



SUPPORTING A FRIEND THROUGH PET LOSS

Introduction

Some people prefer to work through their grief in their own private way. However, if you feel your friend would appreciate support, you may find this fact sheet helpful.

Anyone of any age can be deeply affected by pet loss, and sometimes the depth of grief takes people aback. There is often a strong degree of shock, which is especially the case with a sudden and unexpected loss. Shock can make a person feel very 'out of sorts', feeling weepy, sick, faint, weak, shaky, numb or disorientated. Grief itself brings its own potent mix of emotions. The person may find they can't stop crying, that they are unable eat, or that their sleep is disturbed. As well as the deep pain they are suffering, there may be disbelief, guilt, anger and the need to blame someone for what has happened to their pet (the latter sometimes being directed at the vet) or often they blame themselves.

This complexity of feelings and emotions can make the person vulnerable, and physically, mentally and emotionally run-down. With their emotions in this raw state, they may not be able to face going to work, or to deal with anyone outside their circle of family and close friends, until they begin to feel stronger in themselves.

Ideas on what to say

As it is difficult to know what to say and how to be with someone suffering grief, people sometimes opt to avoid the situation, which can leave the person feeling isolated and alone. However, as a friend, there is much you can do to help them through this difficult time. Whilst no-one can actually relieve them of their grief, showing that you care will make a difference. Let them know you recognise the special relationship they had with their pet, and that you are saddened by their loss. You can also say that you understand why they are feeling so terribly upset, and that you are there for them should they want to talk.

If you can, try to convey that you feel totally at ease with them showing their emotions. When they see that their crying does not faze you, they will be relieved. It can help your friend to talk through the many emotions they are feeling and, whilst they may get upset doing so, it will be a relief to get some of it off their chest. However, if they do not feel like talking, allow them some quiet space, perhaps offering to make them a cup of tea or something similar.

Listening

Be prepared to listen, as people in grief mostly need to talk to someone who understands what they are feeling. You don't have to come up with answers or prompt them to talk, just being there for them will offer some comfort.

When to be a little firm

Whilst anything that alludes to 'getting a grip' is totally counter-productive, there are times when you may need to be a little firm with your friend, in terms of encouraging them to drink and eat, or to see their doctor if you are really worried about them. Use your instinct and be honest – if you are worried let them know you are concerned for their well-being and that you want to help if you can.

Getting another pet

It is usually better not to talk about getting another pet during the early stages of grief, as some people perceive this as a betrayal to the memory of the pet they have just lost. However, if your friend says they want to do this straightaway, encourage them to talk it through with you so that together you can work out whether it would perhaps be wise to wait until they are more settled. Bringing a new pet into the home can be quite challenging and your friend might need to feel stronger before going down this path.

Practical help

Your friend might appreciate help with a few practical tasks, such as calling their workplace if they are unable to go in over the next day or two, or contacting other people who may need to know what has happened. If they need to collect their pet's ashes from the vet a few days later, again they may value your support as this is a particularly difficult thing to do. Also, you may be able to prepare a light nutritious meal to have together, or go for a quiet walk. People who have lost a dog often find going out the house without their dog is hard as it brings back so many memories.

Making a difference

Loss of someone close – whether a relative, friend, or beloved pet – brings its own grief which is, of course, a painful process. One of the best things you can do for your friend during this troubled time is to let them know that you understand why they are feeling so much pain, and that you are there to listen and support. However, it is important not to get stressed and put pressure on yourself in your desire to help make things better. The most anyone can do is to be there for them, and to listen. Offering your time is one of the greatest gifts you can offer – do this, and you will have made a difference.

In conclusion

All the recommendations in this Support Sheet are offered as suggestions only. They result from personal experience of pet loss, from supporting others through pet grief, and from research. **However, if you are particularly concerned about the welfare of your friend, do not hesitate to suggest that they visit their GP for advice.** Many GPs are aware of the severity of grief in pet loss and offer sympathetic medical support.



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