

WHEN A PET DOG DIES



The death of a beloved pet dog cannot be measured. The grief that comes from it is something very personal and, more often than not, extraordinarily intense. Everyone experiences, handles and expresses grief differently, regardless of whether they are the dog's owners, other family members, friends or mere acquaintances.

It is a sad fact that dogs do not live as long as humans, which means almost all dog owners will have to face the trauma of losing their best friend and companion at some stage during their lifetime. Some will endure the heartache repeatedly, either because they own various dogs at the same time or simply because the life of an average human being may span the consecutive lives of many pet dogs. One might imagine it is an event that gets easier the more times it happens, but as someone who has had dogs all my life and still have dogs as I approach retirement age, it saddens me to tell you ... it doesn't.

I have contributed daily to an American health forum website and a Facebook Canine Kidney Disease Group Forum for many years, supporting hundreds of grieving dog owners. In all that time there have been some common phrases, questions and comments that people have made. I have always responded in the most cautious, honest and sympathetic way I can while recognizing they are the ones suffering at this time, not me. It is sometimes hard to put yourself in someone else's shoes and walk at their side down the same path, but it helps (I think) to have experienced similar events and to have agonized with similar emotions.

By way of explanation, this article includes photos of all the dogs I have had the privilege of sharing my life with, including my current best friends. Each one was special, unique and irreplaceable. They were my friends, companions and soul mates – and I miss them as much today as I did when they passed.



Credit: Tony Booth

(Left to right) Penny, my childhood companion. Soda, my big bouncy bubbly Old English. Floss, a rescued puppy who succumbed to Parvovirus all too young.

I do not doubt that grief is the same the world over, regardless of social standing or culture, but the way we each react to it and the length of time it takes to conquer is sometimes very different. These are a few of the more frequent comments people make when they have lost a pet (I hope my responses offer some comfort if you are going through a similar event at this time):

‘When do you know when the right time has come?’

People rarely ever say the word ‘euthanasia’, even though everyone at some stage needs to talk about it. The secret language of dog owners - the one that avoids us having to say things outright - is intuitively understood by all that have faced the same dilemma. In some ways, denying the word an existence probably allows us to postpone the event, even if only in our own minds.

It is a hard subject to contemplate, never mind talk about openly and dispassionately. I can talk easily about it here and now when it has little bearing on my life in the present – but when the subject is real, raw and imminent, I fall apart like so many other animal lovers. For this reason, it is something worth debating with loved ones, partners, family and your vet long before it becomes urgent. It won’t make the act any easier, but it will mean everyone involved is thinking with the same voice, allowing each family member to support the other through this difficult period.

No one can truly answer when the right time has come to euthanize a loved pet. It is far too dependent on each situation and circumstance. It is also inappropriate for anyone other than a vet to suggest when the right time has come to help a pet dog out of suffering. The dog’s owner is the only person with the authority, responsibility and insight to decide when that time has arrived. I would suggest gathering every last bit of information before you even contemplate euthanasia, otherwise, you might regret it later - or worse, become burdened with guilt. When a dog is seriously ill, it is worth researching things about the condition, trying to find out what others have said about it and what other pet owners have done to help their best friend. It is also useful to consult your preferred veterinary surgeon to see what advice and

suggestions they may have. Once you have all the necessary information, it will be easier to decide one way or the other.

In the end, there is someone who can tell you when the time has arrived – and that is your dog. Some people say dogs can't talk but I believe they can, and particularly when they are trying to communicate with their own best friend ... which of course, is you.

When a dog has had enough of life and is ready to leave the agony and misery behind them, it will tell you with a look that will cut you to the bone. The eyes, they say, are the windows to the soul – and when a tired and exhausted dog, suffering through chronic illness or pain, stares deeply into your eyes, you will understand exactly what they are saying.



Credit: Tony Booth

Meg, another rescue, who was the most amazing dog that lived to an extraordinary 20 years of age. She shared my life during my 20s and 30s and helped get me through some very tough times.

'People keep telling me, it's only a dog, pull yourself together.'

Some people simply don't understand and therefore cannot appreciate the unique relationship dogs and human beings share. Usually, this is because they have never had a dog themselves. It is pointless being angry with people who may say this kind of thing. We should pity them because they have truly missed out on a kind of love and sharing that is incomparable to any other relationship. Try to find people within your social circle that understand your feelings of loss and get the support you need from them instead. Use the internet as well, because there are lots of excellent support forums that have like-minded people who are there to listen, help and chat about your loss day or night.

'I feel very guilty about calling our vet and think I should have waited.'

