

Pet Loss & Grieving: Part Two

By Jennifer M. Brauns

If you missed part one of this article you can read or download it from our website www.milehighdog.com.

When you lose a pet, it leaves an enormous hole in your heart, your home and your life. The love of a dog can be the most profound of any relationship in your life due to the truly unconditional nature of their feelings toward you as their human. So, it's quite understandable why many people struggle to pick up the pieces when they lose a pet. The grief can be completely overwhelming. Often, people have a much harder time losing a pet than a parent, sibling or best friend. So, while people may feel that experiencing serious grief is unjustified, it is in fact, quite the opposite.

We have all felt grief in our lifetime, but few people understand the grief process or its critical role in our health and well-being. Until you process grief, you are emotionally stuck and in some cases even unable to properly function in day-to-day life or form healthy relationships. Putting a lid on your emotions hurts you and everyone in your life. This article explores how to move through the grieving process without getting stuck.

Stages of Grieving

When you lose a pet, there are many emotions that rise to the surface. Experts agree that the grief process is the same for pets and people. The Grief Education Institute of Denver broadly defines the stages of grief as shock, protest, disorganization and reorganization. Following the death of a pet, it is common to feel profound sadness, guilt, anger, resentment and

disbelief. People are often unable to think clearly or function through the day. It is not uncommon to swing from crying or feeling overwhelming sadness to feeling simply numb or dazed. The initial shock can last from minutes to weeks, and is different for everyone. The reason we suggest making difficult end-of-life decisions for your pet now is that you may not have the mental clarity to make decisions immediately following the death of your furry friend.



Photo by Kim Blackmore

Once the initial shock wears off, the protest phase begins. Our heart and mind struggle to fight off accepting that our companion is gone. During this time it is common to alternate between waves of intense realization that the event occurred, and numbness or exhaustion. At times we function as if on auto-pilot just going through life's paces without much thought. In this waffling back and forth between reality and numbness, our mind begins to accept the reality in small doses and we start to come to grips with what life will be like without our loved one by our side. During this time, people are often reminded of their pet frequently and at times think they see, hear or feel them nearby.

Following shock is disorganization. It is truly the low point in the grieving

process. The fact that your pet is gone has hit you like a ton of bricks. You may not be able to apply yourself to your work, your family or anything else and you may feel lost. Some people can become deeply depressed at this time. Support from friends, family or church can be very helpful. It's important to know that the pain will pass and that it is a normal and necessary part of the grief process. This difficult time lays the foundation for bonding with people and animals again and forming healthy relationships in our future.

Once the painful disorganization is complete, we arrive on the other side of the loss experience ready to put our lives back together again. You've accepted that your pet is gone and will never come back, but you can move on and refocus your attention on family, friends, work, hobbies and life again. You will still experience occasional sadness, but grief will not consume your entire day.

Some people are able to come to grips with the loss of a pet in a relatively short period of time, but many people get stuck emotionally. There are several Pet Loss Support Groups that can provide exceptional understanding and support. If support groups are not your style, there are a number of very experienced counselors who specialize in loss and grief issues who offer individual counseling. We spoke with several well-known grief and loss counselors to get their advice and insight.

Denver's longest standing Pet Loss Support Group is provided by Human Animal Bond Trust (HABT). Founded by the Denver Area

Veterinary Medical Society, HABT exists to provide education and support for people who have lost or are anticipating the loss of a pet. The group meets every Thursday night from 6:30 to 8:00 pm. There is no charge to attend and no reservation is required.

Ann Johnson has been a Pet Loss Support Group facilitator with HABT for twenty-three years. "The group is about talking, sharing, asking questions and helping people when they get stuck. Everyone has time to tell their story and share pictures. People open up, respond and share. There are a lot of tears, pain, struggle and guilt. There is always guilt involved, along with second guessing. People feel so responsible for the lives of their animals," she added. The guilt can be about whether it was too soon, too late, why they didn't see it coming, or what they should have done. "They always feel like they should have done something," Ann shared. "People are always so supportive of each other and sensitive toward each other. There is power in what happens. Everyone knows what it feels like and having a community like that is very empowering."

