



Why Grief Feels Different When Your Pet Dies Suddenly

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If you lost your pet suddenly due to

- advanced age
- an acute illness or accident
- theft or a mysterious disappearance
- euthanasia due to your pet's aggressive behavior or medical treatments that cost more than you could afford to spend,

you may feel that this particular loss is more emotionally painful than others you have experienced.

Experts say the experience of grieving isn't really different when a pet dies suddenly. Rather, it's your capacity to cope with your grief that is severely diminished. When a pet dies unexpectedly, there is no gradual transition or opportunity to say good-bye. The sensations of shock and denial can leave you too stunned and confused to respond, interfering with your ability to gather your support system and start the process of emotional healing.



Leading grief expert, J. William Worden, Ph.D., highlights nine characteristics of grief due to the sudden loss of a loved one. They are:

- 1) feeling dazed, shocked and numb, along with an increased sense of unreality
- 2) pronounced feelings of guilt and "if only" thoughts
- 3) a tendency to blame or "scapegoat" others
- 4) a sense of helplessness and lack of power
- 5) feelings of anger and rage, often directed at others involved with the death
- 6) agitation, anxiety and the urge to "fight or take flight"
- 7) unfinished business and a lack of closure
- 8) complications due to the involvement of medical and legal authorities
- 9) an increased desire to understand and find meaning in life

When you know a death is coming, normal feelings of anticipatory grief tend to arise so, by the time death finally occurs, you are more ready to face your emotions. You may even experience some feelings of relief.

Without time to anticipate and prepare, though, sudden death can be much more disruptive, leaving you feeling angry, confused, helpless and overwhelmed for a longer period of time. Daily life often takes on a surreal quality and feelings of being lost and disoriented often take prominence. Since it is difficult to function normally when you feel stuck in these painful feelings, the world might seem a little less safe and you might feel more fearful and vulnerable. →

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Sudden death can make it much more challenging to accept that loss has actually occurred and to integrate the consequences of your loss into your daily life.

If you feel your pet's death was, in some way, your fault, guilt and shame can further complicate your grief and become debilitating. For instance, to try to gain some sense of control and predictability, you may find yourself reviewing the circumstances leading up to your pet's death, searching for ways that it could have been different. When prolonged, these "if onlys" and "what ifs" can complicate the normal grief process and leave you mentally and emotionally drained and exhausted. In addition, if you witnessed your pet's death or had to move your pet's body, your grief may be more traumatizing, characterized by persistent violent or disturbing thoughts and images of how your pet died. Being preoccupied with these images can make it difficult to sleep or concentrate on daily tasks.

While there is no such thing as an "easier" way to lose a beloved pet, when you know your pet is going to die, you have time to prepare yourself emotionally and say your heartfelt good-byes. Having time to make plans and arrange memorials to honor your pet often makes the loss somewhat easier to bear.

If you are struggling with the prolonged and more complicated feelings of grief that stem from sudden loss, please seek help from a pet loss support group or qualified grief counselor who can help you find perspective and healing. If counseling isn't right for you, find a close friend or family member who will listen and allow you to express all of your feelings. Expressed feelings tend to disappear and become less powerful, while repressed feelings tend to linger and build up steam. Expressing how you feel will help you heal.

In addition to talking about your grief, there are many other ways your grief can be expressed. You can write a letter to your pet, thanking him or her for the love you shared or you can make a photo album of the special times you had with your pet. The goal is to do whatever will help you turn your focus back to how your pet lived, rather than staying focused on how your pet died. After all, that's where the love and comfort you shared still lives on.

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

