

GETTING THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

When you're mourning the loss of a pet



“Happy holidays!” is a greeting we hear often at this time of year — but if you’re grieving the loss of your beloved animal companion, the holiday season may be anything but happy for you.

Holidays can create feelings of dread and anxiety in those who are bereaved. The clichéd images of family togetherness and the often unrealistic expectations of a season filled with picture-perfect, joyful gatherings can cause tremendous stress for those who are not grieving — let alone for those in the midst of the painful, isolating experience of loss. Pressure to produce warm and wonderful holiday memories for and with our families is enormous, even when we’re feeling on top of things. But when we’re mourning the loss of a special pet, we may not have the energy we ordinarily do, and even the happiest memories can hurt. We need to find ways to manage our pain and get through these days with a minimum of stress.

Suggestions for Coping with Grief during the Holidays

List all the things you ordinarily do for the holidays.

Decide what’s important to you and what you can let go of or do differently. For each task on the list, ask yourself these questions:

- Would the holidays be the holidays without doing this?
- Is this something I really want to do?
- Do I do it freely, or out of habit or tradition?
- Is it a one-person job, or can it be a group effort?
- Who is responsible for getting it done?
- Do I really like doing it?



Do some things differently this year.

Trying to recreate the past may remind you all the more that your beloved pet is missing. Although you can’t erase thoughts and memories of your lost pet, it may help to create an entirely new holiday experience. This year, try celebrating the holidays in a different way. Opt for a change of scene or go somewhere new. If you can manage to get away, travel somewhere you’ve never gone before. If you can’t afford a vacation, go to a restaurant — or a friend or family member’s home that doesn’t have painful associations with previous holidays.



Do other things more simply.

You don't have to discard all your old traditions, but you can choose to observe the holidays on a smaller scale this year. Create new rituals and new traditions that pay tribute to the memory of your pet. Here are just a few examples of what you can do:

- Share anecdotes and favorite stories about the pet who died. Sometimes, others need permission to talk about your lost pet. Let them know you would rather keep the memory of your beloved pet alive than pretend nothing has changed.
- Decorate a wreath with pictures, toys and items that belonged to your pet and display the wreath in your home or place it at the animal's grave site.
- Hang a stocking in your pet's memory, and ask each family member to express their thoughts and feelings about the pet by writing a note to, from or about your pet. Place the notes in that special stocking for everyone to read.
- If you decide to put up a tree, put it in a different location and make or buy different decorations for it.
- Create a special ornament labeled with the name of your pet and hang it on the tree.
- If you celebrate Chanukah, recall a memory of your pet on each of the eight nights that you light the Menorah.
- Mention your pet's name in the blessing over the food at the holiday dinner or propose a toast to his/her memory.
- Make a donation to a favorite organization in your pet's honor.
- Purchase a book — perhaps a children's book — on coping with the loss of a pet and donate it to your local library or school.
- Encourage grieving children to draw pictures inspired by their memories of the pet.

Take good care of yourself.

- Once you've remembered your cherished pet, make sure you remember yourself. Be gentle with yourself.
- Do what you can — no more and no less.
- Get enough sleep, nourishment and regular exercise.
- Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine (a stimulant) or alcohol (a depressant).
- Build relaxation time into your schedule.
- Listen to your favorite music or treat yourself to a special meal or relaxing bath.
- Seek out an understanding family member or trusted friend with whom you can talk and be yourself.



Seek support from others.

It is helpful to share your loss with someone who understands the attachment you had to your pet, as well as the pain of your loss. If you have access to the Internet, use the keywords pet loss, grief and bereavement to visit some of the many wonderful websites devoted to grieving animal lovers. Consider attending a pet loss support group through Hospice of the Valley or call a pet loss help line.

Give something of yourself to others.

As alone as you may feel in your grief, one of the most healing things you can do for yourself is to be with other people, especially during the holidays. Caring for and giving to others will nourish and sustain you, and help you to feel better about yourself. If you can bring yourself to do so, visit someone in a nursing home, or volunteer your time at the local humane society or animal shelter. Do whatever you can, and let it be enough.

Plan on feeling sad at certain moments throughout the season, and let the feelings come. Experience the pain and tears, deal with them, then let them go. Have faith that you'll get through this and that you will survive and eventually thrive.



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