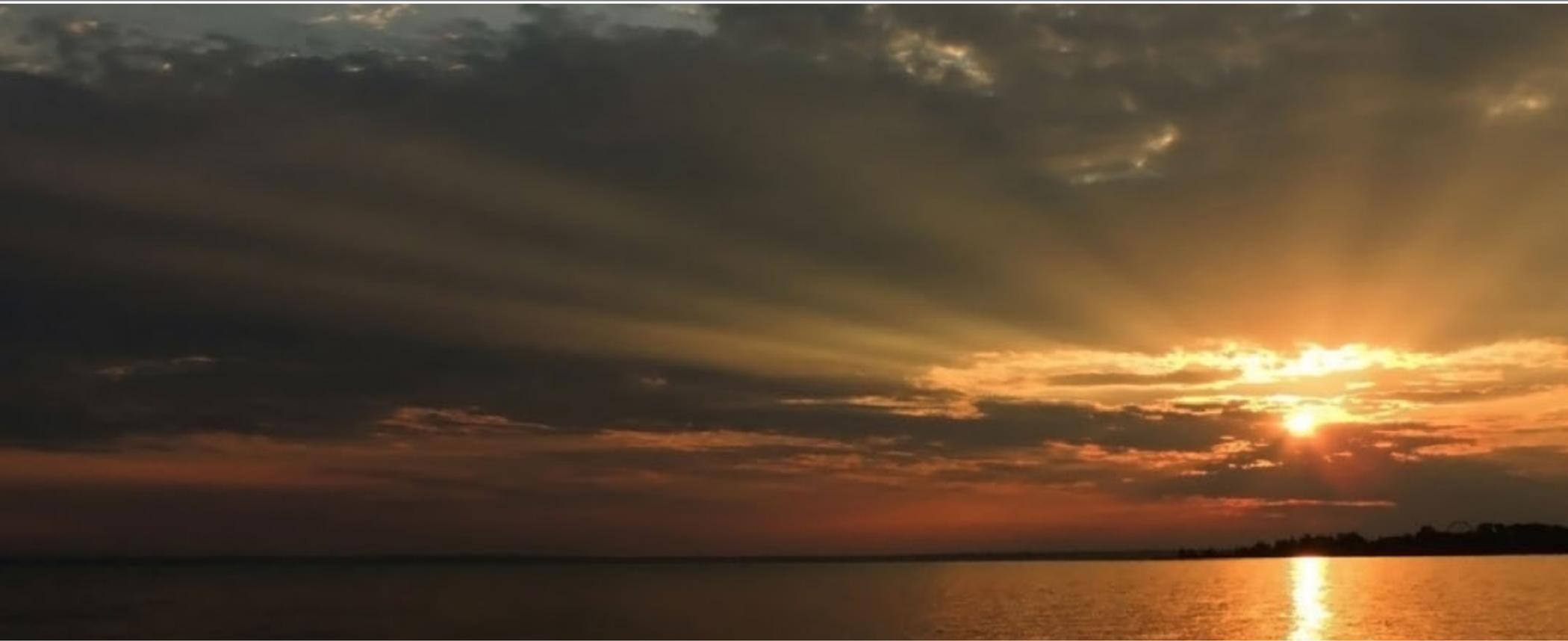




THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

VETERINARY MEDICAL CENTER



# Coping with the Loss of a Pet\*:

## A Guide for Adults, Children and Surviving Animals

\*This booklet is for anyone who is experiencing the loss of a beloved animal companion, regardless of the species. The word “pet” is used here to describe any species, including cats, dogs, horses, pigs, goats, birds, snakes, et al.



Pets are considered friends, family members and companions. The bond between a person and their pet is a special one. The loss of a family pet may result in a variety of emotions: denial, guilt, anger, sadness, shock, or pain. In order to move forward, it is important to deal with these emotions following the death of a pet. It is crucial to remember that people respond differently to the loss of a pet and any given person may experience all or none of these emotions, even for the same family pet.

If multiple people live in your home, respect the feelings of other family members. Recognize that each family member may share a different level of bond with the pet, as well as grieve differently. This guide provides suggestions and ideas to help you on the journey of healing. It does not replace speaking to a trained mental health professional should you require or desire additional support.

