 6 every morning to feed your friend, set your alarm for an hour later.

-Take a different path during your routine walk. Change it up to explore a new route.

-Do something nice for yourself during a time you would normally be caring for your animal companion.

-Bestow all of the loving you gave selflessly to your animal companion unto yourself. What would that look like to practice more loving, self-love?

Tip #3) In Remembrance: You are not your loss

Sometimes, when we experience a loss so deeply, we begin associating our identity with that loss. Over time, it becomes our identity by which we are living our lives. As pet lovers, sometimes we end up feeling less than whole, wounded, different, because of the loss we have experienced. Others who have not gone through our pain possibly cannot understand. We begin to wear our loss like a mask, to protect us from the hurt and pain we are feeling. It helps create a protective layer around our grief, keeping others out. Sometimes, we feel there is nothing anyone can say, do, share, lift the pain we might be feeling. “The loss was so horrible, I will never get over missing him/her.”

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What if I were to tell you that you are your own Christopher Columbus, navigating through uncharted territories. You can create your own journey through the pain and sail to the other side. And you don't have to do it alone.

How **do** we sail to the other side?

Exercise:

What may your own journey look like if you let go of your identity of loss? For some of us, we wore the badge of the caregiver, sacrificing our time, energy, schedule to take care of beloved animal companion. This is our most recent recollection in our memory bank with our animal companion.

What we can do to help shift the emphasis on the tragedy is to begin to replenish it with happier moments you've shared with your beloved.

- How did you meet?
- Did you choose your animal companion or did he/she choose you?
- What was the first day you spent together like?
- What was some of your favorite activities together?
- Funniest moments?

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Tip#4) Be honest about your grief. Grief openly.

What do I mean by this? Well, society has a way of keep the lid on grief. “Grief should be expressed only in private.” “Grief alone” is a misconception I’ve heard many times, read in books, watched on television shows depicting the bereaved.

After Sophie died, many of my emotions were turned inward. I kept a strong outer face for my friends and family. I remember one night, watching Sophie’s “sister” Casey, go from room to room in the house searching for her sibling, I lost my stuff. I was sitting on the couch one moment then heaving myself onto the couch the next, beating the cushions, flinging them, throwing things in the living room, while a mournful (and very loud) wail, escaped my throat. It felt like an out of body experience, this person (me, usually very composed) screaming, beating pillows, so sad and so angry at the same moment. I can still close my eyes and feel that moment. I felt like I cried rivers that evening. Once I got back into my body, the first thing I did was look up sheepishly in my home and wondering if I had freaked out my neighbors. First feeling I recalled experiencing was shame. Then embarrassment. Followed by deep sorrow. And it’s okay for me to admit all this to you. Even as a grief counselor, I can acknowledge my own vulnerability and the courage to “let it rip”.

Society has rigged it so we are supposed to “be strong”, “get over it”, “keep busy, it will make things easier”. For whom?

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Years later, in sharing this experience in my grief work, it brought forth further healing and an opening in my heart for any remaining pain to journey through. I gave myself permission to grieve openly. And now, I am inviting you to give yourself permission to grieve openly too. It will open your heart.

Exercise:

- Are there any feelings or emotions you have been holding inside?
- What would it look like if for a moment, you were to “let it rip”?
- Can you give yourself permission to let go?

Tip #5) It takes a village.

By now, you might have realized that there are no short cuts in affairs of the heart. Unlike to-do lists or competitions, there is no prize for finishing first, or last. Rushing through the avalanche of emotions that might be coming your way may spell out a revisit to the same pain or loss dressed up in a new outfit later. So, how can you make your way to find some inner peace with your grief? Reach out for support. You cannot do this alone. By choosing to allow others into your life, you are moving towards one step closer to healing.

If you do not have close family or friends to lean into, stretch yourself and look within your community. Often times, there are support groups, counselors, clergy and fellow grievers. Know that you are not alone. Help is available. There is a list of pet loss resources on my website www.luxepets.com, as well as the MAF website.

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Exercise:

-Sometimes what we need the most isn't someone with the right answer, or to fix, but simply an ear to listen, so that we feel like we are heard. Practice this exercise with someone you feel safe with or close to.

Ask a friend to hold a space so that you can simply share what is on your mind about the recent loss of your animal companion.

-Set a timer for 10 minutes.

-Find a comfortable place to sit with a friend

-Rules are simple: You speak from the heart

-Your friend: Holds the space of receiving information and being unconditionally loving.

He/she is allowed to nod, send love silently, say, “yes” “I understand” “I get it” or (equivalent verse) in response to your share. It is important for your friend not to give advice.

At the end of the 10 minutes, spend some time sharing with one another what the exercise was like for each of you. Take time out to journal your feelings if you feel called.

Okay, so now we've shared with you 5 ways to begin healing from pet loss. This is a glimpse of the practical tips and tools offered in our “28 days of healing from pet loss” series, available 5/2011 . It is my intention to provide you with an abundant supply of tools to fill up your toolbox so you can begin to empower yourself in your journey of healing.

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Most importantly, I acknowledge your courage in being present with me today. This can be scary and uncomfortable. It is expected! Simply by reading this, you've taken the first step in showing up for yourself and shifting your grief experience. I invite you to call me & set up a free 30-minute session and experience how I can further support you in healing from pet loss.

With loving gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Chew'.

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