

Processing Your Pain: A Roadmap for the 5 Stages of Grief

When your pet dies, it's natural to experience a roller coaster of emotions, from depression to anger to guilt. By committing to doing what's necessary to address your pain, you can come out the other side, knowing there is happiness down the road.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today I'm chatting with Colleen Rolland, president of the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB)
- The APLB is a tremendous resource for not only pet parents, but veterinary staffs and pet grief specialists; the site has a very active chat room where grieving pet owners can seek support and assistance from others who understand exactly what they're going through
- In our discussion today, Colleen covers anticipatory grief, along with the five stages of grief, including shock/disbelief/denial, anger/distancing/alienation, guilt, depression, and finally, resolution
- We also discuss getting unstuck, and where to go for support

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 24, 2022.

My guest today is Colleen Rolland, president of the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement. Having honed her people skills over a 23-year career in an executive senior management position, Colleen made the decision to pursue a different career path that would allow her to combine her affinity for animals, especially horses, with her passion for helping others navigate the heart wrenching loss of a pet.

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.

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement

Colleen explains that the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement was founded in 1999 by Dr. Wallace Sife after the loss of his own pet, a beloved Dachshund, a few years earlier.

Dr. Sife was an educational psychologist but didn't understand the depth of grief he was feeling, and when he went in search of resources to help him, he discovered there really wasn't much available. So, he wrote a book in 1993, *The Loss of a Pet*, as a coping guide — a guide he would've liked to have had when he lost his dog.

Dr. Sife was at a book signing at Barnes and Noble, where people were really excited about his book. They suggested he start a pet loss support group, which he did. Next, they wanted him to start an association for pet loss and grief, which is how the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB) came into being in 1999. Eventually, the APLB site

included a free online chat room where anyone who needed it could find support.

"If you have pain of any type with regards to the loss of a pet," Colleen explains, "you can visit our chat room free of charge. It's open six days a week and my goal is to get it to seven days a week."

We've just added an online support group for our members, but anyone can go into the chat room and talk with our professional chat hosts, some of whom have been there for 10 years or longer. They're all professionally trained, either through a social work designation, any other type of helping degree designation, as well as through our own APLB pet loss grief specialist course."

Anticipatory Grief

As a veterinarian, I'm dealing with grief — my own and my clients' grief — all the time. There's never a time when it isn't in the picture. I've observed that when my clients begin to develop anticipatory grief over the impending death of an animal, they often don't recognize what's happening to them.

"Veterinarians have my utmost respect, because they are one of the few professions that see death on such a regular basis," says Colleen. "And what I think most clients don't realize is that a vet often has patients from puppy- or kittenhood right through end-of-life care and euthanasia, and these losses deeply affect them, as well."

As for pet owners' anticipatory grief, it's very important to seek support as soon as possible to help them through all the stages of grief. Death is part of the cycle of life, and if we can help people remove the stigma that a lot of Western societies place on death and see it instead as the logical completion of that beautiful life cycle, it won't be as scary, as sad, or as devastating as it might otherwise be."

5 Stages of Grief

Colleen believes awareness of the stages of grief can provide a roadmap for pet parents of what to expect when death happens.

"If you know what's coming down the pike, you'll be more prepared for it," she explains. "Your feelings of extreme grief will be validated. Many people, immediately after the death of a pet, feel like they're going crazy because they seem to bounce back and forth between several intense emotions, including not only depression, but in some cases, suicidal ideation."

These are all normal feelings that people go through as they process their grief. If they don't allow the feelings, if they press them down, they'll come out in another way. Up until about 20 years ago, it was very shameful to admit that you cared for a dog, cat, horse, lizard, or other animal more than you did for the humans in your life."

The number of clients we've seen who apologetically say, for example, 'I loved Freddie more than I loved my brother. When he died, I didn't feel this kind of grief. If people know what might be waiting down the road for them after the death of a pet, it can be very helpful.'"

Normally, when a pet dies, the first stage of grief involves shock, disbelief and/or denial. This stage doesn't last long.

"It's the mind's way of protecting us from the trauma we're feeling," says Colleen. "For a little while, your mind short circuits, and it can't deal with anything else. People tend to bounce back and forth between stages two, three and four. It's a roller coaster of emotions.

Some people, depending on what their experience is, or what role the animal played in their life, may skip one stage, and lean heavily into another stage. But, again, these are all stages that have been recognized and documented.

Stage two is anger, distancing, and alienation. Unfortunately, sometimes vets and their staffs are the targets in this stage because they're so intimately involved in the process. They're not only dealing with performing the euthanasia but are also often the target of the strong emotions the client is feeling. Other targets for anger can be family members who don't deal with the death in the same way the pet's owner does.

Distancing and alienation can happen if, for example, you work in an organization and your loss isn't recognized by a supervisor or manager. It's important to remember that this is a very emotional time, and you want to be careful not to burn any bridges.

The third stage is guilt, which is anger turned inwards. The guilt can be merited or unmerited, but it's almost always self-imposed. The fourth stage is depression. You can feel such terrible sadness that you may not want to get out of bed. If your overwhelming sadness becomes chronic, moving toward clinical depression, then you should seek professional counseling.

The final stage is resolution, which is marked not by letting go of the memory of your animal, but of the heavy, awful sadness that filled your heart in earlier stages. It's realizing that your pet gave you a part of themselves, and death can never take that away. Your pet is living on in your heart, contributing to the person you are and will be because of their unconditional love.

If you reach what you think is the resolution stage, but then you bounce back into an earlier stage, my suggestion is to see someone to talk about it, because you must process it. Once you reach resolution, you can still have teary episodes, but if you're reverting to an earlier stage and being triggered, it means you probably haven't fully processed the loss.

This is especially important if you now have another animal in your life. You can't fully commit to a new pet until you fully process your feelings about the loss of your former pet. There's room in our hearts for so many animals, but we must be able to resolve our feelings."

Getting Unstuck

It could be that right now you're feeling very vulnerable or very uncomfortable about seeking support or counseling to help process your loss. You might be worried about "failing" or creating more pain for yourself. It's really important to understand that if you commit to doing what's necessary to address your pain, there will be a positive outcome.

You don't have to stay stuck where you are. Don't give up hope, and don't resolve to feel this way forever out of fear that addressing your pain won't help.

"Another way you can look at it is that you had a very special bond with your animal," Colleen says. "You communicated with them just by looking at them. You knew everything about them, they knew everything about you."

Ask yourself, 'What would they want for me?' Would they want you to be miserable for the rest of your life? Or would they want you to acknowledge the loss, knowing that you loved them and had a relationship with them unlike any other, and to move on and share your gift of love with another animal?

I think if people can reframe it this way, not necessarily within the first couple of weeks of the loss, but if they can move towards it and know there is happiness down the road, it will help them."

Where to Go for Support

If you'd like more information about pet grief and loss, your first stop is the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement website, where you'll find a wealth of content on topics such as the euthanasia process and self-help tips.

There's also an extensive directory of services for pet loss grief specialists and counselors, chaplains, and in-home euthanasia veterinarians. As mentioned earlier, there's also a wonderful chat room where you'll be surrounded by "animal people" who share your feelings and can offer support.

"What I find particularly helpful to many people is writing a letter to their pet," says Colleen. "You don't have to do it on one sitting, but write about what you loved about them, and be specific. Then you can go back and review it and revise it as often as you want."

You can also write a letter from your pet to you. What would they say to you? What would they say about the care you gave them? What would they want for you? Just the process of putting pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard can be so therapeutic, and research shows that it's very beneficial."