*“Until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened”  
– Anatole France*



### Grief

Grief is a healthy and normal response to loss. Coping with grief is an individual journey of healing. What works for some, may not work for all. Grief can feel like being lost. The familiar things we relied on to live each day are gone. We must find new anchors or stabilizers along the way and learn a new way of relating to the world and people around us. This can be especially true when a companion pet was heavily integrated into our daily routines. It is common to replay the last moments of your pet's life repeatedly in your mind, as a video playing the same scene over and over.

What can make the experience of pet loss different from other losses is that it is considered a form of disenfranchised grief. This means society still doesn't recognize it as a 'valid' form of grief when compared to the loss of a human life, which means the social support one would normally expect during such a difficult time may not be as readily available. Your loss is valid and so is your grief.

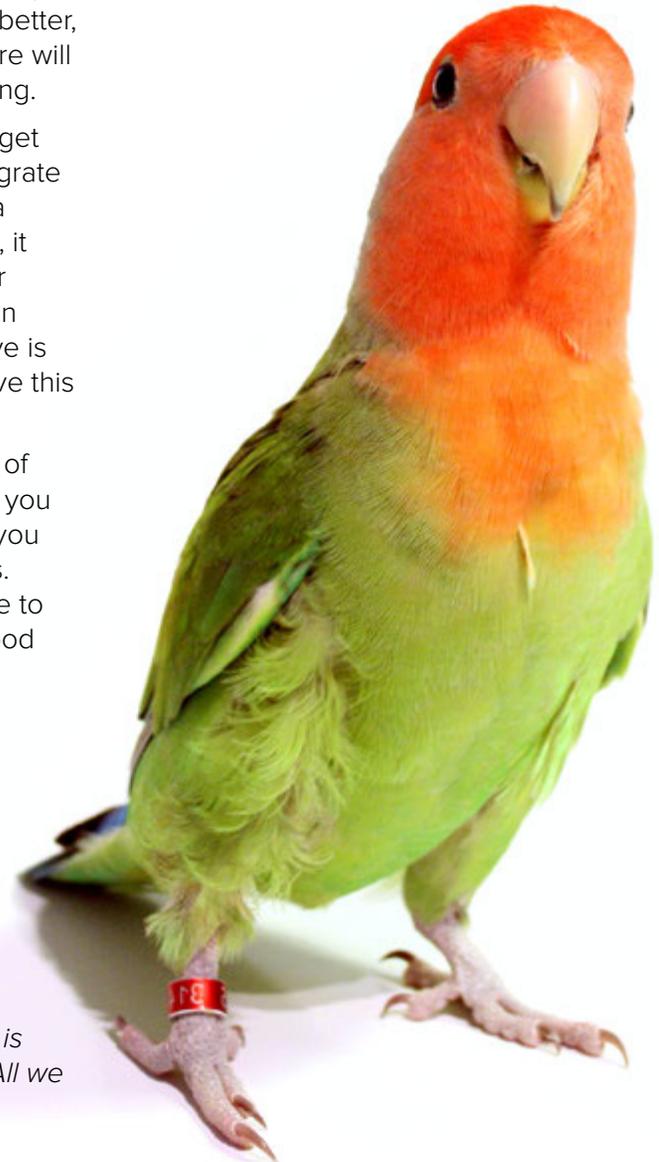
No one can rush the process or provide a magic cure for grief. When grief is new, it is common to feel exhausted: physically, emotionally and spiritually. Changes in appetite, sleeping patterns or health are frequently reported. Those who are grieving often describe feelings of being out of control, isolated and lonely. Things that seemed so important before now may seem trivial. Others may experience a sense of "life isn't fair" or being in a tunnel or fog, while everyday life swirls around them.

All of these feelings are normal and part of the grieving process. Grief follows no organized plan, formula or schedule. You may start to feel better, and then feel as if a wave has hit you. There will be ups and downs in the process of grieving.

The purpose of healthy grieving is not to "get over" the death of a loved one, but to integrate the experience of loss into present life in a functional and healthy way. In this process, it is not unusual for certain memories of your pet to become blurred. This does not mean you are forgetting your pet or that your love is diminished. The truth is, you will always love this very special member of your family.

