

# **Guiding Pet Parents Through Grief and Healing**

## **A Special Interview With Moira Allen**

**By Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Hi, I'm Dr. Karen Becker and joining me today is Moira Allen, who is really made it her passion to help people work through their grief. And she's put together a tremendous body of information and work helping people cope with their overwhelming feelings of loss and sorrow. And I'm so thankful that she's joining me today as a part of our Grief Awareness Week. So, Moira, thank you for joining me.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And I'm excited to learn more about your passion. But let's back up and talk a little bit to our listeners and readers about how you got into the field of grief therapy, grief work, grief awareness, because I'm sure that probably trial by fire, I'm assuming that you had unaddressed grief, and you figured out that you wanted to address it. But if you could walk us through how you got into this line of work or passion, that would be great.

**Moira Allen:**

Well, thank you, Karen. It goes back to what was about 1987, I think. And of course, it starts with losing a pet. And we had a cat and that cat died. And of course, I was naturally grieving. But at the time, I was working for a pet magazine, which doesn't exist under the same name anymore, so I won't get into which one, and we had a custom of running reader surveys every month.

**Moira Allen:**

So every month, we'd run a survey and the next month, or two months later, we do the results. And we did surveys on things like, "What kind of color do you like for your dog" and blah blah blah, and we get like, you know, 30 or 40 responses. And I don't know why we chose this, but we ran a survey on pet loss. And we got hundreds of responses. And people just poured their hearts out. They wrote letters, they wrote about how – the thing that came across to me, and this was how many people were writing.

**Moira Allen:**

“I'm probably the only person who feels this way.” But and then they'd go on to talk about how terrible it was and how much they hurt and how much they miss their pet or how guilty they felt. And you know, want to talk about guilt more later in this conversation. But just reading all these people who, you know, this was many, many – we won't say how many years before the internet. And so they had no, you didn't have blogs, you didn't have forums, you didn't have ways for people to get together and talk about this with each other.

**Moira Allen:**

And the realization that you had all these hundreds of people, every one of them sitting there in their home thinking they were the only person, that that they were somehow strange, or they had a mental problem because they felt so much grief over the loss of the pet. And I'm looking and reading all these responses and going there's a book here, you know, there's, you know, this needs to get out there. And there were only, I think, two books, both of which were very, they were written by psychologists, they were very complicated and academic and not at all user-friendly, as we would say today. And so I decided I was going to sit down and write the book about pet loss.

**Moira Allen:**

And one of the things that I was doing to was bringing together these stories from these people, so that it wasn't just me sitting down because a lot of books have come out since then it's like, I lost my pet, here's what I feel is all, you know, this is my experience,” but it's not kind of everybody's experience. So that's basically how the book got launched. And then years later, the internet came along. So then I launched the website, and I've basically been flogging this ever since. And what's amazing is I will still occasionally get an email from somebody saying, “Well, you know, losing a pet, it's really not that big a deal.” I mean, just kind of want to reach through the screen and smack somebody when they say that.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, yeah. And because it's also individual. Of course for some people, they just go to the pet store and get another one. That is not the vast majority of true pet lovers that I know. It is not – there's also those same people that get new husbands or wives when they also die. So you know, our ability to recycle life is very variable.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

This particular week, I wanted to do a deep dive about loss for those of us that struggled deeply and profoundly in just getting over just the day-to-day living without an animal that meant so much to us. So despite the fact that I'm sure you do get those emails every now and then I'm sure the vast majority of people not only reading your book, but visiting your website are having similar experiences to you and I, which is I'm having a hard time keeping going. Help me out.

**Moira Allen:**

Yeah, exactly.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. And so you set up your website for listeners that aren't familiar with your website, if people wanted to go visit it, could you give us some more information?

**Moira Allen:**

It's [www.Pet-Loss.net](http://www.Pet-Loss.net).

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Okay.

**Moira Allen:**

And so it's called The Pet Loss Support Page. And so it has lots of articles. It has a bunch of handouts, if you're by any chance of that, or you run a support group or something, there's a lot of free handouts on there. And we do also maintain a state-by-state guide to professional resources like counselors, support groups, cemeteries, hospice, in-home euthanasia, suppliers, that type of thing. And I try to keep that pretty much up to date.

