

Do Dogs and Cats Understand Death?

Discover the deep emotions our furry friends experience when they lose a loved one.

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

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Canine and feline family members can experience sadness and deep grief at the loss of a beloved human or animal companion
- It's important to watch for behavior changes in pets who've experienced a loss; the most common changes involve affection and territory
- There are many things you can do to comfort a grieving pet, such as keeping a consistent daily routine, distracting them with fun activities and exercise, and providing natural grief remedies as needed

If you're a pet parent, you very likely understand the tremendous grief that comes with the loss of a precious animal companion. But what about when pets lose their beloved human or an animal friend to death? Do they grieve as well? How much do they understand about death as a part of life?

Dogs and Cats Feel Deep Grief

While we can't truly know if furry family members understand the permanence of death, there is ample evidence they grieve the loss of beings they love.

Dr. Barbara King, professor of anthropology at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA and author of [How Animals Grieve](#), believes that thanks to thousands of years of companionship, humans and dogs are quite tuned into each other.¹ We seem to instinctively comprehend each other's gestures, body language, and emotions.

King believes dogs and cats feel deep grief. She has found that in homes where two dogs have lived together for years, some owners report that when one of the two dies, the surviving dog becomes **depressed**. Some people argue that it was simply a change in the dog's daily routine or the grief his owner displayed that caused him to grow depressed, but King disagrees.

She believes that when you closely observe the behaviors of the surviving dog, you'll see that he's clearly looking for and missing his canine pal, and the loss is causing him to feel depressed.

Behavior Changes in Pets Who've Lost Animal Friends

In 2016, a team of researchers conducted a study providing evidence that indeed, many dogs and cats grieve the loss of an animal companion.² The researchers surveyed 279 owners following the death of a pet. The owners had a total of 311 surviving pets, including 159 dogs and 152 cats. They reported the following behaviors in their surviving pets:

Behavior Change	Dogs	Cats
Demanding more attention than usual	35%	40%
Seeking less affection	10%	15%
Being clingier/needier	26%	22%
Seeking out the deceased pet's favorite spot	30%	36%
Sleeping more	34%	20%
Eating less	35%	21%
Eating more slowly	31%	12%
Increased vocalizing	27%	43%
Increased volume of vocalizing	19%	32%

A 1996 ASPCA survey of cat owners revealed that a change in vocalizations following the death of a companion was the most common physical or behavioral manifestation.³

Additional changes owners observed included pets avoiding their usual sleeping spots, **aggressive behavior** toward both people and other animals, and changes in elimination behaviors.

There are certain limitations when using owner input to collect this type of data, in particular the potential for anthropomorphism (the tendency to attribute human characteristics to pets), as well as owner bias. There's also the possibility some pets react more to a change in their owner's behavior than their own sense of loss.

How to Help a Grieving Pet

1. **Closely monitor your surviving pet** — The process of grieving isn't well understood in either humans or companion animals, so it's best to pay special attention to your surviving pet for signs of a distress reaction. Knowing what to expect, and how to react, can be very helpful during a time when everyone in the family is feeling a deep sense of loss.
2. **Keep daily routines as consistent as possible** — Pets do best when they know what to expect from one day to the next (this is true for all pets, not just those who are grieving the loss of a buddy). Try to keep mealtimes, exercise, walks, playtime, grooming, bedtime, and other daily activities on a consistent schedule.
3. **Keep your pet's diet and mealtimes the same** — Your pet may not have much of an appetite in the days following the death of a housemate but continue to offer him the same food he's used to, at the same time each day. Store what he doesn't eat in the fridge and offer it to him again at his next regularly scheduled

mealtime. Use his hunger to help him get his appetite back by resisting the urge to entice him with treats.

If his appetite doesn't pick up after several days or he's refusing to eat anything at all, make an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out a health problem. 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**.

4. **Avoid inadvertently rewarding your pet's depression** — This is a tough one, because it's only natural to want to comfort your surviving pet. Unfortunately, especially in the case of dogs, giving attention to a pet who is displaying an undesirable behavior can reinforce the behavior. Obviously, the last thing you want to do is reward a lack of appetite, anxiety, inactivity or other types of distress reactions in your pet.

Instead, I recommend distracting her with healthy activities that provide opportunities for positive behavior reinforcement. This can be a walk, short training sessions, a game of fetch, or **exercising together**.

5. **In multi-pet households, give surviving pets space to revise their social structure** — When there are more than two pets in the family, each member of the group has a specific relationship with every other member of the group. When an animal dies, it creates temporary instability within the group.

This can result in conflicts that are disturbing to human family members, but unless one of your pets is becoming a danger to the others, it's best to let them re-establish group dynamics on their own.

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.

6. **Think twice before quickly adding a new pet to the family** — Don't automatically assume that acquiring a new pet to "replace" the lost pet is the answer. Dealing with loss and grief is a process that is individual for each of us and each of our animal companions, and while some family members may be ready immediately for a new pet, others may not be.
7. **Avoid further upsetting your pet with dramatic emotional displays** — Our pets pick up on our emotions so encourage family members who are dealing with their own grief to be sensitive to your pet's state of mind. It's okay to seek comfort from your surviving pet as long as you don't frighten him or cause him additional distress.
8. **Give it time** — It's hard to know how long our pets' memories are, but based on anecdotal evidence, it seems that dogs in particular do remember companions for some time. Your pet's grieving process may take a few days, weeks, or even months, but eventually most pets return to their normal lively selves.

If at any point you feel your pet is suffering unnecessarily or there is something more going on than simply missing his friend, I recommend discussing the situation with your veterinarian.

9. **Consider having your pet present at his companion's death** — Some pet guardians feel it helps to have the surviving pet present during or after euthanasia or allow them to see and smell their friend's body once death has occurred.

Your pet may have no obvious reaction to his friend's body in death (most pets sniff and walk away), but it may help him to comprehend there is no need to search the house for the animal that has passed. I have found this to be very helpful for remaining pack members, especially if they have a very strong bond.

10. **Use natural grief remedies, if needed** — There are some excellent homeopathic and Bach flower remedies that can be easily administered to your grieving pet until you see an emotional shift in a more positive

direction. Some of my favorites include homeopathic Ignatia, Holistic Solutions, the Bach flower remedy **Honeysuckle**, and Green Hope Farm Grief and Loss.

Using **applied zoopharmacognosy** has been one of the most helpful ways of helping animals over their grief that I have experienced as a practitioner.

Sources and References

¹ [U.S. News and World Report July 6, 2012](#)

² [Walker, J.K. et al. Animals 2016, 6\(11\), 68](#)

³ [PetMD, November 17, 2022](#)