"In practically every session, someone has said that they have had a harder time with the loss of their pet than they did when they lost their mother, father or brother," she said. While many people attend the Pet Loss Support Group within hours, days or weeks of losing a pet, they have had people attend as much as a year after losing a pet or when another loss or life event triggers grief issues again. The HABT Pet Loss Support Group has three facilitators who rotate during different times of the year. The other facilitators are Susan Anschuetz and Kay Gilchrist. Like Ann, Susan and Kay have

been facilitators for twenty-three years and all three women provide individual loss and grief counseling through their private practices.



Photo by Martin Green

Next we spoke to Suzanne Hetts. An animal behaviorist by trade, Suzanne was Co-Founder of the Pet Loss Education Program at Colorado State University (CSU). During the mid 1980s, Dr. Steve Withrow, head of the Oncology Department at CSU's Veterinary Medical School, realized he was spending a lot of time with his oncology clients in helping them deal with their pet's disease and subsequent death. He wanted to help provide support and education for the families of his terminal cancer patients.

Suzanne and others teamed up with CSU's Marriage and Family Therapy Department to provide support for the families of their terminal veterinary patients. "What we saw at CSU was that it wasn't uncommon for the death of a pet to bring up a lot of other unresolved grief issues for people," Suzanne shared. "Many of the pet owners we counseled did not have pets that were dying, but they were dealing with anticipatory grief around an amputation or other type of loss," Suzanne said. She wanted our readers to know that it is not abnormal to grieve for a long time over the loss of a pet. People often worry that there is something wrong with them, but there is not.

Next, we spoke with Julie Millick, a former Lakewood police officer who has been providing grief and other counseling services for thirty-five years. When asked what advice she could offer our readers, she had this to say. "It is important for people to remind themselves about their pet. The mind works in symbols. Write a story, compile a photo album or do other activities that help you remember. It is also important to observe anniversaries like birthdays," she added. In Julie's experience, friends seek her help right away while other people go through the overwhelming part, get mad and then contact her about three or four weeks down the road when they are still sad all the time. People often admit to being embarrassed that their pet meant so much to them that they can't get over the loss. "People don't think it's valid, like they should be getting over it sooner," she shared. "The hope is that you can transfer grief into something that honors the loved one," she added. Julie and her partner Marcie Miller own HeartGlass Studio in Golden. They lovingly make art glass keepsakes containing cremains of your beloved pet or loved one. I pressed Julie for a guideline about when to seek counseling. Everyone is different and she was hesitant to put a timeframe on grief, but she did suggest that if you are still crying a lot or can't pull it together after three weeks, it would be helpful to speak with someone. If there is traumatic shock involved, such as witnessing an accidental death, seek counseling without waiting.

Gender Differences in Grief

Julie had some gender-specific advice for dealing with pet loss. "Men are action people. The more they can do in action around the loss the better. If you can get them to take a hike to the

places the dog loved or put a memory photo album together or do something with action involved, it will help them open up the doors to their emotions. With women, being able to say the words and use enough intensity to express their feelings is what helps. Use feeling words with women and elicit their feelings of sadness. Writing music or stories with emotion is the way to move grief along for women. Women need to be able to say how bad they are feeling and, in the midst of big emotion, let the feelings be as raw as they are in order to process grief. Friends often don't want to make someone feel worse when they are dealing with a loss, but the only way out is truth," she said.

When It's Time to Say Goodbye

We touched in part one of this article on euthanasia, cremation and burial. Over the last two months in researching this article, there were two names that came up over and over again and while there seems no proper segue, we would be remiss to not further address their unique and caring end-of-life services. While many talented and caring veterinarians offer in-home euthanasia services, there are two Denver women who take it to the next level. Dr. Ann Brandenburg-Schroeder of Beside Still Water and Dr. Christine Daigler of A Peaceful Passage specialize in in-home euthanasia. "I couldn't imagine helping pets in a clinic environment after doing this," Dr. Daigler said.