**Moira Allen:**

Although I have to confess and this last year has been a little strange, and I haven't updated this last year. But basically, that's become pretty much an opt-in directory. So I know that it is like the most up to date, pet loss professional directory for online now. And so if you're looking for something in your area, that's a good place to start looking,

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

What a beautiful gift and resource to the community, Moira. Really, it just is. It's a resource that has not been out there until for you to put this vast resource together, it really is a gift. So through this evolution now of many decades of you helping people with resources and tools through their grief, can I ask, what are some of the kind of recurring beneficial steps that you have been able to identify as being maybe not consistently helpful for everyone, but generally applicable to the vast majority of people? Are there some consistent tips and suggestions that you have found consistently beneficial for people that are really struggling?

**Moira Allen:**

Well, one of the first things that is consistently, any issue, is accepting that you're hurt. And I think one of the problems we have today is we live in a very positive-focused society. I mean, you know, we're all supposed to be upbeat and happy all the time. And we don't have a lot of training in hurting. And of course, one of the reasons too is, you know, in our society today, we don't experience the amount of loss in our personal lives that, say, 100 years ago, you might have, yeah, and so we don't have a lot of training in grieving and so when that hits, we're not accustomed to that feeling. So I was like, "What's wrong with me? Why do I feel this way? I don't understand it." Especially if you are a first-time pet owner.

**Moira Allen:**

And I mean, after you've gone through it, you kind of build up the – you know what's going to happen, you can have all the intellectual understanding that it's going to happen in the world. And it doesn't help you feel any better when it actually happens. But at least you know you're going to go through this. When you're doing it for the first time, it's overwhelming. And you may easily think, "Is there something wrong with me? Why am I feeling this so intensely?"

**Moira Allen:**

And so the first most important step really is just embracing the fact, "You know, I'm going to feel bad, this is going to hurt, there's no way around it." If I broke my leg, I wouldn't be surprised that it's going to hurt for two or three weeks while it heals. That loss is kind of the same way. It's when it happens you just kind of have to sit back and realize, "You know what, I'm just going to feel bad for a while. And people around me are going to need to understand that I'm going to be feeling bad for a while and there's no shame in there's no guilt in that. And if you can't, I don't want to interact with that feeling. Just, you know, be understanding and back off until I feel better."

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yep. Yep. Do you find that the vast majority of people struggle with guilt or shame associated with their grief, people that are coming to your website struggling with feeling – I don't want to say embarrassed about their grief. But having difficulty to let letting people know around them the depth of their pain because they feel you know, it's a dog or cat and maybe we shouldn't – maybe I shouldn't feel this level of excruciating pain pertaining to an animal?

**Moira Allen:**

To a certain degree, I think there's still issues with people getting the kind of family support and certainly when you go outside the family, if you're in the workplace, and you know, you're still miserable, you might burst into tears at a moment's notice. And sometimes you find people who understand, sometimes you find people who don't, but you do feel embarrassed. And you know, the people are willing to cut you more slack if you say, “My sister died, or my mother died,” but when my cat died, it's like, “Oh, okay,” and then they really think you're going to be over it in a few days.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah.

**Moira Allen:**

And it's difficult. And a lot of people too, they feel like they don't want to show weakness. If they're a parent, they don't want to break down in front of the kids, I think they have to be the strong one. And that can create problems. Because then the kids, I've run into this problem where the kids are feeling like, “Well, mom or dad, they don't care.”

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Right.

**Moira Allen:**

Because they're not showing their grief. You know, they're trying to be strong for the sake of the kids, and the kids are getting kind of the wrong message there because the kids want to break down and cry. And the parents aren't showing how strongly they're grieving. So yeah, it needs to be a family understanding. We're all feeling this way. And we're all having to deal with this.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It's a really important point that you make about especially I think, with young kids, depending on the dynamic of each family, and depending on how open or communicative or emotionally available parents are to their kids. I haven't thought about that, I guess, to the extent that if parents are trying to stone-face their grief, that in one way, we're almost denying our young kids a lesson in empathy, by not showing the extent of, as parents, the extent of our grief to our kids.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

So I think that like that's a really valuable tip that parents out there, if you have a death of a hamster, or a parakeet, or a family, dog or cat, crying with your kids, and letting your kids see the transparency and your grief and how much you're hurting is an incredibly valuable, lifelong lesson in your children being able to openly express their own grief. And that's a really, really important piece.

