

How to Help Your Pet Deal With Grief

Both dogs and cats can experience sadness and grief at the passing of a beloved human or animal companion, sometimes profoundly. How can you tell if your pet is affected? The signs to watch for and 10 ways to help them cope.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Behavioral changes are common in pets after another pet dies, particularly for affectionate behaviors — displayed by 74% of dogs and 78% of cats — and territorial behaviors, displayed by 60% of dogs and 63% of cats
- Dogs may also eat less or eat more slowly when a companion pet dies, while others sleep more
- Among cats, 43% vocalized more often while 32% increased the volume of their vocalizations, which could be a sign of anxiety in the animals
- Stress levels tend to be synchronized in dogs and their owners, so if you're feeling stressed over the loss of a pet, there's a good chance your dog may be, too
- One of the best ways to ease grief is to keep your daily routine as close to normal as possible; feed your pet at the same time as usual, go for your regular walks and build in time for extra affection and play

Losing a pet prompts feelings of grief in pet owners, but other members of the family, including your pets, also experience the loss. Whether pets grieve in the same way as humans is difficult to quantify, but many pet owners notice changes in their pets after another animal in the household dies.¹

In the wild, studies have found evidence of grieving among elephants, baboons, chimpanzees and dolphins. Elephants, for instance, may attempt to rouse a deceased member of their family, while giving extra attention to bones and carcasses.²

Research into companion animal bonds — and separations — is limited, but research from Australia and New Zealand shows they may be significantly affected by the death of another household pet. And for those of us who have witnessed dogs losing a companion, it's clear they are experiencing the emotion of loss.

Dogs and Cats Show Signs of Stress When a Household Pet Dies

In a survey involving 159 dogs and 152 cats, pet owners reported their animals' behavioral responses to the loss of a companion pet. Behavioral changes were common, particularly for affectionate behaviors — displayed by 74% of dogs and 78% of cats — and territorial behaviors, displayed by 60% of dogs and 63% of cats.³

In the majority of cases — 82% of dogs and 97% of cats — when pets had changes in affectionate behavior, they became more demanding of attention or were more needy or clingy toward their owner. This in itself could be indicative of feelings of grief, as it mirrors the way some pets that experience **separation anxiety** respond to their owners upon return. According to the study:⁴

"This behavior appears to parallel two well reported components of owner-orientated separation anxiety in dogs; the anxious maintenance of close proximity displayed towards owners upon the presentation of departure cues, and the over exuberant affection directed at the owner upon their return and could reflect an inner emotional experience of grief, anxiety, or distress."

"Both dogs and cats were reported to demand more attention from their owners and/or display affiliative behavior, as well as spend time seeking out the deceased's favorite spot," the team explained. About 35% of dogs also ate less, while 31% ate slower and 34% slept more after losing their companion. Among cats, 43% vocalized more often while 32% increased the volume of their vocalizations,⁵ which could be a sign of **anxiety in the animals**.

"There was consensus that the behavior of companion animals changed in response to the loss of an animal companion. These behavioral changes suggest the loss had an impact on the remaining animal," the study concluded.⁶ Overall, the following behaviors indicative of grief were reported:

- **Dogs: Behavior Change**

- Demanding more attention than usual — 35%
- Seeking less affection — 10%
- Being clingier/needier — 26%
- Seeking out the deceased pet's favorite spot — 30%
- Sleeping more — 34%
- Eating less — 35%
- Eating more slowly — 31%
- Increased vocalizing — 27%
- Increased volume of vocalizing — 19%

- **Cats: Behavior Change**

- Demanding more attention than usual — 40%
- Seeking less affection — 15%
- Being clingier/needier — 22%
- Seeking out the deceased pet's favorite spot — 36%
- Sleeping more — 20%
- Eating less — 21%
- Eating more slowly — 12%
- Increased vocalizing — 43%
- Increased volume of vocalizing — 32%

Dogs Show Characteristic Signs of Grief

A separate study involving 426 adults who had at least two dogs, one of which died, also hints that dogs grieve over the loss of a pet in the home. Only 13% of owners saw no changes in the behavior or habits of surviving dogs after the loss of their canine friends.

About 66% of the dogs displayed more attention-seeking behavior, 57% played less often, 46% had a decrease in overall activity level and about one-third slept more, ate less, and/or seemed more fearful.⁷

Three in 10 dogs also barked and whined more. While the length of time the two dogs had spent together didn't seem to play a role in the surviving dog's grief, having a "friendly" relationship did. "The surviving dog was significantly more likely (1.3 times) to play less and to eat more or similar after the death event" when they had been friendly with the other dog.⁸

Further, the more grief-stricken the owner, the more likely there was to be behavior changes in the surviving dog. "These findings indicate that a dog may show grief-related behavioral and emotional patterns when a close conspecific dies, with aspects of the latter possibly related to the owner's emotional status," the team concluded.⁹

How to Help Your Grieving Pet

Stress levels tend to be synchronized in dogs and their owners,¹⁰ so if you're feeling stressed over the loss of a pet, there's a good chance your dog may be, too. One of the best ways to ease the grief is to keep your daily routine as close to normal as possible. Keep mealtimes the same, continue with your regular walks and build in extra time for affection and play.

Monitor your pet's food intake closely and make an appointment with your veterinarian if his appetite seems significantly off. Cats, in particular, should not go without eating for more than a couple of days or they risk developing a potentially fatal condition called **hepatic lipidosis**.

If house-soiling, aggression or other negative behaviors emerge, don't yell or punish your pet. Instead, I recommend using **positive behavior reinforcement**. If you're in a multi-pet household, remember that your surviving pets are also in the process of establishing a new social structure.

If there's a lot of growling, barking, hissing or attacking that isn't subsiding as the group settles into its "new normal," I recommend consulting either your veterinarian or a **veterinary behaviorist** for guidance on how to resolve difficulties between pets.

And while you may be tempted to add a new furry member to your family right away, keep in mind that this won't replace your lost pet in your other animals' eyes — or your own. In some cases, it can also add additional stress for pets that are already feeling unsettled. It takes time to go through the grieving process, for pets and humans, so give all members of the household time to adapt.

You'll know when the time is right to open your heart and home to **another pet**. In the meantime, as you help your pet work through the loss of a companion, take time to process your own pain using this **roadmap for the five stages of grief**.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3,4,5,6} [Animals \(Basel\). 2016 Nov; 6\(11\): 68](#)

^{7,8,9} [Scientific Reports volume 12, Article number: 1920 \(2022\)](#)

¹⁰ [Scientific Reports volume 9, Article number: 7391 \(2019\)](#)
