Managing Grief

A Guide to Mourning and Memorializing Your Companion Animal

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

VETERINARY MEDICAL CENTER

Veterinary Social Work Services
More than 80 percent of companion animal owners in America consider their animals to be members of their family, making the loss of a companion animal a painful experience. During this time of transition, it is important for people to have a support system that understands the human-animal bond.

Veterinary Social Work Services (VSWS) at the Michigan State University Veterinary Medical Center facilitates a support group for the loss of companion animals. These meetings are a free service, and occur on the second and fourth Thursday of each month at 6:30 p.m., except for November and December. Please call 517-432-5967 for holiday meeting times.

The VSWS also hosts a Companion Animal Memorial Service every fall on a Sunday afternoon. All are welcome to attend. Please contact our office for details regarding our yearly service.

For more information, please contact:
Veterinary Social Work Services
vsw@cvm.msu.edu
517-432-5967

“Until one has loved an animal, a part of one’s soul remains unawakened.”
-Anatole France, writer
What to Do Next

Following the death of a companion animal, owners have to make decisions regarding their animal’s remains. A veterinarian will review the options available with you. Options include:

- Home burial (take animal remains home)
- Communal cremation (with no remains returned to the owner)
- Private cremation (with remains returned to the owner) through external companies. Your veterinarian will be able to provide the contact details of local pet crematoria.

Once a decision is made, owners inform their veterinarian if they plan to take the animal home or use cremation. If owners choose to take the remains home, the animal will be prepared and given to them.

Communal Cremation
If owners choose communal cremation and indicate this on the required Hospital paperwork, no further action is necessary.

Private Cremation
- Private cremation arrangements are made directly between the owner and company or institution they plan to use
- Owners call the cremation company they have chosen

- Owners provide their name and contact information and report that the animal is at the MSU Veterinary Medical Center
- Owners provide information regarding their animal such as name and type of animal
- Cremation company should explain when they will come to MSU for pick up and when owners should expect the cremated remains to be ready

Ways to Memorialize Your Animal Companion
One way to create an enduring connection with your animal is by memorializing them. This can help you maintain the bond between you and your pet and with the grieving process itself. Some ways to memorialize your animal companion are:

- Writing an obituary
- Planting a tree, bush, or flower in the animal’s memory
- Creating a scrapbook or photo album
- Holding a memorial service with family and friends
- Donating or getting involved with a local humane society
- Taking a piece of their fur or mane to use in an ornament or charm
Grieving is a complicated process, and there is no one-size-fits-all model for how to grieve the loss of a companion animal. In his book *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, J. William Worden proposes that there are four main tasks associated with mourning: accepting the reality of the loss, working through the pain of grief, adjusting to the environment in which the deceased is missing, and finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. These tasks are not necessarily completed in a clear, linear order, nor do they follow a standard timeline.

What do these tasks mean, and how can we go about working through these different aspects of mourning?

**Task 1: To Accept the Reality of the Loss**
This can mean different things to different people; for some, accepting the reality of the loss may be enacted through funeral or burial rites, while for others, it may be more about coming to terms with the loss such as what, when, where, and how the loss occurred.

**Task 2: To Work Through the Pain of Grief**
This we simply refer to as “feeling the feelings.” This task is about acknowledging and trying to understand the broad range of emotions that you may experience when grieving, while taking care to not deny or minimize feelings.

**Task 3: To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing**
This task involves getting used to an environment without your pet. It could mean adjusting to a home in which your companion animal no longer lives or getting used to an activity without the presence of your pet.

**Task 4: To Find an Enduring Connection with the Deceased While Embarking on a New Life**
Through this task, we come to balance our memories and bonds with our animals with the need to continue living.
While our group is designed for adults, we support families, and we are here to provide assistance for all. There are many ways to assist a child through the grieving process following the loss of a pet. You might:

- Hold a funeral
- Create a keepsake
- Write a family letter
- Assure the child that it is okay to express his/her feelings

Oftentimes, the loss of a pet is a child’s first experience with death. While children do grieve, they do not necessarily respond to death in the same ways as adults. Depending on a child’s developmental age, they may take longer to process information, and are more likely to express their feelings through action or play. Younger children in particular may have trouble understanding what death means. It is important for parents and caregivers to use clear and concrete information at an age-appropriate level to describe an animal’s death. Avoid using phrases like “passed away” or “put to sleep,” as this can be confusing for children. Maintain a calm tone of voice and use clear, unambiguous vocabulary such as “death” or “died.” Explain that death means an animal’s body doesn’t work anymore, usually because they were very sick, hurt, or old. Listen to your child’s questions and respond with simple, honest answers. Be careful not to give them more information than they can absorb. Kids tend to ask questions in order to learn answers they are ready to know. It’s okay to answer them honestly and with sensitivity.

Naturally curious, children may have many questions about their animal’s illness and/or death. It is best to try to answer these questions as honestly as possible, incorporating your own values and belief systems as you see fit. If you have questions or would like to discuss how your child is coping, please feel free to contact us. We are available to consult with you.
The loss of a companion animal can be painful for individuals and families. During this time of transition, it is important to have a support system that understands the human-animal bond. Below are some support services specific to pet loss, including those offered by MSU’s Veterinary Social Work Services.

**MSU Resources**

**VSWS Pet Loss Support Group**: Our Pet Loss Support Group meets the second and fourth Thursday of every month from 6:30–7:30 p.m. in the MSU Small Animal Clinic. All are welcome to attend, and there is no need to register in advance.

**Grief Support Services**: We offer grief support services over the phone and in person. Our availability varies during the week, but we can generally be reached most days and some evenings. You can contact us at 517-432-5967. All messages will be returned during the next shift.

**Other Resources**

**ASPCA Pet Loss Hotline**: 877-GRIEF-10 (877-474-3310)

**Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement**: Pet loss and anticipatory bereavement chat rooms are available at aplb.org.

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### Recommended Reading

#### For Children
- *For Every Cat an Angel*  
  by Christine Davis
- *For Every Dog an Angel*  
  by Christine Davis
- *Forever Paws*  
  by Christine Davis
- *Bill at the Rainbow Bridge*  
  by Dan Carrison and Peg DuVal
- *I'll Always Love You*  
  by Hans Wilhelm
- *Grief is a Mess*  
  by Jackie Shuld
- *I Miss My Pet*  
  by Pat Thomas
- *Saying Goodbye to Lulu*  
  by Corinne Demas
- *The Goodbye Book*  
  by Todd Parr

#### For Teens and Adults
- *Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens*  
  by Alan D. Wolfelt
- *Understanding Your Grief*  
  by Alan D. Wolfelt
- *Comfort*  
  by Ann Hood
- *When a Family Pet Dies: A Guide to Dealing with Children’s Loss*  
  by JoAnn Tuzo-Jarolmen
- *Three Cats, Two Dogs*  
  by David Congalton
The MSU Veterinary Medical Center is located on the southeast corner of Bogue Street and Wilson Road on the MSU campus. Please enter through the Small Animal Clinic. Entrance and parking are off Wilson Road.

MSU Veterinary Medical Center
736 Wilson Road
East Lansing, MI 48824