**Moira Allen:**

But I think as you say, too, it's setting a tone for the rest of your life. You know, if you're a child and you're grieving, and your parents are setting the example that they're not, then you can grow up thinking, "Well, okay, once I become an adult, then I don't do this anymore." You know, I might have a cat or a dog or a parakeet, or hamster or whatever. But, you know, I will outgrow that reaction to the loss of a pet. And you're not going to.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Right, right. And I could see where later on then that could make, as the child becomes an adult, they may think that their feelings again are irrational, because "I should have grown out of this." And yet, it doesn't work that way. So as a great tip for parents, being open and honest, and communicative, and transparent in how you're feeling, including whenever the tears come allowing them to come or being able to verbalize your feelings for your kids in a role-modeling fashion is a very, very important piece of having your kids become emotionally competent later on to deal with loss. Really good tip.

**Moira Allen:**

And, of course, so you're asking, what are some of the tips? And of course, one of the big sources of guilt – the biggest, probably, is having to put your pet to sleep. And people are always asking, "How do I cope with that? And how do I deal with that? And how do I not feel guilty about that?" And one of the coping strategies that I've talked about in my book and on the website, and you know, pretty much everywhere I can is pointing out to people that today with

all the veterinary care that we have available, we can keep pets alive for so long. And help them overcome so many hardships and illnesses, injuries, things that, again, years ago, that would have been the end and it's not the end anymore.

**Moira Allen:**

And we have to recognize when we get to that point in a pet's life, that we've replaced nature. And we have to recognize that when we make that decision finally at the end of life since we have basically taken on the responsibility of replacing nature in our pets' lives, then we're replacing it in their death as well. And we have to be willing to make that decision because we've made all these other decisions that if we couldn't have made them, the pet would already have died naturally. and has not done so eventually, then we have to make that decision and saying all that, that doesn't take away the fact that it is the hardest, and it's just the most guilt-producing decision that we can make. Because again, and I was saying, you know, we're kind of a feel-good society, and we aren't accustomed to decisions where there's no feel-good option at the end of the road.

**Moira Allen:**

You know, we are kind of, I think, trained to believe that if you make the right decision, you're going to feel good about it. Or if you make a decision to put your pet to sleep, then you are not going to feel good about it, that just does not happen. And so we're not used to associating the fact that yes, you can make the right decision and it can just feel absolutely miserable, and like you're walking on broken glass.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Mm hmm [affirmative]. Such really, really good, profound thoughts. I also didn't think, Moira, about the fact that you know, some of my very old relatives, the women in the older relatives in my family have talked about how they miscarried three times lost a child at birth, all their kids born at home, one child died at birth, one child died at 2 another child died at 7. As a modern society with modern medicine, you're right, and not living in a Third World country. We, as humans, in modern technology, modern medicine have not experienced nearly the depth and breadth of hardship and death, recurrent heartbreak, of disease, dying and death that our ancestors previously have.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

You're absolutely right. And out of that, our ability to develop any type of coping mechanisms, or like you said, at least not you know, the feelings that are coming, we haven't had in one aspect, thankfully, we haven't had that repetitive grief in our lives that our relatives in previous generations have had to figure out, we've not navigated that in the same sense that they have. But

because modern medicine has afforded companion animals an unbelievable and artificially extended lifespan, we're able to keep cats in kidney failure alive for 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 years, which is a blessing.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And yet, we fail to recognize that many of our animals would have transitioned years previously, if we didn't have kind of artificially modern medicine to patch them up, and bandage him up and keep them going. And yet, it does not change the end result of the overwhelming pain. It is valid for us to recognize that we have, thanks to modern medicine, we have been able to give our pets the gift of life extension, but we're not stopping the hands of time, nor are we stopping the overwhelming feelings of grief. We're kind of postponing them, but we're not changing anything.

**Moira Allen:**

Yeah. And we are postponing it. And that's another area where – and you mentioned it earlier of when you do know, yeah, for example, you do have a cat who has gone into kidney failure. And I'm actually dealing with this right now myself and I have a cat at 16 years old. And so you know, I love the idea of five years, but I know that's not happening.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah.

**Moira Allen:**

But when you know, when you get a diagnosis, and there are many, many diagnoses, you know, you have a pet with cancer, for example. You realize that the end is no longer hypothetical. It's no longer an intellectual thing. It's like, "Well, yeah, I know. I mean, my cat 16 years old, and I know she's going to die eventually."

