

COPING WITH THE DEATH OF YOUR DOG

By Sue Ablett, Gay Martin and Pam Ringrose



Our grateful thanks to all those who shared their memories and experiences in the hope that it would help others. But the biggest thanks of all go to Fozzie, Poppy, Peanut and all those dogs who chose to share their lives with us – sometimes for all too short a time – and so made the greatest contribution of all.

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Fozzie



Poppy



Peanut

“All I want for Christmas is a pill to make Mac live forever”

(William, aged 9)

Sadly, Mac, a beautiful golden retriever, died a few months later. None of us live forever. We all know that, but it doesn't make it any easier and, for children, the death of a much loved pet may be their first encounter with death. This leaflet is based on personal experiences – our own and those of friends. We hope it helps with some of the practical and emotional aspects involved in coping with the death of your dog.

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Commitment

Taking on a dog is a lifelong commitment and, at some point, you will have to face the death of your dog. Dogs are a huge part of our lives: very much at the heart of the family. In return for the care we give them, they devote themselves totally to us. For those who have not experienced the joy that owning a dog can bring, and the heartache of their death, it may be hard to imagine. If you have experienced the death of your first dog, you will wonder how you will ever get through those dark days. If you have been through it before, you know that you do, but it doesn't get any easier.

How and when?

If your dog is old, you will realise that life gradually changes – the walks aren't as long as they once were – and know deep down that you may not have them for much longer. But that doesn't make the end any easier. If your dog dies at a young age, you may feel robbed of the time you planned to spend together.

If your dog dies suddenly at home, or perhaps during an operation, you are spared the agony of having to decide when the time is right and when to call the vet. But you may feel you missed the chance to say goodbye properly, or that you let them down by not being there when they died. We can't choose the time that our dogs, or humans, die, and we can't always be there. Just remember that you gave them a kind and loving home. That's what matters most.

If your dog is ill before it dies, you may face a difficult period leading up to its death, watching and waiting, knowing that things are getting worse. At the back of your mind is always the knowledge that, at some point, you will have to make that dreaded call to the vet. People who have been there before will say that “you will know when the time is right.” Think about your dog's quality of life. Talk it through with your vet, they will advise.

You need to think if you are going to take your dog to the vet to be put to sleep or if it is an option for the vet to come to the house, where you will both be in familiar surroundings. Think about what feels best for you and your dog. Whichever you choose, have a favourite blanket handy to wrap your dog in afterwards.

“ I couldn't believe I would know when the time was right, but I did somehow, and I've never doubted I did the right thing. The vet agreed. ”

“ The vet came to the house. We were in the garden where he always lay in the sun. I just cuddled him while he went to sleep: it was heartbreaking, but it was my final kindness to him. ”



Burial or cremation?

This is not something you want to think about while your dog is alive and well, but if you do know what you intend to do, it will save you from having to make the decision when the time comes. You may like to look into the costs to help you plan. For some there may be no choice. Burial may not be an option if your dog was very large, or if you have a tiny garden and nowhere suitable. If you do opt to bury your dog, be sure to choose a secluded spot where their body can lie undisturbed. Your vet will advise about what you need to do.

If you opt for cremation, you may want to specify individual cremation, with your dog's ashes returned to you in a casket or container. Your vet will arrange this. It won't be easy going back to your vet to collect your dog's ashes and you may want to avoid a busy surgery. Once you have the ashes, it is up to you whether to keep them, to bury the casket, or scatter the ashes. You may want to do this alone or involve close family or friends, who will also be upset and missing your dog: do whatever feels most right, and when it feels right.

“ We buried our dog in the garden. It was then a huge emotional issue when we came to move house.”

“ I chose to scatter my dog's ashes where we loved to walk. The sun shone. We talked about him. It was sad, but not as sad as losing him.”

Who to notify?

There are a number of people you will need to tell that your dog has died so that their records can be updated. These may include: your vet, microchip company, pet insurer, dog groomer, boarding kennels, dog sitter, etc. And, if your dog was from a rescue centre, they will also need to know.

Emotions

We're all different. Women can cry. Men usually don't. Women talk about how they feel. Men rarely do, and may only do so when prompted. Women tend to be more emotional. It's easy to be upset when someone else doesn't react the way you do. It doesn't mean they don't care or that they're not experiencing the same level of loss. We all cope differently: we need to understand and respect that.

Life without your dog

However long you had your dog, you will have established a routine, inside and outside the house. Suddenly you find yourself with a tidy house – no more daily cleaning; no more checking the water bowl – or kicking it over! You don't have to save the last bit of toast. The weekly shop isn't the same – you avoid the pet food. You can leave doors open. If you live alone, you find yourself with no reason to rush home, and with no-one to talk to: dogs are great listeners.

For dog lovers daily walks aren't a tie. They're a pleasure and, for many, a chance to get out and meet people. Dogs are great ice-breakers. The loss of your dog may mean the end of your social life. Going out for a walk on your own just isn't the same.

“The boys didn't say much, but knowing the end was near, they both came home for a weekend. Our dog had seen them both through spotty adolescence and had vetted all the girlfriends. She was a huge part of their lives, and they both knew how much they would miss her.”