The hope is, as time goes on, the feelings of sadness will become less difficult, not that you will never miss or forget your pet. Initially, you may be sad to think or talk about your loss. Eventually, the hope is that you will be able to reminisce and even smile or laugh with good memories.

*"Grief is like the ocean, it comes in waves, ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim." – Vicki Harrison*





## Dealing with Guilt

Guilt is one of the most common emotions people experience after the death of their pet. You may find yourself thinking continuously about what you perceive you could have, should have, or would have done to prevent or postpone your pet's death.

Some suggestions for coping with guilt include:

- Be truthful with yourself about why you feel guilty.
- Do a reality check. Most people assume that if they had done something differently, the outcome would have been better. It's just as likely, however, that if you had done things differently, the outcome would have been the same.
- Remember that you are human. No one is perfect.
- Remember that all living things die. There is not always an answer to why bad things happen and you do not need someone or something to blame. Realize that sometimes you are powerless and you cannot control everything that happens to your loved ones. What you can control is how you choose to respond to the events in your life.
- Some owners find it helpful to write an "apology letter" to their pet, expressing the feelings with which they are struggling.

"Friends live forever in the memories we keep"  
– Anonymous



## Seeking Support

Seeking support throughout the grieving process is important. Reach out to those who you know will be supportive and understand the unique bond you had with your pet. Many people find comfort in calling a pet loss support hotline or joining a pet loss support group. Others talk to trusted friends or advisors about thoughts and feelings. Expressing your concerns in a safe and supportive environment can help you examine emotions from a different perspective.

While there is no standard duration for grief, the pain of loss normally eases with time. You can work through the process by applying healthy

coping skills, such as talking with others about your memories and emotions and facing the grief, rather than trying to stay distracted or busy to avoid it.

If your feelings of sorrow or guilt have not diminished after several weeks or if they impair your ability to engage in family, social, work or other functions, you may wish to reach out for more professional support. Many pet owners find it helpful to connect with a trained mental health professional who can provide counseling for individuals or families.





### Healing Your Own Way

One of the greatest healers is time. Time only heals if you allow yourself to grieve and let yourself feel the emotions that accompany your grief. Afterward, you will be able to make peace with your loss, start to heal and move forward.

Below you will find some practices to consider when in mourning:

- Be kind to yourself. Grieving is an intensely personal process that you should take at your own pace.
- Allow yourself to feel the pain of loss in a safe environment. Give yourself permission to cry. Avoid suppressing intense feelings, so you can heal and start to move forward.
- Talk about your loss to those you trust will understand. This will help process your feelings and help you look at the unique relationship you had with your pet. This may guide you from a place of shock, denial and guilt to a place where you can start to process your grief.
- If possible, avoid people or situations that may prove upsetting. Some people may have never experienced a very special relationship with a pet and may not understand what you're going through. Minimize contact with those who you know will not understand your loss.
- Read information on pet loss. There are many books and online resources that offer support when grieving.
- Take care of yourself. Incorporate physical activities into your daily schedule to support your sleep and overall well-being. Walks are one of the best forms of exercise. If you have memories associated with walking your dog, take your walks at a different time and place initially. When you feel better you can go back to your previous routine, such as meeting with other pet owners with whom you used to chat.
- Although you may feel some initial resistance, make time to visit friends and family. Try to go out more frequently and on a regular basis. You can still take memories with you and share them, if you choose.





## Children and Pet Loss

### Talking to Children about Death

It is easy to feel uncomfortable and intimidated speaking to children about death. Don't feel as if you must have all the answers; sometimes just listening is enough. Properly explaining death can help clarify the concept and alleviate feelings of guilt and uncertainty. Explaining death to children can help them cope with their fears and misconceptions.

#### *Honesty is the best policy*

Sometimes children ask questions that you are unprepared to answer, either because you don't know or you are not comfortable answering. In both cases, an honest answer could be, "I'm not sure how to answer that question right now." This gives you time to better prepare or seek advice on how to answer difficult questions.

