



Five Comforting Conversations to Help You Cope with Pet Loss

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Sharing your thoughts and feelings about your pet's death with others is risky. What if they are uncomfortable or quickly change the subject? What if they say something like, "Aren't you carrying on about this too long?" or "After all, she was just a cat."

Unfortunately, you may get these responses, but if you forge ahead and talk honestly about your grief, it's far more likely that others will also open up and share their stories of pet loss.

This is what happened to Scott, a prominent veterinary oncologist. During a Saturday morning visit to a small, local barber shop, the barber asked Scott what he did for a living. Proud of his work, Scott said he treated dogs and cats who had cancer. The barber, along with the other men in the shop, snickered. Somewhat surprised by the reaction, Scott added that he also offered a grief support program to his clients when their pets died.

"That's the craziest idea I ever heard," the barber said, shaking his head while snipping away at Scott's hair. Based on the laughter that erupted all around, others seemed to agree.



Scott knew from experience that people often use nervous laughter and verbal taunts to try to stop conversations that make them uncomfortable. So, ignoring the tension, Scott proceeded to describe one of his most recent cases. In a quiet voice filled with respect for his patient and client, Scott told the men gathered in the barber shop about Hank, a black lab who had worked furiously to dig his owner out of an avalanche during a cross country ski trip. When Scott told his client that Hank had a massive tumor on his spleen, the man elected to try surgery, even though Scott warned him that the surgery would be expensive and most likely would do little to save the dog.

"Hank saved my life, Doc. Now, I need to return the favor. Do the surgery," the man told Scott.

Miraculously, Hank made it through the surgery. "But, just two days ago," Scott continued, "we had to euthanize him. I was there as he died in his owner's arms." Scott paused and looked around the room. "It's a privilege to witness such boundless, unselfish love and I feel grateful every day for the work I get to do."

For a moment, the room was silent. Then, one man spoke about a special dog he remembered from his past. By the time Scott's haircut was finished, the men had taken part in a different kind of conversation, sharing stories about the pets—and the grief—that had touched their hearts. As Scott readied himself to leave, the barber slapped him on the back and thanked him for the visit. Another man rose from the barber chair and shook Scott's hand. "I hadn't thought about that old dog for years," he told him. "It felt good to remember him." ➔

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These comforting stories would not have been shared if Scott had allowed the men to intimidate him. Without this conversation, the men might not have realized that they weren't alone with their feelings. Now, they realized that other men also had feelings of love and grief inside them and that those feelings were normal.

If you're in the midst of grief, an important part of your healing process is talking with others about your feelings. Here are some conversation ideas to get your healing process started:

1. Many of the thoughts, feelings and behaviors associated with normal grief can make you feel like you are losing your mind. Becoming more knowledgeable about the effects of loss helps you understand why you are exhausted, confused, and preoccupied with your grief. Attend a pet loss support group or make an appointment with a professional grief counselor to learn more about the normal course of grief.
2. Identify other pet parents who have lost their pets. Tell them you'd like to learn about their experience and request that they also listen to yours. Since conversations like these can take time and be emotional, they shouldn't be treated casually. Make an appointment with your friend and meet in a private place. Remember to bring water and some tissues and give yourself permission to cry while you talk.
3. 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 also share any photos or video they have of your pet.
4. 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. For instance, you might talk with your spouse about how your dog escaped your fenced yard or you might ask your veterinarian for more clarifying details about the illness that caused your pet's death. Following these conversations, it can be helpful to write a letter to your pet, explaining or even apologizing for the role you feel you may have played in his/her death.
5. Make an appointment with your spiritual advisor or other trusted advisor and tell your pet's story from diagnosis or injury to the way he or she died. Reviewing the details and timelines can help you make sense of the events and decisions you made surrounding your pet's treatment and death. In the aftermath of a pet's death, it's easy to forget all you did to help him or her. Reviewing the process can bring perspective to the loss and grief you are feeling.

Sometimes you can give and receive comfort at the same time. If you are grieving, make time to talk - and listen - to others. Remember Scott and his friends at the barber shop. When you find the courage to tell others about your feelings, you lend them strength to share their stories, too.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdompetparents.com.