**Moira Allen:**

And that suddenly flips to like at 16 years old with kidney disease, eventually, could be two or three months from now. This is now reality, it's not hypothetical, then you go into what I call, basically pre-bereavement grieving, which is another thing that is hard for people around you to understand, you know, again, let's say you go into work because you've been told your dog has cancer, and you're miserable. And people are looking at you like, "but your dog's not dead yet. Why are you grieving?" And that one is very hard to explain, I think to people around you that you start grieving when you know your loss is coming.



**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Mm hmm [affirmative].

**Moira Allen:**

Not after your loss has happened. And that's also kind of a harder phase because you don't have – if you work through grief after you lose a pet. Ideally, eventually, you reach closure. When you're pre-grieving. There's no closure because the only closure is well, the pet dies and then you get to grieve for real.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yep.

**Moira Allen:**

So you just you know, it's going to get worse before it gets better.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

I also think, me being absolutely well-attuned to kind of pre-emptive grief or, or the anxiety associated with knowing what I know, as a doctor, I have struggled profoundly, professionally. I read the tissue sample, I get the blood work, I know what my clients are headed for. And in turn me being the caretaker, I view myself as also part of their family, certainly a part of their health care team, I have struggled profoundly, with anticipatory grief for my clients and for the patient that I know I'm going to walk them through this process.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

It also though, Moira, robs us of any – the anxiety can rob, rob us, of us appreciating the fact that they are still here today, and actually can prevent us from enjoying this last chapter of life with our companions. And that's a tough one to skate. Tough one to get around.

**Moira Allen:**

Yeah, and I think what you're saying is, you're seeing that in your practice that once you hit that point, and there, you know, you need to get into the sense that every cuddle that you now have is a gift. And you know, appreciate it, and appreciate the fact that you still get a chance to have a cuddle with your cat or your dog, and it's still coming around, and you're going to have good

days, you're going to have bad days, one of the things that I've noticed that veterinary clinics are doing now, which I think is wonderful is the candle, you know, on the counter. And that's relatively new.

**Moira Allen:**

I think that's just wonderful to basically remind everybody else there, too, that people are going through this, you may be going through this, and you're not alone in this. And one of the things that I do wish is that more clinics would, you know, pass out more information. You know, what, when you hit that point where you're giving the diagnosis, you know, your dog has this or your cat has this, start providing people with some of the materials that they're going to need to help them through this period of time.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yep. Moira, people visiting your website in the last – since your website has been last launched, do you see more people, rather than visiting your website and seeking resources after their pet has died? Are you seeing more people attempting to prepare their own hearts for this process that they're about to embark on? Are you seeing an increase in the number of people wanting resources the second that they recognize that they have a terminal diagnosis? Or that their pet is indeed actively dying? Are you seeing more people address grief earlier?

**Moira Allen:**

No, I really am not. I wish I were but generally, in terms of the emails that I get, it's almost always somebody who has gone through the loss and is now looking for the resources and finds the website and finds tools that most people are not looking for the information. And I think some of that is again, we don't want to think about it.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah.

**Moira Allen:**

And a lot of people don't want to think and again, also, I'm talking about a first-time pet owner, you don't really know what you know what he's battling with, or that you're going to really need to go find some information and understand what you are dealing with.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah.

**Moira Allen:**

But no, I'm really not seeing that.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Okay. Okay. And I agree with you. It's unfortunate. And yet I think it's human nature to avoid pain at all costs when we can I think that's hardwired into us and it's understandable why people will potentially, even the thought of searching, typing those words into a Google search, for a lot of people, too much. It's too much to think about.

**Moira Allen:**

You're making it real, and you'd rather it stays not real.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. Makes sense.

**Moira Allen:**

You're admitting it in your own mind. And it can take a while to admit it. And also, let's face it, you may be very focused on the steps here that you're needing to take to keep the pet in good health or as good health as you can keep it and you're more focused on taking care of the pet and taking care of you.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Right, right. So speaking of which, are there any tips that we can think about simultaneously while we are caring for the animal that is fading? What are some things that we can do to also, simultaneously, care for our own emotional well-being?

**Moira Allen:**

Well, one of the things that I find is important and it's a good idea to start. If you have that opportunity that you know your pet is failing, you know that there is bad health, start thinking about this. Think about ways to create memorials and you know, gather together photographs, for example that you've taken of the pet over the years. One of the things that I always like to do is get one of those picture frames that's got all the little pockets, you know that you can put in like 20 different pictures, and make a memorial over time of a particular pet and – oh, I see somebody up there.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

This is Callie. Yeah, and she's a definite comforter. Callie is a grief comforter. She's really good at her job. Yes, you are.