#### *Avoid overcomplicated answers*

Answer the questions asked without going into other information. Children will ask more if they need to do so. Expect young children to ask and need answers to the same questions over and over again.

#### *Avoid euphemisms such as "went to sleep," "passed away," or "gone to a better place"*

Many young children are very literal and may become confused when adults use other terms for death. Such phrases might cause children to feel rejected or abandoned by the pet, imply the pet may return, or encourage children to search for the lost pet. The common phrase "put to sleep" can make children worried or afraid to go to sleep.

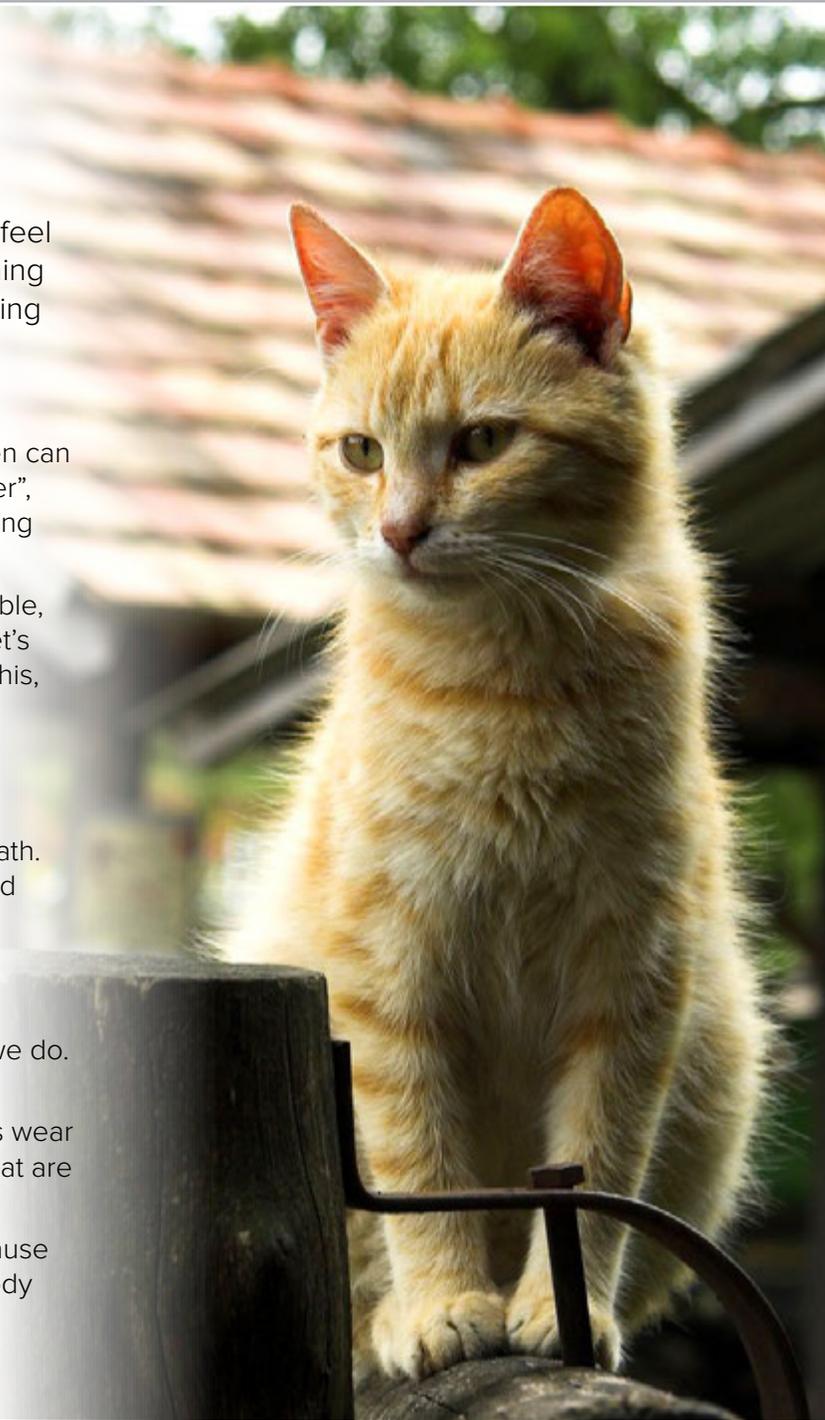
#### *Be simple and concrete*

Be specific with the words you use. Children can handle precise terminology, such as "cancer", "died" or "is dead." Explain that no living thing lives forever.