Ending a dog's life might be done for all the right reasons, but the action often leaves behind a loving owner riddled with guilt and remorse. We all know dogs rely so much on their owners – and in fact, they are entirely dependent on them for warmth, shelter, food, love, good health and comfort. They also rely on us to make the right

decision when the time comes, because they cannot do this for themselves. It is the last responsibility we have – and the most dreadful judgment we must make on their behalf.

Owners blame themselves for making such a decision and try to find ways of subconsciously punishing themselves too, as a way of atonement. This is perfectly natural, even if it is completely unwarranted. The loss is felt so deeply and hurts so much, it can cause normally balanced people to become irrational in their thoughts. Immediately after the event, it is the shock and emotional trauma of loss that makes people rethink their earlier decisions. In time, these thoughts usually subside and the bigger picture returns to a sharper focus – and the original timing of the decision is then understood and appreciated more fully.



Credit: Tony Booth

Arthur had been in a rescue shelter for far too long. He was a wonderful dog, but suffered from intense separation anxiety and fear aggression. I tried for almost a year to help him, but failed despite the intervention and help of two dog behaviourists - sadly, he had been damaged too much from a very young age.

Waiting is rarely the right thing to do, as it merely postpones the inevitable and so often causes a dog to suffer that much more. If you have acquired all the information you can, if you have spoken with your vet and tried every possible treatment for your dog's condition, the last action would be contemplated and taken at the right time and after exploring and considering all other possible alternatives.

'I am embarrassed to say, I feel the loss of my dog more than when my parents passed away.'

Why people say they become embarrassed by their honest feelings, I don't know, because there is certainly no shame or humiliation in the purest of loves that exists between a dog and its owner. We have to remember that our dogs listen to and keep our deepest secrets, they share and support us during the good and bad events in our lives and offer nothing but love, loyalty and companionship. They are there when

others abandon us – and they forgive us when we might occasionally let them down. Our dogs can make us laugh out loud, they share our adventures and protect us when we are on our own.

There is good reason some people say they prefer dogs to humans because we might occasionally fall out with friends and family or not hear from them from one month to the next. But our dogs are always right there at our side and willing to listen to us complaining about this and that without once disagreeing or criticizing. It is little wonder then that they occupy a very special part of our hearts – and as a result, we feel their loss very deeply indeed.

‘I keep forgetting my dog is no longer here.’

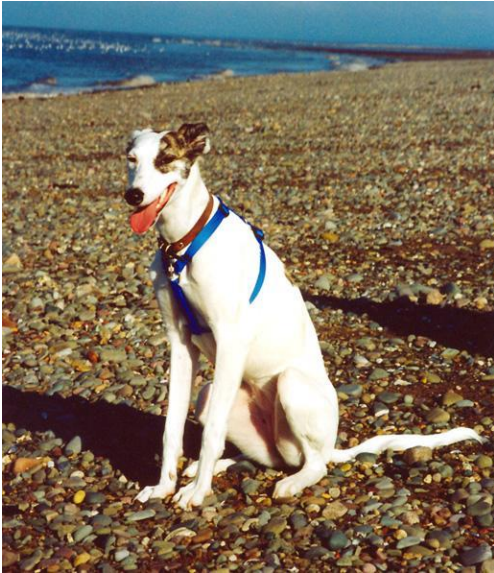
During the first few days and weeks of loss, people say they find themselves doing the strangest of things such as making up their dog’s dinner, leaning out of bed in the morning to cuddle their dog or prepare to go out for walkies ... and then they remember what has happened, and burst into floods of tears. This is a natural part of the grieving process and is something that happens when we lose a partner, a close family member or a best friend.

We are victims of routine. When we have a dog, there are certain things we do automatically every day at the same time and often without much conscious thought. We get up in the morning, shower and brush our teeth and let the dog out. When we come home at night, our dog welcomes us and we spend time playing with them or taking them out for a walk. We feed them at similar times and enjoy their company in front of the television when we are relaxing. When our dogs are no longer with us, our routines are violently disrupted. Our subconscious mind takes it upon itself to ease our suffering by blotting out painful events. We allow ourselves to forget and find ourselves living as if it were still yesterday, which is more comforting than accepting the awfulness of today.

This is grieving and it happens to just about everyone that has lost a beloved pet dog. Slowly but certainly new routines take over, and the memory errors become less frequent as patterns of behaviour adapt to different daily habits.

‘Do you think I will see my dog again in heaven?’

This is probably one of the most difficult questions I get asked. I am not religious and do not have a particular faith. I don’t happen to believe in an afterlife or to the premise that heaven exists. But I am nonetheless quite philosophical about the subject. My opinion is that no one knows what happens to our life-force or soul, personality and memories when we die, so my belief could be wrong. Only time will tell. I certainly do not deny the possible existence of a heaven and would never mock or denigrate it, I just don’t happen to believe in it myself.



