

Characteristics of Grief in Companion Animals

After the loss of your companion animal, you may notice your surviving pets grieving, too. Grief in pets can be displayed in various forms, such as:

- Anxiety, restlessness, or a need to stay closer to the owner
- Acting withdrawn or despondent
- Changes in eating, drinking, sleeping, or exercise habits
- Depression, heavy sighing, or disinterest in usual activities
- Personality changes, such as your aloof cat suddenly wanting lots of attention
- Destructive behaviors
- High-pitched distress vocalizations—howling in dogs or yowling in cats (especially in younger animals)
- Changes in grooming or bathroom habits, especially in cats
- Searching the yard, house, and other familiar areas for the animal that has died

Your pet might also show signs of separation anxiety, such as crying and carrying on when you leave or, as is more common regarding cats, engaging in destructive behavior, such as scratching furniture or urinating outside the litter box while you are gone.

All of the above reactions are normal for surviving pets. In order to help with the changes, pet owners, if possible, should keep the following in mind:

1. **Keep daily routines the same.** Animals usually respond to environments that are predictable, familiar, and consistent.
2. **Stay positive.** As hard as it is for you to cope with your own loss, talk to your remaining pets in a calm and upbeat voice as often as possible.
3. **Do not inadvertently reinforce or reward negative behavior changes.** For example, if a pet learns that anxious pacing results in repeated invitations to join its owner for a snuggle on the forbidden couch, it may be more likely to continue the anxious behavior. Instead of reinforcing unwanted behaviors, owners should provide their pets with positive reinforcement, such as attention and affection, when their pets are behaving in desirable ways.
4. **Engage in new activities.** Giving your pets something new to learn or focus on may help distract them from the loss and uncertainty surrounding it. Dogs, especially, benefit from learning something new that will give them confidence in their pack position.
5. **Watch for changes in the dominance hierarchy when there are two or more surviving pets.** This is particularly true if the pet who died was the dominant animal because the remaining animals often compete for the dominant spot in the pecking order. Competition may involve growling, hissing, and even fighting, but the attacks usually do not result in injury. For the most part, owners should not punish their animals, but let the animals end the skirmishes on their own.
6. **Do more of the things your pets already love to do.** Participating in fun and enjoyable activities can go a long way in helping your pet cope—and can help you feel better, too.
7. **Be patient.** It may take weeks, or even months for your pet to emerge from grief. Honor the process by allowing your pet to make sense of it all over time. Grieving honors

his/her deceased pet friend just as it does with people, so allow for the time and space to do that.

8. **Talk to your veterinarian.** Pets who stop improving, take a step backward, or develop symptoms like persistent loss of appetite, vomiting, or diarrhea that are typically associated with physical illness should be evaluated by a veterinarian. Sometimes the stress caused by the loss of a companion animal can bring about serious health issues that need to be addressed. Also, if your pets show signs of separation anxiety or depression that do not improve on their own, contact your veterinarian.

The loss of a pet is a difficult time for your entire household. However, remembering to provide comfort and support to your four-footed family members during this time can help aid the grieving process and promote healing for the whole family.

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The information above is from *The Practical Guide to Client Grief: Support Techniques for 15 Common Situations* by Laurel Lagoni, MS (1997) by AAHA Press; [How the Loss of a Pet Affects Your Other Pets](#) by Jean Marie Bauhaus (2018); and, [5 Tips to Help Pets Deal with Grief](#) by Jennifer Coates, DVM (2017).