Be mindful of using the word "sick". If possible, substitute this word by talking about the pet's clinical signs of its illness, and because of this, the body isn't working properly anymore.

Some examples:

- "Joey's heart stopped beating."
- "You had nothing to do with Skippy's death. His his lungs and heart no longer worked properly."
- "It's okay if you got mad at Socks. Your thoughts didn't hurt him."
- "Many animals have shorter lives than we do. They don't live as long as people."
- "When animals get very old, their bodies wear out and stop working. The body parts that are old and worn out cannot be replaced."
- "Luna had a disease called cancer. Because the disease couldn't be stopped, her body stopped working the way it should."





## Children and Pet Loss

### Helping Children Grieve

The following are general guidelines for the grieving process of children. Many children develop differently and you will need to follow the child's lead. The way children cope with death and pet loss varies depending on their developmental stage and what their concept is of death and dying itself.

Grieving children don't need different support, they just need more of it. They need more love, more understanding, more time and more patience from their caregivers. Informing other adults in the child's life, such as school teachers, baby-sitters, daycare workers and parents of the child's friends is beneficial because it is not always predictable when or where the child's grief will be expressed. Children and teenagers may need ongoing attention, reassurance and support – it is not unusual for grief about pet loss to resurface later on, even well after the death.

#### *Let children express grief in their own way*

Recognize that children may grieve differently than adults, requiring parental understanding and guidance. It is not uncommon for younger children to express grief in bursts only to quickly return to their normal selves. Children sometimes react to death with outbursts of laughter, aggressiveness, hostility, boisterous activity or in some other manner that may be unacceptable by adult standards. Anger is a common reaction to grief — you can tell your child you are angry, too.

Behavior deemed inappropriate may be positively redirected by role-modelling acceptable alternatives for the child. Try to keep the child's routines as normal as possible. Although these reactions are quite normal, prolonged adverse reactions may indicate the need for support from a professionally trained mental health professional or grief counselor.

#### *Show emotions*

Respect and encourage the expression and the sharing of feelings. Don't be afraid to let children see your expressions of grief, such as being upset and crying. By talking about feelings, children learn these emotions are acceptable and what associated behaviors are appropriate. A lack of expression of grief does not necessarily indicate they are coping well. Encourage (but don't force) your children to talk about how they feel.

#### *Let children honor their pet in their own way*

Encourage activities to help them experience and express their love and grief. Children often work through grief by drawing or other creative outlets.



