

## Stages of Grief

When a person experiences a loss, they usually go through several well-defined stages of grief. Loss is not limited to losing a friend (pet or person). This grieving process can also be instigated by the loss of a job or the crisis of a major health problem.

The first stage of grief is denial. A pet owner has trouble believing that her companion has actually died. She expects the return of her friend any day.

Owners tell me they hear their pets walk into the bedroom or bark at the door. Some have *seen* their friends down the hallway. Individuals who have lost human loved ones also share these types of experiences. When people tell you these things, you can assure them that their experiences are normal. They are not going crazy.

We can help a person get through the denial stage faster by allowing her to see the body of her friend after death. When talking to clients, I always ensure that I use definite words that denote death. I talk about *helping a friend to die* and refer to a companion as *the pet that died*. After I give the euthanasia drug and confirm that the pet's heart has stopped, I tell my client that her companion is gone, so there is no doubt in her mind that her loved one is dead.

The second stage of grieving, and the hardest from the veterinary hospital standpoint, is anger or depression. People in this stage of grief have to blame someone. They may blame themselves, a friend, or me. Some people will even blame the pet for leaving. These people can't be reasoned with easily, so it is important not to take their remarks personally.

During the anger stage, it is best to validate the individual's feelings by saying, "Buffy's death certainly was hard for you to take." Because most of us are not trained in counseling, it is not our place to try to manage their feelings. If this stage of grief goes on for a prolonged period — over a year — the individual needs professional help.

Some clients have anticipatory grief, which means they grieve before the animal is actually dead. It is common for these people to exhibit bizarre behavior during this time, which could lead you to think they are difficult clients. In fact, they really just want to know what is going on so they can feel in control.

The next stage, sometimes designated as the last part of the anger process, is guilt. During this time the anger turns internally; *if I had done something else, maybe Buffy would be alive*. One lady who lost her cat to kidney cancer was convinced she had caused the disease by feeding her cat frozen raw peas as a treat.

The final stage of grieving is acceptance. The client comes to terms with what has happened and gets on with her life following the loss.

Not every grieving person experiences each of these phases. I have also noticed over the years that some individuals vacillate back and forth between the stages. When you read up on the

subject of grieving, you will note that some references break the stages of grief into phases with different names. Though the definitions are different, the fundamental concepts are the same.

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