

Saying Goodbye





Coping with losing a friend

It's not something we like to think about. But as owners, we all know our beloved pets will die one day.

It could be sudden and unexpected, or we may have to make a very hard decision. Either way, losing a pet is a painful, highly emotional experience.

We can't make it any easier; this booklet just explains a bit more about what's going on, and offers some advice to help you get through this very difficult time.



We know how it feels

Losing a much-loved friend and companion is one of life's most stressful events. It's especially hard if it's unexpected; the result of an accident or sudden illness, for example.

It's very important to give yourself as much time as you need for grieving. You've lost someone very special; missing them is natural and not something to be embarrassed about. Talking with friends and family can make a huge difference; your veterinary practice may also be able to put you in touch with a bereavement counsellor.

All we can say is: we understand. Although it's really hard, you'll find a way to cope. And even if it doesn't feel like it now, it will get better in time.

Helping your children

Losing a pet can be especially hard on children. Some could feel very hurt because it's as if a friend has abandoned them. Others might be afraid they'll now lose their parents, too.

So what do you say? If they're told their pet has 'gone to sleep', a child might expect it to wake up again. If they hear it's been 'rehomed' they may think it's their fault, and feel very guilty. Even being reassured that the pet has 'gone somewhere else' leaves the hope it may come back again.

In our experience, it's best to be honest with them. They'll be sad, but it's an important part of the grieving process (more about this later) and will help them come to terms with it more quickly.





Your veterinary practice may also be able to put you in touch with a bereavement counsellor

Making the hard decision

It's probably the toughest choice we ever have to make as pet owners. But sometimes, putting a sick or injured animal to sleep – the technical term is euthanasia – is essential to prevent unnecessary pain and suffering. Allowing them to slip away quietly, peacefully and with dignity can be a last great act of kindness to a much-loved companion.

Your vet (who finds this very hard, too) will advise you when the time is right. Before they recommend euthanasia, your vet will have to decide if your pet is:

- suffering pain, distress or serious discomfort that can't be properly controlled

- having difficulty walking or balancing
- finding it hard to eat and drink enough to stay healthy
- suffering from tumours that can't be treated or removed, and are causing pain or serious discomfort
- having difficulty breathing
- incontinent, or having problems with going to the toilet
- suffering from unacceptable behavioural problems that cannot be resolved.

They'll also talk to you about whether you can cope with any long-term nursing or medication your pet might need.

What happens when an animal is put to sleep?

First, you'll be asked to sign a consent form. This gives the vet permission to carry out euthanasia.

Next, the vet will give an injection, usually in a vein in the front leg. This is an anaesthetic, and your pet will fall asleep, usually within a few seconds. After about a minute, their breathing and heart will stop. They may have some muscle tremors, but this is normal and nothing to worry about: there is no more pain or distress. It's all very calm, respectful and dignified.

Being there at the end

Whether you stay with your pet at this time is completely up to you. Although it's hard, many people find being there helps them to come to terms with the loss, and start the grieving process right away. Others find it too distressing, which can also be upsetting for the animal. Vets understand how difficult this is, and will be happy to let you do whatever you feel is right for you and your pet.

What happens next?

Once it's all over, you'll have time with your pet to say a final goodbye. The vet will give you as long as you need.

Your vet will arrange for your pet to be cremated. If you'd prefer a private cremation for your pet, and to have their ashes returned so you can bury or scatter them yourself, please talk to us.



The grieving process

Losing a pet affects everyone differently. You've had your own unique relationship, and no one else can ever quite understand how you feel. For most people, though, the grieving process is basically the same. Some stages may take longer than others: what's important is knowing that it is normal – and that you can, and will, come through it in the end.

The first stage is shock and disbelief. You may find it hard to accept your pet has gone, and the house may feel very empty.

Next, you'll probably experience anger and depression. This is the really painful part of grieving, and when you'll need most support from family and friends. Just talking about what you're feeling can help a lot.

You might also feel guilty, constantly asking yourself whether you did the right thing, or could have done anything to prevent it. It's not a nice feeling, but it's completely normal, and it will wear off in time.

Going through these stages is tough, but in the end, you'll be able to accept the reality of losing your pet. You'll find you can look back on your pet's life, and enjoy remembering the good times you had together.

Moving on

There are lots of ways you can remember your pet and the life you shared. You could plant a tree or shrub in the garden, or put together a photo album or a video collection. You can also upload your pictures and messages to our *National Collection of Pet Memories* on our website.

Many owners choose to make a donation to PDSA or other animal charities in their pet's memory. To find out about donating to PDSA, please call 0800 591248, or visit pdsa.org.uk

Whether you get another pet, and how soon, is a very personal decision. Some owners just can't face it, while for others, it's the best way to move on. Talk to your family and friends, and your vet, and do what's right for *you*.

You might want to read

Absent Friend: Coping with the loss of a treasured pet – by Laura and Martyn Lee

Companion Animal Death –
by Mary F Stewart

Goodbye, Dear Friend –
by Virginia Ironside

For children:

Missing my pet – by Alex Lambert

People you can talk to ...

Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS)

Freephone 0800 096 6606

Email pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk

PDSA National Collection of Pet Memories

Freephone 0800 591248

pdsa.org.uk/petmemories

Giving to PDSA

Treating poorly pets costs us over a million pounds a week – and as a charity, we have to raise every penny ourselves. Making a donation to PDSA is a wonderful way to celebrate your pet's life, and help us provide free and low-cost care for pets who need it most.

Losing a pet can leave you feeling very lonely. Joining a PDSA fundraising group, or volunteering in your local PDSA charity shop, are great ways to meet friendly, supportive people who'll understand just what you're going through.

To find out more about volunteering, or giving to PDSA, please call FREE on 0800 917 2509 or visit pdsa.org.uk

pdsa.org.uk

Registered charity nos. 208217 & SC037585.
© The People's Dispensary for Sick Animals 06/15
SLF0-0041

pdsa
HELP A VET HELP A PET