Dr. Brandenburg-Schroeder has a background in both human and veterinary medicine. "I've always had in my mind the importance of helping at the time of dying and death. It's a very important time, whether animal or person, for everyone in the family," she said. Dr. Brandenburg-Schroeder

spoke of life, death and dying. "It's not just life and death you know," she said. "Death doesn't just happen immediately one day when you are ready to die. Acceptance happens a long time before you die when you make preparations and work toward death," she added. Beside Still Water seeks to change people's perception about dying. When helping a pet to move on, she typically spends hours on behalf of a single client. She spends about half an hour on the phone with a client to prepare, then there is time to process paperwork, travel time, anywhere from 1 to 3 hours with the family and pet in their home and then she carries the pet to the crematory or cemetery for the client.

These specialized services are far above and beyond what most veterinarians have time for or are able to offer, and their fees are definitely higher. The difference is that Drs. Brandenburg-Schroeder and Daigler assist animals in dying in the manner in which they wish to pass and help the animal and his family to face that their pet is ready to die and help him along. "People are so much more at peace when they realize that their job is to listen, hear and understand, and that their pet wants to and is asking for their help to die," she said. "I believe in the spirit of the animals. The people I assist are people who also believe. That is why they want something special and different for their pet. They are not just animals to these families. There is no stress and no hurry, we just allow the pet to let go of all things painful and distressing and to relax. The only work left to do is the work of dying. The families talk a lot, help each other, share stories and support one another and their pet through the process," she explained. While part

one of this article mentioned that in-home euthanasia services cost about the same as in-clinic euthanasia, we must differentiate here between the services of Beside Still Water and A Peaceful Passage and those of a typical veterinary house call.

"The first person to approach for making your pet comfortable and dealing with end-of-life issues is your family veterinarian. They know you and your pet best and have an existing relationship with you. If your family vet is not able to provide care that feels right, they will refer you to someone else," Dr. Brandenburg-Schroeder said. All that said, during our calls to Denver vet clinics to compile data for our end-of-life resource directory, the names Beside Still Water and A Peaceful Passage came up dozens of times by vet clinics who do not provide in-home euthanasia but who highly recommended the services of these two women for people who wish to assist their pet in passing at home.

Well, once again we have far exceeded the page space available to share the findings of our Pet Loss and Grieving research with you. We will pick up again in the next issue to complete the topics of cremation, burial and memorializing your pet. 🐾



Photo by Kim Blackmore

Denver Area Veterinarians offering in-home euthanasia services:

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|-------------------------------------|--------------|--|
| 4 Paws Animal Clinic | 303-232-2023 | Lakewood |
| A Peaceful Passage | 303-948-1540 | Mobile (specializes in in-home euthanasia) |
| Academy Acres Animal Hospital | 303-690-1130 | Englewood |
| Allbrick Veterinary Clinic | 303-429-1499 | Denver |
| Animal Clinic of Parker | 303-840-1255 | Parker |
| Animal Doctor | 303-466-8888 | Broomfield |
| Annie's Animal Clinic | 303-471-5040 | Highlands Ranch |
| Arapahoe Veterinary Hospital | 303-794-5574 | Littleton |
| Arrowhead Animal Hospital | 303-469-1616 | Westminster |
| Arvada Animal Hospital | 303-202-1121 | Arvada |
| At Home Veterinary Service | 303-855-1671 | Mobile |
| Bellevue Animal Clinic | 303-794-2008 | Englewood |
| Beside Still Water | 303-237-0817 | Mobile (specializes in in-home euthanasia) |
| Best Friends Veterinary Care | 720-384-6981 | Mobile |
| Brentwood Animal Hospital | 303-761-0103 | Denver |
| Broadview Animal Clinic | 303-755-1424 | Littleton |
| Brooklyn Veterinary Clinic | 303-688-9352 | Castle Rock |
| Capitol Hill Veterinary Clinic | 303-329-3131 | Capitol Hill |
| Centennial Valley Animal Hospital | 303-578-5418 | Louisville |
| Cherrellyn Animal Hospital | 303-781-7841 | Englewood |
| Cherry Hills Animal Hospital | 303-730-3248 | Littleton |
| City Rover Mobile Vet | 720-344-9196 | Franktown |
| Companion Animal Hospital | 303-779-5525 | Centennial |
| Deer Creek Animal Hospital | 303-973-4200 | Littleton |
| Denver Animal Hospital | 303-871-8719 | Littleton |
| Dr. Bob's Vet Shop | 303-502-2400 | Lakewood |
| East West Veterinary Service | 303-816-6006 | Mobile |
| Firehouse Animal Hospital | 303-733-2226 | Capitol Hill |
| Firehouse Animal Hospital | 303-973-0442 | Ken Caryl |
| Firehouse Animal Hospital | 303-794-5574 | Littleton |
| Firehouse Animal Hospital | 303-830-7387 | Park Hill |
| Firehouse Animal Hospital | 303-452-8704 | Thornton |
| Gentle Touch Animal Hospital | 303-691-3720 | Denver |
| Gentle Vet | 303-691-1504 | Morrison |
| Goldenvue Veterinary Hospital | 303-279-9182 | Golden |
| Healing Touch Veterinary | 303-554-7141 | Mobile |
| Hearthside Home Veterinary Care | 303-681-6383 | Mobile |
| Home Veterinary Care | 303-467-2166 | Mobile |
| Homestead Animal Hospital | 303-771-7350 | Centennial |
| Jasper Animal Hospital | 303-665-4002 | Lafayette |
| Mile High Mobile Veterinary Service | 303-394-3189 | Mobile |
| Mobile Small Animal Clinic | 303-697-6350 | Mobile |
| Neighborhood Pet Care Center | 303-797-8461 | Littleton |
| North Metro Animal Hospital | 303-433-8835 | Mobile (non-profit vet) |
| Parker Mobile Dog & Cat Service | 303-688-7244 | Parker |
| Paw Prints Mobile Vet | 720-238-2939 | Mobile |
| Pet Palace Veterinary Clinic | 303-699-0477 | Aurora |
| Rocky Mountain Mobile Vet Clinic | 303-257-0202 | Mobile |
| Southeast Mobile Veterinary Clinic | 303-766-5167 | Mobile |
| Stockton Animal Hospital | 303-985-7112 | Lakewood |
| Table Mountain Veterinary Clinic | 303-279-1701 | Golden |
| University Hills Animal Hospital | 303-757-5638 | Denver |
| VCA All Pets Lafayette | 303-665-4230 | Lafayette |
| VCA Tenaker Pet Care Center | 303-850-9789 | Highlands Ranch |

Our resource directory will continue in the next issue with providers of these products and services:

- Hospice Services
- Crematories
- Pet Cemeteries
- Pet Caskets
- Headstones
- Garden Markers
- Cremation Urns
- Sympathy Gifts
- Memorial Items
- Portrait Artists
- Memorial Jewelry
- Animal Communicators

Denver Area Pet Loss Support Groups:

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| Animal Emergency & Specialty Center (Parker) | 720-842-5050 | www.AESCparker.com |
| Human Animal Bond Trust - Pet Loss Support Group (Denver) | 303-318-0447 | www.humananimalbondtrust.org |
| The Pet Stuff Place - Pet Loss Peer Support (Castle Rock) | 303-814-6060 | www.thepetstuffplace.com |

Denver Area Pet Loss & Grief Counselors:

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| Susan Anschuetz | 303-860-9228 | |
| Anne Cattarello | 720-352-0930 | anne@gentlepsychotherapy.com |
| Jan Cook | 303-360-0900 | chrysalis231@email.msn.com |
| Nancy Cronk | 303-766-3123 | animalclergy@aol.com |
| Kay Gilchrist | 303-995-2311 | |
| Ann Johnson | 303-238-0842 | |
| Mary Jeanne Murl | 303-745-0860 | satchsmom@yahoo.com |
| Fran Osmak | 720-201-6597 | fosmak@comcast.net |

We have made every effort to provide a comprehensive list of providers. If we missed you, please e-mail jmbrauns@aol.com and we will include you in the next issue.