“After a while I hated the tidy house. I never thought I'd miss dog hairs and paw marks!”

“I knew I needed the exercise but I'd lost the reason to go to the park.”

“ I cried my eyes out for days. Then one day I realised I hadn’t cried, and that upset me too. ”

“ I had photos everywhere but my biggest fear was that I would forget what he looked like. ”

Coping

How people cope after the death of their dog depends on the individual, and the circumstances. If your dog died suddenly and unexpectedly, there will be a huge sense of shock. If you knew the end was coming, the feelings will be different.

Coping is very personal. Some throw themselves into frantic activity, whilst others may prefer to read or write poetry, take comfort in making sketches of their dog, or create a memory box or scrapbook. You may think you are OK and then something happens which is a powerful emotional trigger. You can’t avoid everything that is going to upset you. Facing grief and coming out the other side is a personal journey we have to make when we lose a much loved pet, such as a dog. We have to accept that life goes on, but not in the same way.

Family and friends can be a huge help. The animal lovers who knew how much your dog meant to you will know just what you are going through: they are the ones who won’t hesitate to call or send a card. More than anything they know how much it matters to you to be able to still talk about your much loved pet. They are also the ones who are likely to ask – without causing offence – if you will have another dog.

Time spent on your own may be important, but don’t shut out others who may be hurting too. For children this may be the first time they have encountered death. The relationship a child has with its first dog is very special. It may also be the first time they have seen adults upset. They will need help to cope.

If you have other dogs and cats, this may help you cope, but don't forget that they will also miss, and may be confused by the absence of, their friend.

You may encounter some who have no idea how much your dog meant to you. "It was only a dog after all". Such people have surely never experienced the joy a dog can bring.

"Time is a great healer." It is true. The dark days do get easier: you will find yourself able to talk about your dog without getting so upset. In time, the wonderful memories of great times shared do come to the fore, and they will never disappear.

Celebrating the life of your dog

There are lots of ways you can choose to celebrate the life of your dog. Have copies made of your favourite photo: frame one for yourself, but also give one to family and friends. You might like to plant a tree, or a smaller bush of some sort. You can still celebrate birthdays, or visit those places you enjoyed together.



“ I still carried on with my Monday walk with a close friend and her young dog. Our dogs had a very special bond, and I didn't want to lose that. ”

“Someone said to me, you can’t bring your dog back, and you can either be miserable, or you can give a great home to another dog. He was right, and I did.”



Having another dog/‘moving on’

Think ahead whether or not you are likely to want, or be able to have, another dog. If you know you will have another at some point, this can give comfort. You can never replace the dog you lost, but you can come to love another. If you know that, for whatever reason, maybe age or family circumstances, you will not have another, you need to come to terms with this, and to accept it. Some people may feel they can’t go through the pain of losing a dog again. If you feel that way immediately after losing your dog, just consider the years of pleasure your dog gave you. If you can’t take on the long-term commitment of another dog, maybe you can “borrow” one, or help at a local rescue centre. Or perhaps you may be able to take on a puppy destined to become a guide or hearing dog. If you are not going to have another, consider donating

unwanted collars, leads, food or bedding to your local rescue centre.

If you do decide to have another dog, think carefully about where to get it from. Ask your vet how to select a reputable breeder. Or consider visiting a rescue centre. All kinds of dogs – young and old, and all breeds (even pedigrees) - find their way into rescue centres, through no fault of their own. Giving an elderly dog the chance to live out its remaining years in happiness may help you feel needed, and so help you cope. Think about what suits your particular situation, but take your time to make sure that you make the right choice, for you and your new canine friend.

If you do take on another dog, you may find yourself surprised by the mixture of emotions. Excited but guilty, looking forward but anxious, concerned that others may feel it's "a bit too soon," and always concerned that the dog you have lost is not forgotten. All of this is normal and all dog owners have been there. It's hard to predict how you will feel, so just do what feels right for you, and if you do become a dog owner again look on it as a tribute to how much your previous dog meant to you and your family.

Further information

Your vet may be able to advise about other sources of information, or organisations that provide support. There is a Fact Sheet available from the Dog's Trust (www.dogstrust.org.uk), which contains more practical information.

“ My new dog introduced himself to friends and neighbours with a note saying he was the new dog on the block and looking forward to meeting everyone. But he also said how much he had heard about his predecessor. We included nice photos of both of them. ”

What the readers thought:

“This booklet is great. You touch on all the salient (and difficult) practical points, and manage the emotional issues really sensitively.”

“I really like the format. Using quotes makes it feel so personal, something I could really identify with.”

“This is really, really good. Reading it I got upset thinking about all my past dogs, but it was really sensitive and gentle.”

“I had tears in my eyes reading it. Especially the comment about the spotty adolescent!”

“For someone who has recently gone through this, it all rings so true. I’m sure it will be a huge help.”

Production of this leaflet was made possible by private donations. If it has helped you, then please consider making a donation to support the work of a local animal rescue centre. And do pass it on to others.

Further copies are available from www.dogsmatter.info

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