



Canine Grief

When our furry friends lose their buddy

By Dr. Dawnetta Woodruff & Dr. Dani McVety

The loss of a cherished dog can be quite traumatic, not only on the family as a whole, but also on the other dogs left behind. Dogs cannot voice their feelings to us, but based on outward signs, it certainly appears that they can experience grief when a companion dies. There are several studies that document changes in pets' behavior after the loss of a loved one (human or non-human). These behaviors may include fluctuations in appetite, vocalization, and changed interactions with housemates. I believe that many of these emotions are compounded by their reaction to their owner's emotions. Pets handle the Circle of Life so much better than many humans do! They take time to grieve, and then they move on with their lives. We have a difficult time dealing with the ebb and flow of life, but our pets often handle it gracefully as just another normal part of life.

Many signs of canine grief are based on the dog's natural personality. For example, a subordinate dog may become introverted—they may hide and may not interact with the family when a more dominant companion has been lost. Conversely, some dominant dogs may become very clingy or appear abnormally nervous (panting, pacing, searching for their friend, etc.) if their "pack" seems to have been lost. These behaviors are general, however, and can be seen in any dog. Just as every person handles heartache and pain differently, so do our pets. I have seen dogs snuggle up to their companion after death. I have also seen dogs walk out of the room and refuse to re-enter that room until their companion has left the house. Each pet's way of dealing with loss will be different and unique. I have seen 2 year-old labs hide behind the couch, but I have also seen 2 year-old labs step over the body of their housemate just to give their owner a kiss. Some family members become angry or upset that their pets do not grieve as they expect them to. It is important to remember that we are each unique and individual...so are our pets, and we can learn a lot from them during the difficult time surrounding our loss.

It's normal for behavior changes such as these to be seen in the first 10-14 days after the loss of a companion. You may try to take their mind off of the loss by providing them with extra attention and affection. Long walks, playing, and engaging in favorite activities (especially those done with the companion that passed) can help build confidence and stimulate mental enjoyment. Environmental enrichment techniques such as puzzle toys (especially Kong-type toys that allow you to hide a treat inside) help keep them busy during the day.

If your dog is too depressed, they may not respond right away. Remember, time heals all wounds, and this is true for your pets as well. You may consider using a DAP (dog appeasing pheromone) diffuser, available at most pet stores, to help your pet relax. Give them a few days and then start encouraging them to do more—use their favorite rewards and encourage their more normal behavior. If symptoms do not subside after two weeks, you may consider taking your grieving pet to a veterinarian. There are medical and even holistic approaches to canine grief that can be particularly helpful including antidepressants, acupuncture, and herbal remedies. Some more severe cases may also include stress colitis (diarrhea) and may necessitate a visit to your veterinarian sooner.

If your grieving dog is now an "only child," some owners wonder if they should get it a new companion to prevent loneliness. While this may work for the more sociable and extroverted breeds, it doesn't work for all (especially highly dominant dogs). It is best to allow your dog a bit of time to heal. Most experts recommend waiting at least 2-4 weeks (sometimes longer) before introducing a new pet into the household. There are certainly exceptions to this rule; if you have questions about your particular situation, take your concerns to your veterinarian and ask their opinion.

Remember, your dog may miss your lost companion just as much as you do. Spending extra time together will help both of you make it through a very difficult time!