**Moira Allen:**

She's beautiful.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

She is. And she shows up almost always at the perfect time when people need her to make a quiet appearance to say, "I'm here to support you." And she's quite wonderful at discerning when people need her, which is great. But I love that idea of collecting pictures along the way.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

I have also found collecting hair as I brush my animals. I started collecting Ziploc baggies of you know what I remove their hair, I take their hair and put it in a Ziploc and then at Christmas time, they now have these glass ornaments that you can add hair, you can add anything to but they're huge. They're plastic, and you can either break them in half-

**Moira Allen:**

Yeah.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

-or you can pop the top off.

**Moira Allen:**

Mm hmm [affirmative].

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And I have been able to save all of my animals' hair and fur and it has been just magnificent because you-

**Moira Allen:**

-behind you.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes, yes, yes. You're going to see tails pop up all over. I'm surrounded by – yes.

**Moira Allen:**

Yes. You suddenly develop a tail across out of your chair.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes, yes, you'll see tails kind of veer in all over and then veer out, just making a subtle appearance. Yeah.

**Moira Allen:**

I love that idea though. With the hair. I actually have shaved some. My cat has a tendency to get mats. And occasionally I have to just snip them out. And I've been saving some of those too. Yeah, I had a hard time not just grabbing it off the table at the vets the, you know, a couple of weeks ago, she had to shave her neck to take blood and I'm going, “[inaudible 00:27:32] shaved off her diamond.” And she's like, “Well, here.”

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes, exactly. Even animals that have transitioned, I was going through some old plastic bins in my garage and I found some of Gemini's hair in my vet school books. And I collect, I call them

magic fibers, I collect every single – because at this point, it's not just an endangered rarity, she's extinct. And so each of her blessed fibers of hair, I put into my memory globe for my Christmas tree and I just have one out.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And when I find my animal's hair, and whiskers as well, I have whisker jars, which are just such fantastic ways to for an ongoing basis, remember our beloved. So there's are some simple things you can do. There's some simple things you can do as you are walking your pet down this last final chapter that can be very soothing to your soul.

**Moira Allen:**

Things like a special toy, you know, something that was very special that pet – I still have a collar from a cat that passed oh, gosh, when I was in college. So I still have her collar. I don't put collars on my cats anymore because they tend to lose them. So there's just no point. But you know, things of that – and if you have any desire to write things down, I find that it's a good idea to start doing that before you lose your pet.

**Moira Allen:**

Because afterwards you kind of – it's very easy to get into the, “Well, I will do this later” and later doesn't come. So this is also a good way while you're working through that preparatory time to write down and it helps remind you of all the good times that you've had [inaudible 00:29:20] because these are the things that one of the things again, that you will find when you lose a pet is that it's very easy to get focused on the memories of the last days and the loss and forget about the fact, you know, let's say you have a 16-year old cat that you don't want to be focusing on the last three months or six months of that pet's life. Go back and remember the other 16 years and write down some of those stories and some of the funny things of that animal did get out the photos, “Oh God, I remember when they did that,” and write it down. You know, make yourself a little multimedia presentation. Yeah, make it a [crosstalk 00:30:05] thing if you can.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, that's really good. And you're right we tend to think about the miserable and for some instances, or, you know, if you have an animal that has undergone cognitive or physical decline, we just think about all of the high-maintenance, overwhelming last months, when really, all of the even really funny, silly, amazing stories get pushed to the corners of our mind. So talking about some of those brighter, better days can be very satisfying to our souls.

**Moira Allen:**

And what you just said, there, too, if you are dealing with a pet, were you [were] having a lot of cognitive issues, behavioral issues, health issues, things that you've got to deal with, over and over again, we're talking about guilt. One of the sources of guilt is you can feel relieved when your pet finally does pass, and then you feel guilty, because "I shouldn't feel that way. I shouldn't feel relieved that this is now over." And that's something that you need to accept and embrace. It's like, yeah, this was hard for you to it was not just hard for your pet, it was hard for you.

**Moira Allen:**

And getting past that point where you now have to maybe deal with giving medications every day or dealing with, you know, with vet visits every week or something like that, that yes, your life is going to change and it's changing in some positive ways to and recognizing to that it's changing in a positive way for your pet. One of the things, you know, that kind of flip subjects is that I like to tell people is when you're reaching that point of making that decision, never make your pet suffer just so you won't have to.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Girl, that's it, like deep as a veterinarian. That's such an important thing. And yet, it's so difficult to get that message relayed in a way that is not offensive or hurtful.

