



Veterinary Wisdom®

for practice teams

“It’s All My Fault!” Helping Others Deal with Guilt

Dana Durrance, M.A. and Laurel Lagoni, M.S.

Guilt is the inner critic who judges our actions, thoughts, and even feelings. Guilt is a particularly insidious emotion because it can block our ability to grieve a death in the way that we need to.

Guilt complicates the grieving process when we get “stuck” on past events to the point where we cannot move forward emotionally. To get “stuck” emotionally is to hold ourselves to an impossible standard, scolding ourselves repeatedly when we can’t protect our pets from every harm.

Several situations can trigger feelings of guilt for pet parents. Some of the most common are:

- Accidental death (a car accident from walking off-leash or leaving a fence gate open; poisoning from house plants or household chemicals)
- Sudden illness (like cancer or a major organ failure)
- Deciding to euthanize or stop medical treatment
- Inability to afford veterinary care

Whether guilt is justified or not, we can’t make another person’s feelings of guilt go away just by telling them not to feel that way. In fact, if we try to talk someone out of their feelings, it often backfires and only strengthens their resolve. A better way to approach guilt is to acknowledge the feelings of remorse and create opportunities to make amends.

If you know someone who is struggling with feelings of guilt due to a pet’s death, use some of the following suggestions to help spur the emotional healing process. And, if they continue to be “stuck” in guilt, gently refer them to a qualified mental health professional.

- Reassure the other person that you don’t judge them or think badly of them. Emphasize the love they had for their pet and remind them they are a caring and good person.
- Suggest they write a letter to their pet, telling the pet all the things they feel guilty about and apologizing for what they feel they did or did not do.
- Help them do something worthwhile to honor their pet. For instance, suggest they give time or money to a cause or organization that benefits animals.

- If it’s appropriate, hold the other person’s hand. Recent brain research shows people (particularly women) grow calmer when they hold another person’s hand—even if it belongs to a stranger!



(Photo from Dreamstime.com)

- If the pet died suddenly, help them find ways to educate other pet parents about how a similar situation could be avoided in the future in order to save other animals. For example, they might send out flyers in the neighborhood about the dangers of walking a dog off leash).
- Encourage them to admit their mistakes and ask their pet for forgiveness. Most people believe that their pets would be very forgiving and would not hold a grudge. We all must find ways to forgive ourselves. Remind others that there is no earthly way for human beings to be perfect.
- Suggest they do something “difficult,” yet positive to honor the pet. An example might be giving up smoking in the honor of a pet. The act of self-sacrifice may give the other person a way to feel they have “atoned” for their actions.
- Remind them to keep a balanced perspective. When we feel guilty about something, it’s very hard to think about the good that we’ve done. Help them remember the positive. In fact, it’s helpful to spend time together writing down the things the other person did that were positive and good for their pet. This helps everyone remember when they came through for their pet.
- Help them realize that the past cannot be changed. Encourage the other person to focus on how they can change their behavior in the future and how they want to move forward. Looking forward help get the grief process “unstuck.”

© 2008 World by the Tail, Inc., www.VeterinaryWisdom.com, 1-888-271-8444

Our mission at World by the Tail, Inc., to “care for people who care for pets.”

Laurel Lagoni, M.S., is the former Director of the Argus Institute for Families and Veterinary Medicine at the James L. Voss Veterinary Teaching Hospital at Colorado State University. She is the current Director of the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center and President/CEO of World by the Tail, Inc.