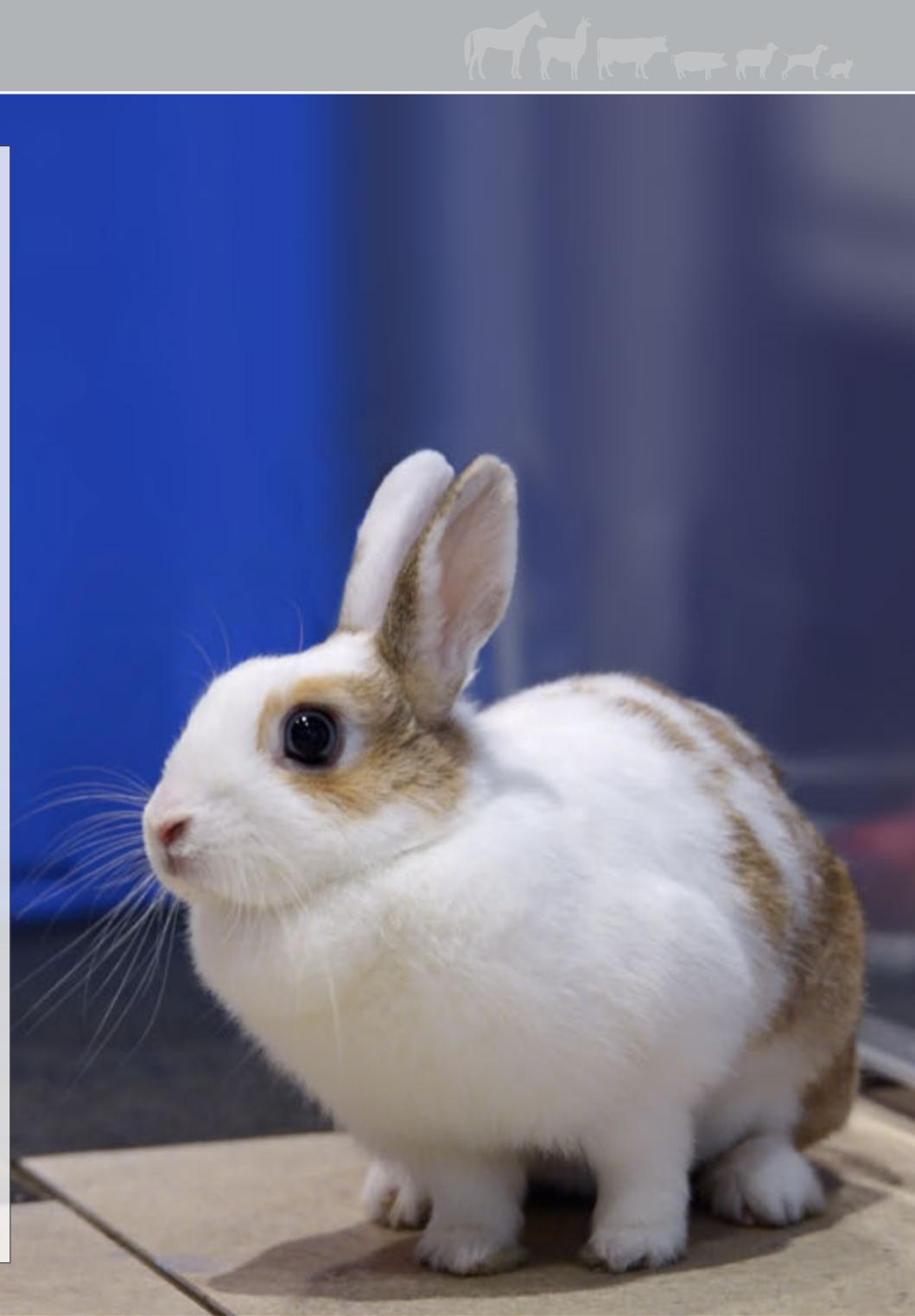
## Celebrating the Life of your Pet: Ways to Remember and Memorialize

Ritual is important when you experience loss. Many pet owners find it helpful to celebrate and honor the life of their pet. Think about how you can honor your pet's life and keep their memory alive. Emphasize the happy experiences you shared.

The following are some ways people find helpful in their journey of grieving:

- Plan a funeral, burial, candle lighting ceremony, memorial or a “celebration of life” service for your pet. Do this privately or invite those who had a special relationship with your pet.
- Plant living things that can carry the memory (plants, flowers, trees).
- Save sympathy cards and emails of condolence from family and friends. Consider using them to create a collage or poster.
- Donate time, money or talent in your pet's honor to an animal charity.
- Create something meaningful for yourself. You don't have to be an artist to do this. It is more about the process involved, rather than the final product or it's appearance. Below are some ideas to get you started.
  - *Make a memory box or frame that includes items, such as:*
    - *Your pet's tags, toys, collars and bedding*
    - *Your horse's shoes and hair from its tail or mane*
    - *Paw or hoof prints, hair clippings and photos*
  - *Create a journal of your pet's story: how, when and where you met, unique personality traits, nicknames, what you love the most and what you'll miss the most*
  - *Write a poem or song*
  - *Draw or paint a picture of your pet or something that represents your relationship with them*

If you aren't comfortable creating these on your own, there are many companies that offer various memorial items for pet owners, such as commissioned portraits, jewelry or special urns.





