



Pets, Divorce and Getting through Grief

by Laurel Lagoni, M.S.

Next to a death, a break-up or divorce may be the most traumatic event in the life of a family. The changes are likely to affect living arrangements, finances, support systems, personal identities, and even the family pets. If you've gone through a break-up or divorce and lost custody or visitation rights with your pets, you are probably experiencing grief just as you would if your pets had died.

Jean McBride, a licensed marriage and family therapist and Executive Director of the Colorado Center for Life Changes in Fort Collins, Colorado, says losing custody or visitation rights with your pets can trigger what grief experts call ambiguous loss.

"In cases of ambiguous loss," says McBride, "the pet hasn't actually died, but the welfare and, in some cases, even the whereabouts of the pet may be unknown. This uncertainty can make it very difficult to grieve normally and in a healthy way because the relationship remains unfinished in a pet owner's mind."

If you've lost day-to-day contact with your pet and are grieving for a pet who is still very much alive, the following suggestions may help you cope with your feelings.



Realize the decision made about your pet was based on putting your pet's needs first. Remind yourself that you and your former partner or spouse or, in some cases, the court placed your pet where he or she would be most comfortable and stable. Factors like a fenced yard, flexible work schedules, and financial support were considered and the person who was determined to be the best prepared to be the primary caretaker for your pet was chosen.

Remember that, if children were involved in your divorce, you and your former partner or spouse or, in some cases, the court most likely placed your pet with your children. Neither children nor animals deal well with lots of changes in their routines, so pets often end up living where the children live so they can serve as stabilizing influences for one another. If you have joint custody or frequent visitations with your children, but not your pet, request that recent photos of your pet also be shared.

If you simply have no contact with your pet, it's important to acknowledge your feelings and allow yourself to grieve. Write in a journal, talk to a friend or therapist, or frame a photo of you and your pet. It can also be helpful to write a goodbye letter to your pet, thanking him or her for their years of friendship.

"Talk with someone who understands your bond with your animal and will encourage you to explore what you miss by no longer living with him or her," suggests McBride "and then, when the timing and circumstances are right, consider bringing another pet into your life to love."

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