**Moira Allen:**

Right.

**Moira Allen:**

But it is a big, big issue in veterinary medicine, where we see our patients – there is no more quality of life. It's not that they're even struggling to maintain quality, live quality of life is long gone. And in fact, the animal is suffering. And some situation, egg and all. And he we have the very difficult job trying to explain to an emotionally overwhelmed, broken human, that the animal does not, cannot feel good in their body at all. So why are we forcing them to stay in their body? And that's a hard thing for people to-

**Moira Allen:**

Yeah, it's a hard thing to say it's like, because "I don't want to hurt I know how painful it's going to be. And I don't want to take that step." But and if in fairness to one of the things that I did

have noticed is that it can sneak up on you too, that as you say the quality of life is going but when you with the pad every day, the changes are small. And sometimes you have a moment that you blink and you step back and you realize, “Oh my goodness, it's time.”

**Moira Allen:**

And the last cat that we had put to sleep she had had a lot of health issues all her life and we're not quite sure what she had at the end. We think she probably had a tumor. She lost a lot of weight. She was dealing with issues and I remember her coming into one of her spots and I looked over her and I was just this kind of blink it's like, “Oh my, you have gone down so far and I have catching it because it's a day to day thing you need to be put to sleep now.”

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yep.

**Moira Allen:**

And then of course, the upside of that was that I never felt the least bit of guilt once I realized it is time if you can make that adjustment in your head. It's like, “Oh, this is truly the best thing I can do the kindest thing the most loving thing that I could get right now-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yes.

**Moira Allen:**

-is to do this.” Then you don't feel the guilt is when you're not quite sure then that's when it's hard.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

I will say that I have had more of my clients reach out after euthanasia. Not struggling with grieving, but struggling with, “I waited too long didn't I? I waited too long, oh, my gosh, I waited too long,” and they're overcome, recognizing that they couldn't see. They couldn't see the level of decline that their animals went through. And they have horrible guilt about passing the threshold, and letting their animals wallow at a place that they would not want for anything that they love.



**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And that's really, that's an extra step of having to hop that hurdle and letting yourself off the hook of saying in my grief, "I could not see straight and I'm going to let it go," because beating yourself up your animals gone, and they spend months or years beating themselves up for not what they perceive, making the right choice at the right time. And that isn't healthy either.

**Moira Allen:**

Well, and guilt in the pet loss world is 90% a matter of 20/20 hindsight, "If I had known then what I know now, yeah, then I would have done this, I would have changed that I would have done this differently, I would have done it sooner." And we beat ourselves up for having the information after the fact-

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah

**Moira Allen:**

-and not recognizing that when we were dealing with it, we were making generally, and I say generally, because it's not always true when you, as a vet, you know, you know, there are people who are not going to make the right decisions. And there's just not a lot you can do about that.

**Moira Allen:**

But generally, we are making the best decisions we can with the information that we have. And then we get more information afterwards in which, "Well I should have done this, I should have done that," then this guilt kicks in and we have to recognize we did the best we could. And as you say, you've got to make a conscious decision to let it go. Forgiveness is not a feeling, it's a decision. And you can't just sit around and wait. "Well, okay, now I feel I feel like I forgave myself." No, you're not going to ever feel like that.

**Moira Allen:**

You have to decide, "I'm not going to let this destroy my life and torment me for years." And this is not why my pet loved me. Yes, my pet would not be happy with the idea that, you know, because it died, I'm going to just torture myself for the next umpteen years of my life. That's not what the pet wants. And you have to look back at all the things you did, right. And again, going back in time, to get to the point where you were you had have been doing something right.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

In fact, 99% of your decisions were probably stellar and excellent and maybe even the euthanasia decision was correct. But for some reason you have through your emotional filtering, you have twisted that to somehow you have done something incorrect, wrong, or regardless, you have to get to the point of letting yourself off the hook. But that's a big step. So I love the fact that you say it's not an emotional feeling, you are going to actively decide that you will forgive yourself and let it go. Really good.

**Moira Allen:**

Because if you don't, you're going to damage your relationship – if you still have other pets, you're going to damage your relationship with the pets you still have, you're going to damage the relationship with your next pet. Or as I'm sure you've probably seen, you're going to decide “Well, I'm never going to have another pet again, because I'm never, you know, I'm never going to go through this again. I'm just going to be miserable for the rest of my life.”