### Surviving Animals in the Family

Families who live together form close attachments. When a companion animal dies, surviving pets may cling to their human family members, be more reactive to stimuli, appear anxious or depressed and demonstrate a loss of interest in playing, sleeping or eating. Changes in lifestyle can be stressful on pets and some may show signs of separation anxiety. This may include panting, pacing, whining, drooling, howling, barking and not eating treats when left alone. These behavioral and emotional changes may be a temporary response to the loss, a distress response to the owners' sadness, a distress response to changes in routine that occur as the result of the death, or an underlying medical condition.\*

Watch for changes in the relationships between surviving pets in the home, particularly if the surviving pet often looked to the other pet for direction. Such reactions may be more common in species such as dogs or individuals that have complex social interactions or a high need for social stimulation. Allow companion animals to work out their own relationships, provided they are not having physical altercations. Avoid punishment, reprimands or discipline about the animals' relationships to each other, as these can increase levels of anxiety, fear and aggression. Try rewarding positive behaviors and interrupting undesired behaviors with commands or redirection to a new activity.

There are many new natural, non-toxic means of managing anxiety and stress in dogs and cats. Pheromones are available in sprays, atomizers and collars. They can be effective tools for reducing your pet's anxiety. **DAP** (dog appeasing pheromone) is a replication of the pheromone that a mother dog releases while nursing her young. For cats, **FELIWAY® Multicat** is a replication of the feline version calming nursing pheromone. Many veterinarians, pet stores and pet supply catalogues have these products available.

Exercise is also a great stress reliever for your pet. It can also be a helpful tool in managing your own grief response. Prior to beginning a new exercise program with your pet, consult with your pet's veterinarian and your family doctor.

An excellent way to monitor your pet's stress levels is to set up a video camera or device to record their behavior while you are not home. If you have concerns about the behavior of your surviving pets, your veterinarian may be able to provide suggestions to help or you may consider scheduling a consultation with our Behavior Service at [vet.osu.edu/vmc/companion/our-services/behavioral-medicine](http://vet.osu.edu/vmc/companion/our-services/behavioral-medicine)



*\* Important health alert: if a cat stops eating, this can be a medical emergency. If a dog or cat stops eating, contact your family veterinarian as soon as possible.*



### Welcoming Another Pet into your Home

The decision to bring another animal into the home is very personal. Some people or families may decide not to get a new pet because of the emotional, physical or financial demands involved with companion animal care. Others may feel the time is right to share their home and heart with another pet.

During this process, it is important not to rush into making any decisions about adopting a new pet as a means of alleviating the pain of grief. If there are children in the family, children can learn from grief that because relationships are special and unique, they are not replaceable. Getting a new pet too soon may imply that grief is unimportant and unnecessary.

Consider welcoming a new companion animal into your home when the entire family has had sufficient time to deal with the emotions of grief. Introducing a new pet too soon can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment toward the new family member.

Bringing another animal into the home is not a betrayal of the one that is gone. You will never replace the one you've lost. You will simply be opening your home and heart to a new friend. Consider communicating this concept to children in the house beforehand.

When you welcome a new pet into your family, it is important to remember that each pet has a special and unique personality. Take the time to discuss different sizes, breeds and behavioral needs before making a final decision. Consider the needs and temperament of any surviving companion animals. Your veterinarian is an excellent resource for these discussions.

To read more about introducing new pets, please visit [indoorpet.osu.edu](http://indoorpet.osu.edu)

*"The only way to avoid the pain of losing a pet is to give up everything good about knowing them."*

*– Vince Harold, Veterinary Medical Center Client Liaison*





## Additional Resources

For a complete listing of pet loss support materials including: online communities; grief and bereavement resources; pet loss support groups; pet memorial; suggested pet loss books and other online reading materials, please visit the Honoring the Bond website at [vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond](http://vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond)

The mission of the Honoring the Bond program at The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center is to recognize and honor the human-animal bond by providing support to companion animal owners. Honoring the Bond program services are available, at no cost, to clients of the Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center.

Our social workers can assist in the following ways:

- Act as a liaison between the companion animal owner and veterinary medical team
- Provide crisis intervention during difficult situations
- Assist in processing difficult decisions (quality of life assessments, treatment decisions)
- Be present before, during and/or after euthanasia
- Facilitate family discussions with children
- Provide assessment and referral for further follow-up counseling, if needed
- Provide resources, including reading lists, websites, counselor and pet loss support group referrals, cremation/burial resources, memorial ideas, etc.

