

Autism & Grief Project

Coping with Pet Death Fact Sheet



The death of an animal companion is sometimes one of the first losses we experience. Pets are constant companions for years at a time, and for adults on the spectrum who have difficulty navigating interpersonal relationships, the bond with an animal can be especially close. Animal companions listen without judgment, are loyal, and provide a constant presence. Some animals also serve as service animals, trained to assist, reassure, or comfort an autistic adult.

The absence of a beloved animal due to death, or even when a pet is missing, can cause intense grief reactions for an adult with autism. Visit the What is Grief? section to learn more about grief.

Tips for Supporting Your Loved One

When helping your loved one cope with grief after the death of an animal companion, it is important to:

- Recognize, value, and support — Recognize, value, and support the individual's feelings and focus on the pet who has died, rather than immediately communicating about the idea of replacing it.
- Avoid euphemisms — Be clear and direct in your language or other forms of communication about what happened. Use words like “died” instead of “passed away” or “lost him” to promote clarity and understanding. For example, if a pet was euthanized, stick to the facts and avoid using the phrase “put down” or “put to sleep.”
- Find ways to remember — Use mementos and pictures to provide a connection to the deceased pet. Holding a collar or leash, snuggling their favorite blanket, or running fingers over a pet's toy are ways to remember them. As with a person's death, it may help to view the pet's body after death.
- Create a space for ritual — Unlike with people, pets are rarely buried at cemeteries. Placing a marker, small statue, or stone engraved with the pet's name in the yard or other accessible location can provide comfort and solace and an ability to easily visit the spot as a way to remember them.
- Communicate — Communicate in a way that is most effective for the individual about whether, and when, it may be appropriate and important to welcome another animal companion.