

Never Do This After Losing a Pet

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By Dr. Karen Becker

Story at-a-glance

When two pets are closely bonded and one of them dies, the surviving pet can experience grief that is similar to human grief.

Signs of grief in a companion animal include changes in sleeping or eating habits, lethargy, clinginess, and repeated searching from room to room for the pet that has passed.

Steps you can take to comfort a grieving pet include keeping a consistent daily routine, distracting your pet with fun activities and exercise, and offering a few all-natural supplements.

When a family loses a beloved companion animal, it's hard on everyone, including surviving pets. Dealing with your own grief, and perhaps the grief of a child, is difficult enough without also worrying about a remaining pet that may have stopped eating or is showing other signs of depression.

When two pets are closely bonded and one of them dies, the surviving animal may have what experts refer to as a "distress reaction" that is similar in many ways to human grief. Some of the signs include:

- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Changes in eating habits
- Lack of interest in normal activities
- Reluctance to be in a room or home alone, or away from human family members
- Wandering the house, searching for their lost friend

10 Tips for Helping Your Surviving Pet Deal with a Loss

•Closely monitor your surviving pet.

The process of grieving isn't well understood in either humans or companion animals, so it's best to pay special attention to your surviving pet for signs of a distress reaction. Knowing what to expect, and how to react, can be very helpful during a time when everyone in the family is feeling a deep sense of loss.

•Keep daily routines as consistent as possible.

Pets do best when they know what to expect from one day to the next (this is true for all pets, not just

those who are grieving the loss of a buddy). Try to keep mealtimes, exercise, walks, playtime, grooming, bedtime, and other daily activities on a consistent schedule.

•Keep your pet’s diet and mealtimes the same.

Your pet may not have much of an appetite in the days following the death of a housemate, but continue to offer him the same food he’s used to, at the same time each day. Store what he doesn’t eat in the fridge, and offer it to him again at his next regularly scheduled mealtime. Use his hunger to help him get his appetite back by resisting the urge to entice him with treats.

If his appetite doesn’t pick up after several days or he’s refusing to eat anything at all, make an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out a health problem. Cats, in particular, should not go without eating for more than a couple of days or they risk developing a potentially fatal condition called hepatic lipidosis.

•Take care not to inadvertently reward your pet’s depression.

This is a tough one, because it’s only natural to want to comfort your surviving pet. Unfortunately, especially in the case of dogs, giving attention to a pet who is displaying an undesirable behavior can reinforce the behavior. Obviously the last thing you want to do is reward a lack of appetite, anxiety, inactivity, or other types of distress reactions in your pet.

Instead, I recommend distracting her with health-giving activities that provide opportunities for positive behavior reinforcement. This can be a walk, short training sessions, a game of fetch, or engaging in exercise together.

•In multi-pet households, allow surviving pets to establish their own revised social structure.

When there are more than two pets in the family, each member of the group has a specific relationship with every other member of the group. When an animal dies, it creates temporary instability within the group. This can result in conflicts that are disturbing to human family members, but unless one of your pets is becoming a danger to the others, it’s best to let them re-establish group dynamics on their own.

If there’s a lot of growling, barking, hissing, or attacking that isn’t subsiding as the group settles into its “new normal,” I recommend consulting either your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist for guidance on how to resolve difficulties between pets.

•Think twice before quickly adding a new pet to the family.

Don’t automatically assume that acquiring a new pet to “replace” the lost pet is the answer. Dealing with loss and grief is a process that is individual for each of us and each of our animal companions, and while some family members may be ready immediately for a new pet, others may not be.

According to the Santa Barbara Independent:

“Although it may be tempting to run out and adopt another dog or cat after your pet passes away, most experts recommend waiting at least three months to give your pet time to adjust.

Adopting a new puppy or kitten may not be the best idea since a hyperactive animal can be physically and emotionally stressful on your grieving pet. Even an older, mellower cat or dog may cause your

pet to become territorial.

Be sure your pet is fully over his grief before you bring a new pet into your home.”

Take care not to further upset your pet with dramatic emotional displays in his presence.

Our pets pick up on our emotions, so encourage family members who are dealing with their own grief to be sensitive to your pet’s state of mind. It’s okay to seek comfort from your surviving pet as long as you don’t frighten him or cause him additional distress.

•Give it time.

It’s hard to know how long our pets’ memories are, but based on anecdotal evidence, it seems that dogs in particular do remember companions for some time. Your pet’s grieving process may take a few days, weeks, or even months, but eventually most pets return to their normal lively selves.

If at any point you feel your pet is suffering unnecessarily or there is something more going on than simply missing his friend, I recommend discussing the situation with your veterinarian as a first step.

•Consider having your pet present at his companion’s death.

This may sound a bit morbid, but some pet guardians feel it helps to have the surviving pet present during euthanasia, or allow them to see and smell their friend’s body once death has occurred.

Your pet may have no obvious reaction to his friend’s body in death, but it may help him to comprehend there is no need to search the house for the animal that has passed.

•Use natural grief remedies, if needed.

There are some excellent homeopathic and Bach flower remedies that can be easily administered to your grieving pet until you see an emotional shift for the better. Some of my favorites include homeopathic Ignatia, Jackson Galaxy’s Spirit Essences Loss Remedy, OptiBalance Love Lost, the Bach flower remedy Honeysuckle, and Green Hope Farm Grief and Loss.