Honoring the Bond is sponsored in part by:



[schoedingerpetservices.com](http://schoedingerpetservices.com)  
614-224-0010

Honoring the Bond is a nonprofit program, relying on the generous donations of owners, veterinarians and businesses. If you would like to donate to Honoring the Bond (HTB fund #309011) you may send a check to the following address:

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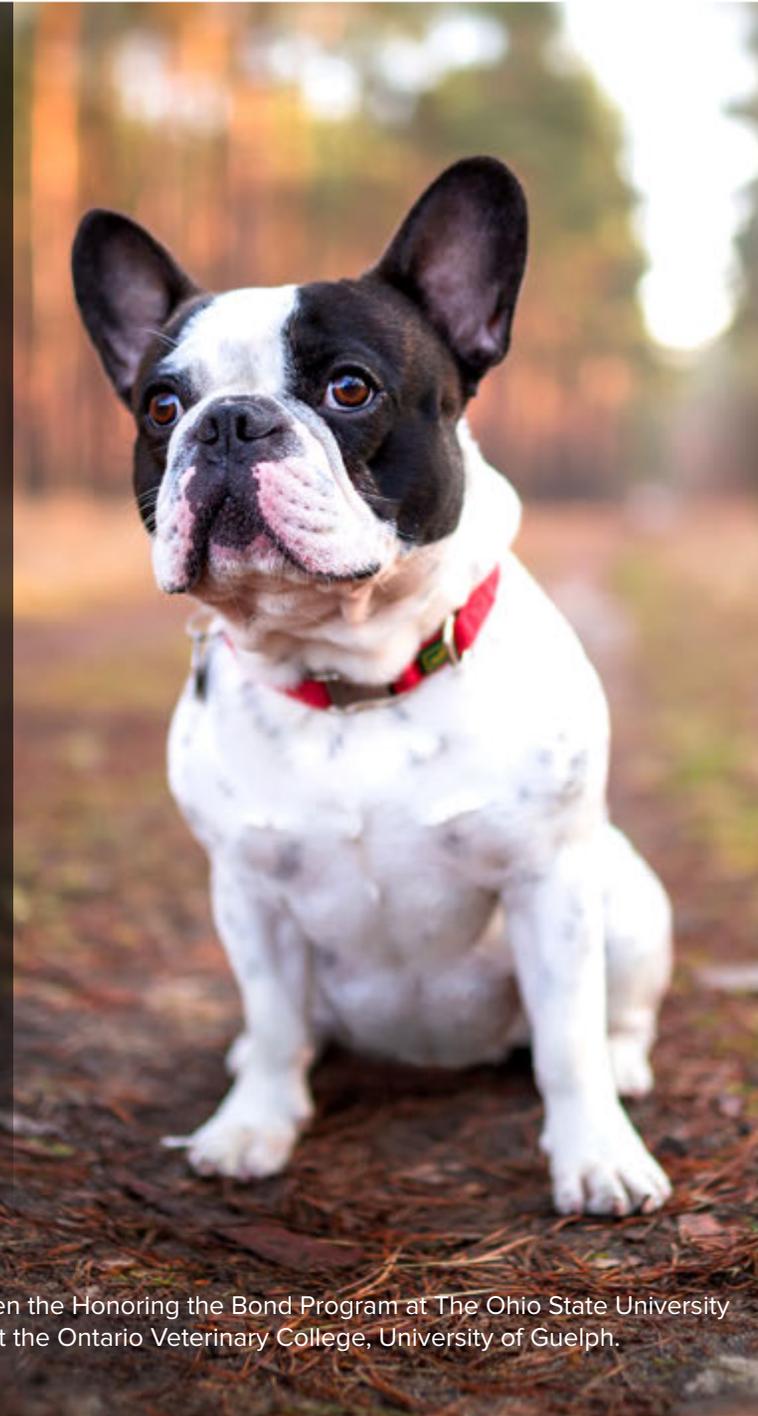
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