



The Good, the Bad, and the Holidays

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It's the holiday season and, for Emma and thousands like her, it comes with a mixed bag of emotions. On one hand, the holidays bring excitement and the anticipation of celebrations spent with family and friends. Yet, for Emma, the season also triggers feelings of loneliness and regret. You see, two years ago in mid-November, Emma's beloved cat Sandy died.

Many people who've lost a pet around the holidays experience strong grief or "anniversary" reactions during the days, weeks, and even months leading up to, as well as following, the anniversary of their pet's death. If you're having an "anniversary" reaction, thoughts and emotions similar to those you experienced when your pet died may get 'triggered' each time the date rolls around. In the midst of an "anniversary" reaction, even grief that is several years old can get 'stirred' again, prompting you to revisit your memories in powerful and sometimes unpredictable ways.

While Emma's "anniversary" grief dampens her mood a bit, she doesn't let it ruin her holidays. She uses a few effective strategies to deal with her grief and to take good care of herself. If you're experiencing an anniversary reaction to the loss of your pet, try one of more of Emma's techniques to cope.



- **Be aware of your own unique symptoms, as well as what works for you to deal with them.** It's important to understand how *your* grief may play out in *your* life. Grief is different for each of us. For example, Emma traveled often and for long distances when Sandy was ill so she could receive specialized treatment for cancer. As someone who defines herself as a homebody, Emma found the disruption to her lifestyle quite traumatic. Now, two years later, Emma often finds herself reluctant to leave home as the holiday season begins. Once she realized why she felt this way, she began to give herself permission to take a few days off in early December to simply stay home. She uses the time to relax and pamper herself and to reflect on her days with Sandy.

Your anniversary reaction and coping strategies might look different from Emma's. For example, if you had to make a gut-wrenching decision, perhaps about choosing euthanasia for your pet, you might find yourself feeling depressed, irritable, guilty, or generally 'out of sorts', despite the festivities of the holiday season. Feelings of sadness during such a traditionally happy time can be confusing unless you understand why you are experiencing them. It may help to know that you are not alone and that your feelings are normal and to-be-expected.

- **Share memories with understanding friends and family who support you.** The great paradox of grief is that talking openly about your pet and your painful feelings of grief, instead of trying to suppress them, actually helps you heal emotionally. Ignoring your memories and feelings or pushing grief away often makes it more powerful, more unpredictable, and much more difficult to manage. Take charge of your grief by accepting it and allowing it to be present.
- **If you haven't done so already, think about ways to memorialize your pet** (and, if you've already done this, do it again!) You can intentionally move your feelings of grief toward memories of love, gratitude, and healing by creating an annual ritual or memorial. Committing to a comforting annual ritual is one of the most positive and effective ways you can deal with "anniversary" reactions and grief. For example, you might consider making an annual donation in your pet's name to an animal-related charity or pet loss support program.

Your memories of your pet are a unique and treasured part of the relationship you shared. Allowing yourself to *consciously remember* your pet's love and companionship helps your healing process progress. Yes, you'll probably laugh, smile, AND cry, but that's okay. Life with your pet as you knew it is gone, but the love you shared truly never dies.

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