

After Rainbow Bridge: Saying Goodbye to a Pet

By Jeanette Stehr-Green

There is a tale known to most pet guardians about what happens to a pet after it dies. As the story goes, the pet crosses Rainbow Bridge where it is healthy again, plays happily with others of its kind, and is free of suffering and pain. The pet's afterlife, although wonderful, is made complete when its human family takes that same journey across Rainbow Bridge and rejoins their furry (or feathered) family member.

Although a comforting tale, we do not know what happens to a pet's life essence after death. We do know, however, that the loss of a pet usually is a difficult and painful experience for their human companions.

Why do we feel so strongly about the death of our pets?

Pets are members of our family. They are dependent on us for most of their care and become a part of our daily routine as we feed them, walk them, groom them, and clean up after them.

Pets love us unconditionally. They offer us comfort when we are sad, companionship when we are lonely, and a nonjudgemental presence when we err. Some of us even talk with our pets as we work through problems or life challenges.

Their constant presence in our lives – being at the door when we return home, at our feet as we make dinner, or by our side when we watch television – makes the absence of a pet often more noticeable than the loss of a human loved one.

So, it is not surprising that we go through grief, sometimes very deep, after the death of a pet. We also may have feelings of guilt after taking our pet to the veterinarian for the last time, wondering if we did the right thing.

What can we do to ease the pain of losing a pet?

First and foremost, allow yourself to grieve. By engaging with and expressing the emotions that come after the loss of a pet, you begin to process your grief.

Grief may come in the form of sadness, anger, guilt, or a combination of these and other emotions. The process will be unique to you and the relationship you had with your pet. It cannot be rushed.

Perform a ritual to help say goodbye to your pet. Be it a personal gesture – like lighting a candle – or a collective experience where family members share memories of the pet or spread their ashes, these actions can help you cope with the loss of your pet and kickstart the grieving process.

Create a lasting memorial for your pet. Plant flowers (such as daffodils, daisies, or forget-me-nots) that will bloom every year. Create a memory box or album with photos of your pet. Keep your pet's tags on your key chain. These and other creative activities will help keep your pet's memory alive.

A contribution to the local Humane Society, animal shelter, or rescue group – in your pet's name – can be a living memorial to your pet and help you feel that some good has come from the loss.

Reach out to others for support. Talking about your loss can help with the grieving process. Do not be afraid to reach out to family and friends; many want to help but just do not know how.

Some find comfort and safety in attending an organized support group geared toward pet loss. The Seattle Animal Shelter facilitates a weekly online Pet Loss Support Group every Thursday from 5:30 to 7:00 pm. For more information, email saspetloss@gmail.com. The Rainbow Bridge website at <https://www.rainbowsbridge.com/> has extensive grief support resources. Lap of Love at <https://www.lapoflove.com/> was created by veterinarians for the care of geriatric pets and has extended their services to include grief support.

Use the loss of your pet as an opportunity to talk about death with your child. Explain in an age-appropriate manner that your pet's body stopped working and the pet won't be coming back. Use simple, direct language like "dead" or "died." Euphemisms like "went to sleep" can cause confusion or fear, especially among younger children.

Share your own feelings and let your child know it is okay for them to have strong emotions. Help them find healthy ways to cope with the loss such as talking about their feelings, performing rituals, or creating memorials to honor the pet. (See above.)

As this might be your child's first experience with death, be prepared for questions. Answer them honestly with only enough information so that they understand the truth. Follow their lead. If they don't ask questions or quickly change the topic, especially when you've given them opportunities, it is possible that your child might not want to discuss it.

Be sure to give all family members plenty of time to grieve before considering getting a new pet. It may take some family members longer than others. Engage with all family members to discuss bringing on a new pet.

You may never really "get over" the loss of a furry (or feathered) family member. You can, however, focus on the happy times and the positive impact the animal has had on your life and keep them in your heart forever.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.

SIDEBAR

Burying Fido in the Backyard

Many pet owners choose to cremate their furry or feathered friends so they can keep a part of them forever, but is it okay to bury your pet on your property?

According to Washington State law (WAC 246-203-121) and Clallam County code (7.01.045) you can bury your pet on land that you own but you must dispose of the body within 72 hours after the death or discovery and do the following:

- Cover the animal with at least three feet of soil,
- Place the burial site at least 100 feet from any surface waters, including wells, springs, or streams, and
- Avoid low-lying areas that are subject to flooding.

If you do not own the property, you must obtain permission from the property owner. If you bury a pet on your property, you should notify future buyers of the property about the burial site.

If the pet died of a disease that could be transmissible to humans, the local health officer can decide the method of disposal and prohibit a backyard burial.