

Ask Your Therapist

By Krishnabai, MSW, LICSW, the Ashby Center for Counseling

Grieving the Loss of Your Animal Companion

For many years I have had an unusual “specialty niche” within my practice: pet bereavement. While I have always kept friends company during and after the death of a pet, it was after my first client who came for therapy specifically to deal with her grief about the death of her cat that I realized the need for pet bereavement therapy. I saw first hand the pain she felt when people said things such as “He was a cat - not a baby” and “Just go get another one” and “You’re still upset? That was a month ago” and how unable she was to openly deal with her grief because of the shame she felt because she could not “Just get over it”.

I often lend out my copy of Pack of Two by Caroline Knapp because her premise is this: Love is love, no matter who the Beloved is. We either love or we don’t. We love in many different ways, different formats, different degrees but the actual root of the emotion is the same. Love is love.

What happens during pet bereavement therapy? In 95% of the cases, I see the person for only 1 or 2 times. I ask that they bring in photos of the pet and I ask that they tell me stories about that pet such as favorite moments, silly memories, special talents and adventures as well as the painful feelings and memories of the death. Mostly I keep my mouth shut and just listen and look at photos. I find that people who really love their animal companions are hungry for a chance to talk openly about their pet and gratefully speak at great length about them. When they grow quiet I talk about how legitimate their feelings are and I encourage them to keep talking to others who understand and will listen supportively to them. I tell them that grief takes as long as it takes and not to judge (or let others judge) their process. I suggest they make a scrapbook of memorabilia or just keep the pet’s photo in their wallet for as long as they want it there.

If you know someone who is grieving the loss of their pet, here are some things you can do. 1. Listen without judgment. 2. Don’t make any suggestions about what you think they should do. 3. Send them a pet bereavement card. (Yes, they exist and can be found at the Cooperage in the wonderful Pet Corner of that store.) 4. If you have a pet ask if they would like a visit from your pet to get a “cat fix” or a “dog fix” especially if theirs was an “only pet”. 5. Send a donation to a local no-kill shelter such as the Ahimsa Haven Pet Shelter in Winchendon and include in your donation letter who the money is in memory of. 6. Be extra kind.

To read all the prior Ask Your Therapist columns go to www.krishnabai.com where you can also send Krishnabai a general question for her column.

Krishnabai, MSW is a therapist in Ashby and Wellesley Hills where she sees adults, older teens and couples. The core of her work is the discovery and expression of the Authentic Self. She focuses on the identification, expression, and resolution of emotions, commitment to honesty and the use of remedial education and information. The Ashby Center for Counseling 978-386-5657