

# Autism & Grief Project Fact Sheet



## **Pet Death**

When your pet dies, the grief you feel can be just as strong or even stronger than when a friend or family member dies. Animals, whether they are pets or service-oriented, often seem to know and understand you more than anyone else. When they are no longer present in your life, you may experience grief.

### **Death from Natural Causes**

Just like people, pets grow old and can have health problems as they age. At any age, they can get many illnesses, such as cancer and diabetes. These illnesses can cause your pet to slowly get sicker over weeks or months. It can be hard to watch this happen.

You may begin grieving when you hear that your pet has an illness that can't be cured, and their life will be ending soon. It can be difficult to think about what your life will be like without your companion. For many people, it is helpful to start planning for what they will do to cope when their pet dies. Many people begin thinking about when it might be a good idea to get a new pet. For others it is too hard to think about another pet.

Everyone is different and grieves differently when their pet dies. You can choose what is right for you. The suggestions in the section below called "Ways to Cope with Grief" may be helpful as you grieve your pet's death.

### **Death by Euthanasia**

Some pets die by euthanasia, which is often incorrectly described as being "put to sleep." A veterinarian may suggest this procedure because it helps a pet die painlessly. This is usually suggested if an animal is extremely sick or injured with little or no hope of getting better. The vet uses an injection of drugs that makes the pet unconscious and then stops their heart and breathing, causing a peaceful death.

Some pets are euthanized because they are a danger to other animals and people. Deciding to help your pet die peacefully with euthanasia is difficult even if the vet says it is the best thing to do.

Trusted family, friends, advocates, and veterinarians can help you make the best decision and provide support. However, you should never feel pressured about using euthanasia to help your pet die unless it is an emergency.

You can choose to stay with your pet while it is euthanized. Some people do this to say goodbye and provide comfort to the animal. Communicate with the vet if you would like

to be with your pet. Making the decision to be with your pet is a personal decision and is not right for everyone.

## **If Your Pet is Missing**

It is not unusual for badly injured or very sick pets to leave their homes to find a place to die in nature. This can be especially upsetting and cause you to grieve because you cannot find the pet and do not know exactly what happened.

Sadly, there are times when a pet is removed from a home because someone in the home decided the pet was a problem.

Not knowing whether a pet is missing or has died can make you feel sad or anxious. These are feelings of grief over something that has been lost, which might feel worse than if you knew the pet had died.

## **Ways to Cope with Grief**

Just as with the death of a person you care about, the loss or death of a pet or service animal can feel like your life is not the same anymore and has drastically changed. It is natural to feel this way. The people around you may not understand your grief reactions because they did not have the same relationship with the animal. They also may not understand because they grieve differently and might expect a different grief response from you. Everyone grieves in their own way, and there is no right or wrong way to feel grief.

Here are some suggestions to help you cope with your grief:

Seek comfort from trusted friends, family members, a clergy person, faith community, or support person.

- Take time to allow yourself to grieve. Recognize that if your grief keeps you from being able to work or enjoy your other activities for a long time, you may need to seek professional help from a counselor.
- Hold a small memorial service for your pet or service animal either alone or with trusted a support person, family, and/or friends.
- Keep an item that belonged to your pet, like a dog collar, a cat toy, or a favorite blanket, and hold it when you're feeling sad. Whatever the item is, holding it close may help you to remember and feel connected to your pet.
- Place a small statue or stone in your yard or home to visit when you miss your pet. When people die, sometimes they are buried in a cemetery and loved ones can visit that spot. Since pets usually aren't buried in cemeteries, so this allows you to have a special spot to connect to your pet.
- Think about volunteering at an animal shelter when you are ready so you can care for and be around animals that need love and attention.

- Recognize that, just as with a family member or friend who has died, you may feel a strong bond with your pet, even after it has died. Remembering this bond can help with your grief, especially as you remember the good times you had together.
- Remember to take care of yourself by eating healthy, drinking water, and getting enough sleep.
- Use coping techniques such as: stimming, music, drawing, walking, indulging in your passion or special interest, or any calming activity.
- When you feel ready, consider bringing an animal companion that needs a home into your life.