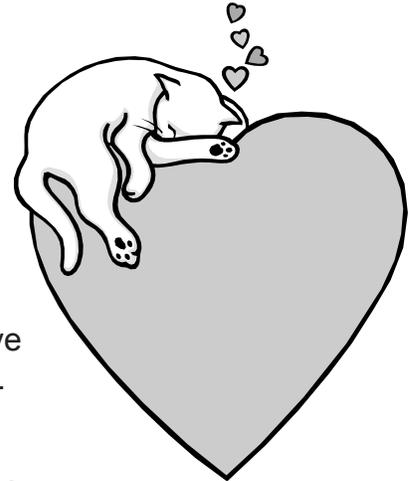


# When a Pet Dies

Losing a cherished companion animal can bring deep sadness – and often other emotions, such as guilt, anger, and depression. Grief is a process of physical, emotional, social, and cognitive reactions to loss. The grieving process is hard to work through! One needs to be patient with themselves and/or others experiencing loss. Studies have found that people often go through stages or phases of grief. Although responses to loss are as diverse as the people experiencing it, patterns of stages commonly experienced have emerged. Some stages of grief reactions are described below.



## **SHOCK/DENIAL:**

A feeling of numbness can last hours to weeks. It is a period often described as “unreal”, (i.e. being amazed to have made it through a euthanasia). Some reactions people experience during this stage are: having disorganized thoughts, feeling unaffected, feeling numb, being euphoric or hysterical, feeling outside their body or being talkative, hyper, or passive. Other people will feel in denial of the loss (i.e. “I can’t believe he is really gone...it just doesn’t seem real.”)

## **SEARCHING/YEARNING:**

People will often find themselves acutely missing the pet that is gone. Individuals in this phase can be pre-occupied with thoughts of the deceased; they may have dreams about the pet who is gone. Reactions experienced may also include sensing that one sees or hears the pet outside their home. Feelings commonly experienced are intense pining, sadness, fear, anger, relief, irritability, guilt, and yearning. Sometimes anger is not directed at the loss, but instead towards a family member, veterinarian, self or God. During this period individuals may find themselves bursting into tears at unexpected times. People may also experience physical illness, pain, weight change, fatigue, and change in appetite.

## **DISORGANIZATION:**

During this phase individuals are beginning to live their lives without their animal companion and learning new skills. This commonly leads to feeling disorganized, as well as needing to evaluate and learn different ways of managing life (i.e. how to fill that empty spot when coming home without someone to greet you.)

## **REORGANIZATION:**

People in grief forget that grief is a process and that through this process, new coping skills are learned. The pet who is gone is usually never forgotten. In the case of death, most individuals never “get over” the loss. However, survivors learn to live with loss. The intensity of the loss changes and a survivor can rejoin life. One finds that they can eat and sleep. Individuals may establish new relationships with pets. Sadness and crying still occur at times, while simultaneously increased happiness will be experienced.

## Steps that you can take to help manage your feelings during this time of loss:

**ACCEPT your Grief:** It is not something to be avoided, battled, or “gotten over.” Seek out friends who understand the bond with a companion animal and can offer uncritical support.

**KEEP BUSY:** You can take control of your grieving process by keeping to your normal daily routine (such as work, family duties, grooming your remaining cat or playing catch with your dog).

**COUNT your Blessings:** Grief focuses you on your loss – so take stock of what you haven’t lost. Include family, friends, other companion animals, and anything else that is important to you.

**CHANNEL Guilt into Growth:** The death of a pet can bring powerful feelings of guilt, especially when it involves euthanasia or an accident. Put those feelings to use to improve the lives of other animals. If for example, your companion died from antifreeze poisoning, commit yourself to educating others about this danger.

**SEEK Closure:** Find a way to acknowledge the ending of your companion’s life, such as a funeral service or memorial tribute. One way to do this is to create a written, photographic or artistic memorial that highlights favorite memories.

**DECIDE not to be hasty:** Impulsive acts, such as disposing of your companion’s belongings or rushing out to get another pet, may be decisions you will later regret. Take time to process your feelings.

**SEEK Help:** While there is no “standard” duration for grief, the pain of loss normally eases over time. Sometimes, however, other issues can complicate the grieving process. If your feelings of sorrow or guilt have not diminished after several months, you may wish to join a pet loss support group or meet with a counselor who specializes in this type of bereavement.



San Bernardino County  
Animal Care & Control Program  
**(800) 472-5609**