

Caring for Your Heart When Your Pet Passes

Is there a way to help ease the pain while caring for your end-of-life pet, and once he or she is gone? Find out how creating a memorial in honor of your pet can help, along with other tips for caring for yourself, including dealing with feelings of guilt and grief if you have chosen euthanasia.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Our guest today is Moira Allen, author of the book *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, and owner of The Pet Loss Support Page website
- Moira discovered many years ago, after the loss of her own cat, that people grieving the loss or imminent loss of a pet had few outlets to share their pain and sense of loss
- With that knowledge, Moira was inspired to write her book and launch her website
- Moira offers wisdom and guidance to help pet parents work through feelings of grief and guilt, and care for themselves while caring for a dying pet

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 23, 2022.

My guest today is Moira Allen, a professional writer, former editor of *Dog Fancy* magazine, book author including *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, and owner of The Pet Loss Support Page website.

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.

Helping Grieving Pet Parents Feel Heard and Supported

Moira began delving into the subject of pet loss in the late 1980s, when she was grieving the loss of her cat. At the time, she was working for a magazine on pets that ran monthly reader surveys, and coincidentally had just run one on pet loss. Normally, they would get 30 or 40 responses to their surveys, but the topic of pet loss received hundreds.

"People just poured their hearts out," says Moira, "and I was taken by how many wrote things like, 'I'm probably the only person who feels this way.' They wrote about how terrible the loss was, how much they hurt or how guilty they felt, and how much they missed their pet. This was before the days of chat forums on the internet, so people didn't have a way to get together and support each other.

I realized there were probably countless people out there who had lost a pet and were sitting at home thinking they were alone in their feelings, that they were somehow strange for being so sad, or that they had a mental problem because they felt so much grief over their loss."

As an author, Moira realized there was a huge need to write a book for people dealing with the heartbreak of losing an animal companion. At the time, there were only a handful of such books available, all written by psychologists, and all were very complicated and academic and not user friendly.

Moira decided to write a book about pet loss using the stories of the survey respondents. She didn't want to write about just her own grief over the loss of her cat, but about the grief of many pet parents, to capture a wider range of experiences and feelings.

Years later, after the internet came along, Moira launched her pet loss support website. It's full of up-to-date content such as articles and handouts, as well as a state-by-state guide to professional resources such as counselors, support groups, hospice, in-home euthanasia, cemeteries, and more.

Tips for Managing Feelings of Grief and Guilt

One of the issues Moira sees over and over among people who are really struggling with the loss of an animal companion, is they have trouble accepting that they're hurt.

"I think one of the problems we have today is we live in a very positive-focused society," she explains. "We're all supposed to be upbeat and happy all the time, so we don't get a lot of training in hurting and grieving. When it hits, we're not accustomed to the feeling. We wonder what's wrong with us, especially if we're first-time pet owners.

People who've been through it before have a better idea of how they're going to feel, and while that knowledge doesn't help them feel any better when it happens, it's also not a surprise.

For pet owners going through the loss for the first time, it can be overwhelming in its intensity. And so, the first and most important step is simply accepting the fact that you're going to feel bad. It's going to hurt, and there's no way around it. The people around me need to understand that I'm going to feel badly for a while and there's no shame or guilt in that."

Many pet parents who've chosen euthanasia have feelings of guilt along with grief. As Moira explains, with all the advances in veterinary care today, we're able to keep pets around longer by overcoming or at least managing disorders and diseases.

We've replaced nature, in a sense, to have our pets with us for months or years longer. And when we make the decision to euthanize a pet at the end of their life, we're again taking on the responsibility of replacing nature to ensure a painless, peaceful death.

"We have to be willing to make that decision," says Moira, "because we've made all these other decisions that prevented our pet from dying naturally from a disease or injury.

Again, we're a feel-good society, and we aren't accustomed to decisions that don't involve a feel-good option. We've been trained to believe that if we make the right decision, we'll feel good about it. But no one feels good about making the decision to euthanize their pet. It's the right decision, it's just that it feels miserable."

Pre-Bereavement Grief

All pet owners realize their animal companion will die one day, but when an older pet receives a diagnosis of, say, kidney failure or cancer, the prospect of losing them becomes much more than an intellectual exercise.

"At this point, many people enter what I call 'pre-bereavement grieving,'" says Moira. "It's another thing that's hard for the people around you to understand. Let's say you just learned your dog has cancer, and you're at work and heartbroken.

