



## 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, this year, it also triggers feelings of loneliness and regret. You see, in mid-November, Emma's beloved cat Sandy was euthanized.

Many people who lose a pet around the holidays have a more complicated grief response, finding themselves feeling depressed, anxious, or guilty, despite the festivities of the holiday season. Feelings of depression, during a traditionally happy time, can be confusing unless your clients understand *why* they are experiencing them. As a veterinary team member, you can be a tremendous support for clients who lose their pets during the holidays if you keep the following four tips in mind:

**1) Educate clients about normal grief and remind them that they may need more support than usual, simply because their loss occurred during the holidays.** It's normal for people who are grieving to feel sad, depressed, irritable, foggy-headed, and fatigued, regardless of what's going on around them. These feelings are to be expected! Encourage your clients to share their feelings and memories with understanding friends and family who support them. And, remind them that the great paradox of grieving is that talking openly about emotions, rather than trying to suppress them, actually helps the healing process progress. Ignoring memories and feelings or pushing grief away often makes it more powerful, more unpredictable, and much more difficult to manage.

Help clients feel more empowered by encouraging them to accept the fact that they have lost someone dear to them and that they must now allow their grief to be present. If your clients don't believe they have friends and family members who will support them, refer them to a qualified veterinary grief counselor in your area or online.



You can find a current list of free, as well as expert, counseling resources when you visit the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center at [www.veterinarywisdom.com](http://www.veterinarywisdom.com)

**2) Create a special keepsake for clients by making a clay print of their pet's paw.** For many pet parents, the hardest part of saying good-bye is going home 'empty-handed', without their beloved pet. When you take time to make a paw print, your clients leave with a customized memorial that helps them feel they are still connected to their pet---and to your clinic! Many pet owners say that returning to the veterinary clinic, the scene of their pet's last moments of life, is one of the hardest parts of dealing with the aftermath of pet loss. For some clients, the emotional pain is so intense that they avoid making new appointments for their surviving pets or even switch to another veterinary clinic.

You can ease the anxiety your clients feel about returning to your clinic by sending them home with ➔

(Cont.)

a paw print keepsake, as well as with memories of your compassion and thoughtfulness. Convenient ClayPaws® Kits are available at [www.veterinarywisdom.com](http://www.veterinarywisdom.com)

**3) Suggest other ways your clients might honor the memories of their pets.** Clients can intentionally move their feelings of grief toward memories of love, gratitude, and healing by creating an annual holiday season ritual or memorial as a tribute to their pets. In fact, committing to an annual ritual of giving during the holidays is one of the most positive and effective ways to deal with grief. For example, your clients might make an annual donation in their pet's name to an animal-related charity or pet loss support program like Best Friends Animal Society ([www.bestfriends.org](http://www.bestfriends.org)) or the Argus Institute (nationwide pet loss support and veterinary grief education program) at Colorado State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital ([www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu](http://www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu)). If your clinic has a fund to help those who can't afford treatment for their own pets, you might suggest that, as well.

**4) If you're interested in providing deeper, and perhaps more long-term, support for clients, you might take your grief education efforts one step further, teaching clients about what experts call "anniversary grief".** "Anniversary grief" reactions occur during the days, weeks, and even months leading up to, as well as following, the anniversary of a loss. If clients experience an anniversary reaction, thoughts and emotions similar to those they experienced when their pet died may get "triggered" each time the same date, or even the same time of year, rolls around. "Anniversary" reactions can be even more distressing if clients aren't consciously aware of the links between their feelings and the deaths of their pets.

During a typical anniversary reaction to pet loss, clients might experience:

- sad memories, feelings of grief, or anxious thoughts similar to those they had while their pets were ill or dying
- the arousal of more intense emotions like fear, guilt, helplessness, or depression, especially if some part of the grieving process seems unresolved
- the avoidance of events, places, and people still associated with a pet's death, like the street where a dog was hit by a car or *your veterinary clinic*, where their pets were euthanized.

Researchers say anniversary reactions may occur due to the way traumatic experiences are stored in human memory. Along with details like where people were, who they were with, and what they were doing, memory also contains information about the *threat* or *danger* inherent in an experience. Thus, those memories of danger instinctively prompt humans to seek safety and protection, often by avoiding the place, or even the people, associated with a loss.

Since you don't want your clients to avoid your veterinary clinic, it may be in your best interests, as well as your clients', to enlighten them about this phenomenon. When people become consciously aware of *why* they may be reluctant to revisit your clinic, they can reassure themselves that they are not actually re-experiencing their pet's death, but simply remembering the distress they felt at that time. And, when you've handled their original loss with sensitivity and thoughtfulness, they'll also remember that they can trust you to support them through the experience.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom® Resource Center at [www.veterinarywisdom.com](http://www.veterinarywisdom.com)