

Pets, Divorce and Getting through Grief

by Laurel Lagoni, M.S.

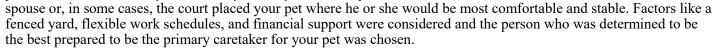
Next to a death, a break-up or divorce may be the most traumatic event in the life of a family. The changes are likely to affect living arrangements, finances, support systems, personal identities, and even the family pets. If you've gone through a break-up or divorce and lost custody or visitation rights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

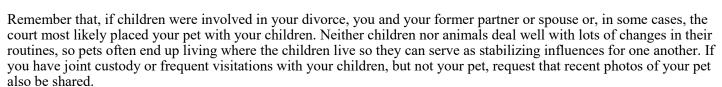
Jean McBride, a licensed marriage and family therapist and Executive Director of the Colorado Center for Life Changes in Fort Collins, Colorado, says losing custody or visitation rights with your pets can trigger what grief experts call ambiguous loss.

"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





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."

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