Your colleagues' thought is, 'But the dog isn't dead yet, so why are you grieving?' It can be very hard to explain to the people around you that you've started grieving because you know your loss is coming.

It's a hard phase to deal with because when you work through grief after loss, ideally, eventually you reach closure. But when you're pre-grieving, the only 'closure' is when your pet dies, and then you begin to grieve for real. With pre-bereavement grief, you know things will get much worse before they get better."

Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your End-of-Life Pet

If you have a pet whose health is failing, while you're taking care of your end-of-life animal, you also need to take care of your heart. Moira believes a good way to do this is to think about how you can create memorials in honor of your pet. For example, you can begin to gather photographs you've taken over the years and put them in one of those picture frames that holds several photos.

One thing I do is collect some of my pets' fur in Ziploc baggies when I brush them. Around Christmas time, I transfer the fur to plastic ornaments designed for that purpose and hang them on my tree.

"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," says Moira.

"Because afterwards, it's very easy to get into the 'I'll do it later' mindset and later never comes. This is a good way, while you're working through that preparatory time, to write about the good times, because you'll find when you lose a pet that it's very easy to get focused on the memories of the last days and the loss.

If you have a pet who's been with you for 10 or 12 or 15 years, after the death you don't want to be focusing on the last three or six months. You want to remember the entirety of your pet's life by reading those memories you wrote about and looking at the photos you collected. Make yourself a little multimedia presentation and make it a family thing if you can."

This is good advice, because we tend to think only about the end of our pet's life, especially if we've watched their cognitive or physical decline. We tend to think only of the last, perhaps overwhelming days or weeks or months, and all the good years get pushed to the corners of our mind.

Dealing With Feelings of Guilt

"If a pet was having a lot of cognitive or behavioral or health issues, things that were worrisome, difficult to manage, and exhausting, the owner can feel relieved when the pet passes, which then causes feelings of guilt," Moira explains.

"But it's something you need to just accept and embrace. The end of your pet's life was hard on both of you. It's natural to feel relief that you no longer need to give the medications every day or make regular trips to the vet's office — things your pet hated. Even with the loss, your life has changed in a positive way, as it did for your pet, who is no longer suffering.

One of the things I like to tell people is that when you've reached the point where you need to decide to euthanize, never make your pet suffer just so you won't have to. If you can make that adjustment in your head and realize it's truly the best, the kindest, the most loving thing you can do for your animal, then you won't feel as guilty."

In my experience, many clients reach out after euthanasia, afraid they waited too long to help their animal transition from this life to the next. They say things like, "I waited too long, didn't I?" They see in hindsight what they couldn't see in the moment — their pet had suffered significant decline, and they feel terrible guilt for letting things get to that point.

If this has happened to you, you need to let yourself off the hook, because in your grief, you literally "couldn't see straight." You need to let it go, because beating yourself up over something you know, now, but didn't know then isn't healthy.

The Wisdom of Living in the Moment

Unlike most adults, animals live in the moment. They live for right now. If they're comfortable, they're not worried. We worry. They don't. But when they show signs of discomfort, we need to act. We need to do what's necessary to make sure they have a good quality of life, because they're relying on us to help them manage their pain and the anxiety that goes along with it.

What we don't want to do is spend our days full of anxiety, or having emotional meltdowns, because animals pick up on that energy. There will be plenty of time later to have a meltdown. But while our pets are still here and comfortable, with a good quality of life, we need to be fully present with them, and enjoy those precious moments.

Moira makes the point that it's also important, when you lose a pet, to remember all the parts of your life that weren't centered around your pet and put your focus there.

Focus on your work and hobbies and the parts of your life that didn't involve your pet when you're feeling empty and miserable. Pursue all the other things in life that you love, and let time work its healing magic. It can also be very helpful to have a memorial ceremony for your pet to talk about how much he or she meant to them.

"If you're able to bury your pet on your property, you can have your own funeral service," says Moira. "If that's not possible, you can still plan a gathering for everyone who knew your pet to talk, reminisce, and celebrate their life. It's a way to acknowledge that your pet's life had meaning, and now it's over, and it will take time to work through those feelings."

To learn more about Moira and the wisdom she offers, visit her content-rich website, **[The Pet Loss Support Page](#)**.
