



Veterinary Wisdom[®]

for practice teams

Five Comfort Conversations to Help You Cope with Pet Loss

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It can be risky to share your thoughts and feelings about your pet's death with others. What if they seem uncomfortable and quickly change the subject? What if they say something insensitive like, "Aren't you carrying on about this too long? After all, she was just a cat."

While these responses do happen, in my experience, it's far more likely that others will open up and share their stories, too, if you have the courage to talk honestly about your grief.

This happened to a prominent veterinary oncologist I know. A few years back, he went to his small, local barber shop (the kind where only men go and they just CUT hair---no perms, bleaches, or spa treatments of any kind!) and the barber asked him what he did for a living. The vet told the barber he treated dogs and cats who had cancer and the barber, along with the other men in the shop, scoffed at the idea. When the doctor added he also offered a grief support program to his clients, there was a lot of snickering. "That's the craziest idea I ever heard," his barber said.

But, my veterinarian friend proceeded to describe some of his recent cases---the dog who had saved his owner from an avalanche, the young boy and his beloved Golden Retriever who were struggling through chemo treatments together because they had the same kind of bone cancer.

By the time his haircut was finished, every guy there had a story to tell about a special dog from his past---the one who had touched his heart. A couple of them wiped away tears.

This breakthrough would have never happened if the veterinarian had allowed these men to intimidate him. And the men would not have realized that other men also had deep feelings of love and grief for their dogs.

If you're in the midst of grief, it can be healing to talk with others about your feelings. Here are some conversations that are helpful:

- Talk to another pet parent who has lost a pet. Ask them about their experience and request that they also listen to yours. Since this conversation can take quite a bit of time and be emotional, it may need to be scheduled and planned. Think about where and when this conversation can take place.
- Talk to a friend or family member who also knew and loved your pet. Ask them to share their best memories of your pet with you. Request that they share any photos or videotape they may have of your pet.

- Tell your pet's story from diagnosis or injury all the way to the way he or she died. This may help you make sense of the events and decisions you made surrounding your pet's treatment and death. In the aftermath of our pets' deaths, it's easy to forget how hard we tried to save them. Reviewing the process helps put death in perspective.
- If you have any "unfinished business"---unanswered questions, complaints about your pet's medical care, or guilt about how your pet died---seek out the appropriate person and initiate the conversation you need to have. Ask your husband why he let your dog out of your yard, ask your veterinarian to clarify the illness that caused your pet's death, write a letter to your pet and apologize for the role you think you may have played in his death.
- Make an appointment with a professional grief counselor and ask to be educated about the normal course of grief. Are you exhausted, confused, and preoccupied with your grief? Do you think you hear your cat meowing in the next room? Do you feel tingly all over and sometimes panic at the thought of your pet's death? All of these sensations are part of a normal grief response, but they can make you feel like you are losing your mind if you don't expect them to happen. Learn about what's normal.

If you're grieving, you should also be talking---and listening---to others. If you have the courage to tell others about your feelings, you may lend them the strength to share their stories, too.

Sometimes we give and receive comfort at the same time....



(photo from Dreamstime.com)

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