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yep. And would you say that and I have absolutely a lot of my clients have said, “You know what, not doing this again.” And not only do I understand that. You most of us say, you know, when you have a soulmate rarely do you have repeated soulmates, you may be one of the blessed angels on earth that you have had an incredible supernatural bond with human after human and animal after animal. Most people, that has not been their experience. They love other people, they love other animals deeply.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

But it's not this magical, supernatural relationship, you tend to not have a dozen or two dozen of those in your lifetime. Most people don't. And out of that what they say is “I'm never doing this again.” Do you think, Moira, that this is potentially a reaction of unaddressed, open-wounded grief that by if we were to finish and complete the cycle where we have healed enough where we can get to the point of even thinking about welcoming another animal into our house, if we can't get there, do you view that as a sign of unresolved grief or maybe not necessarily?

**Moira Allen:**

I think to a great degree, and I think you are going to see that what you're describing most often, with, again, a first-time pet owner when – I grew up with pets, and I'm betting you did too. But you know, we had pets, but obviously, long before I was born, they were pets in the house when

I came along. So I grew up with the dogs and the cats. And then those, you know, the dogs that were there when I was first, as a small child, you know, they, the first one disappeared, I think what I was 2 or 3, so I just kind of only vaguely where, “Gee, you know, Spook’s gone.” And then the next dog died, probably when I was 4 or 5. And then, you know, the family had had pets all this time.

**Moira Allen:**

So then obviously, they went out and they got new dogs. And so by the time I became an adult, and was having what you would call my own pets, as opposed to the family's pets, I was used to the idea that you have a pet and then the pet dies, and then you have another pet and that pet’s going to die. And this goes on. To me, that's normal. I don't quite know how it feels to say, “Baby, you'd be in your 20s” or even older, and have that relationship for the first time and then lose it. I think that might be a very different experience from where I sit, that you might feel like that was your only soulmate just as if you had a spouse and your spouse dies. And you're saying, “No, I'm never going to get married again. I'm not going to have five more husbands.”

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yep. Yep.

**Moira Allen:**

But I think that we do underestimate our ability to keep on loving. I mean, if you are a person who could love, you're a person who can love, again. I have a visitor.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

And it's interesting. You do, too. Excellent. Good. Good. Oh, I see – I see something back there. That's wonder Oh, yeah. Ah.

**Moira Allen:**

There she is. Here she is. [crosstalk 00:42:07]. “Let me out of here.”

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Exactly, exactly.

**Moira Allen:**

Well, she she's a little nervous about being picked up right now, because she's been having a few things done to her when she gets picked up. So she doesn't completely trust mommy in an odd situation.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Sure, sure. But you know, I do think some of my clients say, “When should I you know? When is it okay to, like, flip out about this diagnosis? Or when is it appropriate to grieve?” And I think that everyone's situation is very, very different. But if we can match our level of stress and anxiety to what our patient or what our beloved is doing, most animals that have a terminal diagnosis, are wildly peaceful. Living in the moment, doing actually pretty darn good, my vast experience in my 20 years of being a veterinarian is that animals get through death stellarly. Humans don't. And so our terminal animals actually can become an amazing role model for us on how to do it and do it well, if we can see using our animals as that role model.

**Moira Allen:**

Yeah, because animals aren't, you know, when you get a diagnosis and say, “Okay, my dog has cancer.” Your dog isn't sitting there going, “Oh, what am I going to do? Well, I'm going to go through this. And I've got-” Yeah, they don't have the future sense. It's, as you say, they're in the moment they're living for now. And if they're comfortable, now, they're not worried. We worry. They don't.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Exactly, exactly. And because of that, when our animals show signs of discomfort, yeah, as guardians, we should be hopping around, we should be saying, “Okay, you clearly have discomfort. I need to do something right now.” And you do that's maintaining quality of life, that is what they're relying on us to be their advocates in managing pain and discomfort and their own anxiety.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

So when my patients start to get uncomfortable, my client should too, that is our job as parents to animals is to make sure that we're managing to the best of our ability. But what we don't need to do is spend our days in daily anxiety meltdown when our animals aren't for a couple different reasons.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

First of all, animals pick up on that energy and animals are really good at smelling our anxiety, our fear. So we want to be in the best date possible for them. But there's also going to be plenty of opportunities later on to have whatever type of meltdown we want. While our animal's here and comfortable. And having okay quality of life. That is those are precious moments that I want to encourage people to take advantage of.