Credit: Tony Booth

My rescued lurcher BB and the last dog I lost. BB was the most intelligent dog I have ever owned and my faithful companion for 12 years. I miss her more than words can describe.

It is a question that I have thought long and hard about and when grieving pet owners ask it, I always say surely if you believe in heaven as a place where peace and serenity exist, then our pets are waiting for us there – because otherwise, how can we possibly experience the complete contentment it promises to offer? I would urge those with strong faith to read The Rainbow Bridge poem (just search for it on the internet). It is beautifully crafted and rich in sentiment. The author is unknown, yet their words have given hope and strength to countless millions across the globe.

‘It has been six months, but I am still crying over my loss.’

Grieving takes its own good time. We cannot rush it, though we may often want it to stop earlier than it sometimes does. It is a slow but progressive journey, littered with occasional backward steps. Over time, the outbursts of sheer emotion become less frequent, even though they can also occur spontaneously and without warning. Small things, events and people’s comments can trigger a flood of tears. I don’t believe we ever truly get over the loss – but we do gradually come to terms with it and learn to get on with the other diverse aspects of our lives.

When I lost my dog BB to kidney failure, it took me two long years to progress through the grieving process. She was a dog that had accompanied me during some very dark and difficult years. When it was time for her to leave me, I was heartbroken beyond belief. I received some comfort from the fact I knew I had given her the best life I could. She had enjoyed days full of adventure, taken regular walks to her favourite places and had a safe and loving home. Yet, even after two years had passed after her death, I could still have an occasional day when BB filled my head and heart ... and the tears would roll down my cheeks as if it had been yesterday.

A good cry is a release of tension and emotion. If you feel the need to cry – let it out – but at the same time try to remember the many healthy, happy and carefree years your dog enjoyed, thanks to you.

'My partner seems to have recovered and is back to normal, while I am still crying every day.'

I am someone who wears his heart on his sleeve. I cry easily and readily. I speak my mind and express my emotions. It took me many years to recognise that people are not all built this way. I once used to think those that didn't cry at the drop of a hat, didn't have the same depth of emotion – but I have since learned that most people suffer from their emotions the same way and to the same degree, but some simply don't display it like others.

So, just because your partner or a family member is getting on with life, don't mistake this for him or her having come to terms with the loss. They may still be suffering in silence, which is often more traumatic than crying out loud. They are probably the kind of person that needs to hide away to release their emotion. They may also be putting all their effort into being strong and protective, so they can help you get through this harrowing period. Give them space and show respect for the way their psyche works.

Distraction is a way others might offset or postpone the turmoil of losing a dog. The pressures of work, family life and other commitments might be being manipulated to fill the void. But they will need to deal with the loss at some stage, otherwise, it will eat away at them and overflow into anger, frustration and irritation. If your partner seems unable to talk to you about how they feel, ask them to talk to a friend or family member they feel comfortable with. Talking is the best medicine to help dissipate grief – but a partner may simply be too close and too grief-stricken themselves to offer the kind of support that is truly needed. Alternatively, if they cannot talk through their feelings, ask them to write you a letter to explain what they are going through and what they might suggest you can do to help.



Credit: Tony Booth

Giro, my now 16-year-old and the most affectionate dog I have ever known - and Sally the 12-year-old rescued and retired from racing greyhound, who came with lots of psychological baggage, but eventually settled to enjoy a safe, warm and loving home.

'I could never have another dog. It just wouldn't be the same.'

The fact that many people feel this way after losing a dog is no surprise. The pain is sometimes intolerable, so who in the right mind would want to go through it again? But eventually, the intense emotions of grief subside. Sadness and tearful episodes might continue for many months and, sometimes, even for years. At some stage during this process, a more rational and brighter outlook starts to emerge and we start to see things differently. It is inappropriate to compare pet dogs against each other because each one is distinctive. They have their own personalities, quirky traits, levels of affection and abilities. No dog could ever be the same as the one that has passed away ... but many dogs could supply the same level of companionship, love and loyalty. Welcoming another dog into your heart and home is not a betrayal of the friend you have lost, it's an affirmation of the good, caring and kind person you are.

The pain of losing a companion is a very small part of the wonderful life a dog and its owner has shared. In time you will be able to ruminate on happier days, hundreds of adventures, a thousand laugh-out-loud moments and a million cuddles. These are the important memories to cherish. They will become comforting and reassuring in time, as well as helping grief to subside. My own dogs, past and present, all have their own special place in my heart. They will never be forgotten. I could not fully enjoy life without having a dog at my side to share it with me. In time, I hope you will feel the same and offer the love you have in abundance to another best friend.

There are so many dogs in need of a good home and rescue shelters are crying out for good-hearted people like you to walk through their doors. Maybe today is not the right time, but who knows ... tomorrow is a brand new day.

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