

Seeking Counseling to Heal From the Passing of Your Pet

There's a great misconception that grieving over the passing of a pet is unjustified because a pet isn't human. Sadly, this can lead people to judge themselves harshly - and prevent them from reaching out for support - when they feel an intense, overwhelming sense of grief over their pet's passing.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today I 'm talking with pet loss counselor Ann Beyke. I encourage you to watch the full interview for much more detail and information
- Ann has a Master's in counseling, but through the loss of her beloved Golden Retriever she found her true calling, and switched her focus to pet loss and bereavement counseling
- Topics we discuss today include society's stigmatization of pet loss, knowing when to seek counseling and how to go about it, and how counseling can help grieving pet parents process the depth of their loss and begin to heal

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 26, 2022.

My guest today is pet loss counselor Ann Beyke. Below are some of the highlights of our discussion, but I encourage you to watch the full interview above for much more detail and information.

Personal Loss Sparks a Passion to Help the Grief-Stricken

Ann has a Master's in Counseling, and has had animal companions most of her life, but it was one very special dog that sparked her passion to focus her education and training toward help grieving pet parents.

"Around 2006, I had a senior Golden Retriever who had been re-homed with me when she was about two and a half," Ann explains.

"She was at the end of her life, and I was already grieving the loss of her. I looked at her one day and was overcome by the thought of losing her. I knew I would feel deep grief and sorrow, but I was fortunate that I was surrounded by a lot of people who would help support me. That made me think about all the other pet parents in a similar situation who were grieving and had nowhere to turn.

I suddenly realized that my dog, in that moment, was giving me the incredible gift of realizing that I could help others who were experiencing the loss of their own pets."

The Grief of Losing a Pet Is Often Stigmatized

In my experience, a lot of people feel their grief at the loss of a pet is unjustified because after all, it's not like they lost a human. This, of course, is a misconception, and it's unfortunate that so many people judge themselves harshly because they feel such an intense, overwhelming sense of loss when a pet dies. These poor people are concerned not only about facing their grief, but also about getting help to deal with it.

"One of the reasons is that our society tells us that we should just get over it," says Ann. "We should just go adopt another dog or another cat. But the fact is that our feelings are deep. They're genuine, and they can overwhelm us. Sometimes a person will call me and admit they're embarrassed they need help. They say things like 'I should be over this.'

It's very hard for some people to reach the point where they're okay with contacting a counselor. And maybe I won't suggest having sessions with them, but instead, I'll spend some time talking about other resources and things they can do.

It's important for people to realize it's okay to reach out to someone to be reassured that what they're feeling is real. Sometimes it's just one phone call; and sometimes it's just the first step in their healing process."

When and How to Seek Help

Some people reach out for counseling when they realize they're overcome with grief and it's touching every aspect of their lives.

"Maybe they feel they can no longer function," says Ann. "They're spending a lot of time crying and depressed and unable to keep up with their regular routine. This reaction is normal. When we experience the loss of a loved one, we do strange things, for example, perhaps we put the orange juice in the cabinet instead of the refrigerator and find it hours or days later.

If you have a gut feeling that you need to talk to someone, listen to your gut and reach out, whether it's to a close friend or family member, or a professional counselor. There are a lot of resources available out there, so I really encourage people to tap into those.

Just know that this is the first step in your healing process. If it's nagging at you, talk to a counselor. Maybe you don't need several sessions. Maybe just one or two will put you on the right track. And it's important to understand that grieving isn't a linear process. It's more like a wave that comes in and goes out.

You'll have, for instance, two days of forward motion or progress, followed by a bad day. You'll feel good for a day or two, then wake up feeling as though you're back where you started."

When it comes to finding a counselor you feel comfortable with, Ann suggests using a resource like **Psychology Today** to find therapists near you.

"Look for counselor listings that have a picture of them with their animal companion; this can be a good indicator that they understand pet loss and grief," says Ann.

"You may not find someone you click with right away, so it's important to keep looking and ask for referrals. There's also the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB), a great general resource that has a list of counselors by state. The important thing is to keep looking. If you've never worked with a counselor before and your first call doesn't go so well, don't give up. Don't stop there."

I think anyone seeking counseling for pet loss grief should absolutely ensure that the counselor they're considering has experience helping people who've lost animal companions. Pet loss tends to be very different from other types of loss, and it's important to talk with someone who is knowledgeable in this area.

How Professional Counseling Can Help

"It's a matter of listening," Ann explains. "I listen to what has happened that brought the person to me. I might ask some questions, for example, 'How have you gone about your day since your loss? What changes have you made? What's your routine?'"

We talk about self-care, which is incredibly important for someone dealing with the loss of an animal. For example, are you eating well? Are you drinking lots of water? Are you exercising? This is a big one, having a regular exercise routine — it's important to help our bodies feel better, and consequently, our mental health as well.

We talk about sleep patterns. We talk about depression, because people with a history of it can spiral into a deeper depression. We talk about what medications they're taking and whether there might be a need for a medication change."

When it comes to how long or how many sessions of counseling are needed, Ann makes the point that everyone is different.

"Not everyone I talk to ends up working with me in a therapeutic situation," she explains. "Many clients come to me, we have a session or two, and that puts them on the right track. They may contact me at later time, perhaps the one-year anniversary of their pet's death, for a session or two."

Everyone's needs are a little different, so I like to leave things open-ended. I don't tell clients, 'You'll need five sessions and you'll be fine.' I don't know that for a fact, and neither do they. Together, we discover what their needs are as they arise."

Ann suggests giving some thought, before you see a counselor, to what you want to work on and accomplish, and what you need from the relationship. Then get those things out on the table at your first appointment. Ideally, you and your counselor will click and establish an ongoing relationship you can depend on during times when you need emotional or mental health support.

Ann also mentions that for many people, it can be beneficial to find a pet loss grief specialist long before they need one, to talk through things such as anticipatory grief, hospice care, at-home euthanasia and other concerns.

If you'd like to learn more about Ann and her approach to helping pet parents navigate the painful process of grieving the loss of a pet, you can visit her website at **[Pet Loss Counselor](#)**.