**Moira Allen:**

And one of the things about that too, is I always say, "If you're not grieving, if it doesn't hurt, how much could you have loved your animal in the first place?" The whole point is it hurts because you love your animal so much. And when I run into somebody and I have a family member who – she has about two days, when she loses a patient, it's like, "Oh, I lost my pet. And the two days later, it's like, "Well, okay, now we're moving on." Okay, whatever, I can't do it like that. Right?

**Moira Allen:**

But, you know, it's, we grieve because we love. if we didn't love, we wouldn't grieve. And if we didn't love, then, you know, I don't believe in you know, just, "Okay, my pet's gone, I'm going to go out tomorrow, and I'm going to go get another one and start all over," you have to process that relationship, it is a relationship. At the same time, here's kind of another little tip that I think people don't think about is I remember, kind of discovering this when one of the first pets that my husband and I had together, when we got married, I had her, she was a cat. And then we got married. So she became our cat. And I think she, she and her brother, were both like, "Come on you two, get married, because I want him in the same house as you" because she, they were just crazy about it. But when she died, you know, I was devastated. But I also realized, there's a lot of your life and you don't think about this, there's a lot of your life that you don't share with pets.

**Moira Allen:**

I'm a writer. So if I write an article, I don't go running to my cat and say, "Hey, read this." You know, there's things that you share with your pets. And then there's a huge amount of your life that, you know, your pet's idea of you as a writer is "Oh, papers to lie on."

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Mm hmm [affirmative].

**Moira Allen:**

And focus on, you know, when you need to get out of that constant feeling of “I'm miserable. My life is over,” there's just this huge emptiness in it. Focus on those parts of your life that your pet wasn't a part of.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

That's good advice, too.

**Moira Allen:**

And remember that you got big chunks of life there that you can turn to and you can deal with, that can help distract you while the grief processes through because grief is basically a time thing. You know, the only thing to deal with grief is time.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. And that makes sense. And I think a lot of us do that. Subconsciously, we throw ourselves in that. That is my primary coping mechanism when the sting when it's that fresh sting, where you're almost in shock, and you know that you're grieving, but there's not active thought, I'm like, “I will just drown myself in work, work, writing, work,” not physically caring for animals, because that stirs up emotions.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

But I'll just write myself into a place of finally being able to dress what I'm feeling by kind of drowning myself in work. And I think that that is an A-OK, very healthy coping strategy.

**Moira Allen:**

Yeah.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Good. That's really good. Have you found any other suggestions or tips that you would say, pet parents, in general, may benefit from? Maybe one last parting tip that has made sense to you over the many years that you have been actively helping people through this process?

**Moira Allen:**

Well, one of the things that many people have said, has been very helpful to them is to have some kind of a memorial ceremony, whether you're an individual or whether you can do this as a family. I mean, we do that with humans. And we generally have some kind of ceremony, we may have a funeral, we may at least have a memorial service or something where people come together and people speak and they talk about what that person meant in their lives, and so on and so forth.

**Moira Allen:**

And many, many people say that doing something similar to that, if you have the ability to, say, inter on your own property, you can have your own funeral service. If you don't do that, you can still basically just plan a, you know, kind of a formal gathering where you get together, you talk, you reminisce, and you say some words and you're celebrating the fact that this life was there, and this life has now gone. But you're acknowledging it, and doing something that is a formal acknowledgement that that life had meaning and now that life is over. And it's going to take some time to work through those feelings.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah. Yeah. That's also really, really good. And you know what's interesting? I have, I have been able to use a scheduled, dedicated time set aside for that very purpose. That for me, has been one of the biggest catalysts of me being able to move forward is having that. I think that that makes sense why humans have funerals for other humans is it is a ritual that is healing and it can be just as healing for anything that you love.

**Moira Allen:**

I think, absolutely.

**Dr. Karen Becker:**

Yeah, it's good, really good advice. I am so thankful that there are beautiful humans like yourself out there that have made it their vocation and passion to help others through really difficult times. It's a beautiful gift that you are giving to the people that are seeking help and healing. And I'm so very thankful for your website, for your book, for your availability in giving people tools to help with their grief. Thank you.

**Moira Allen:**

Thank you so much.