

10 inalienable rights after the death of a special companion

Though you should reach out to others as you journey through grief, you should not feel obligated to accept the unhelpful responses you may receive from some people. You are the one who is grieving, and as such, you have certain “rights” no one should try to take away from you.

The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

1. You have the right to grieve the death of a pet. You loved your pet. Your pet loved you. You had a strong and profound relationship. You have every right to grieve this death. You need to grieve this death. You also need to mourn this death (express your grief outside yourself).
2. You have the right to talk about your grief. Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk about your grief. Other pet lovers who have experienced the death of a pet often make good listeners at this time. If at times you don't feel like talking, you also have the right to be silent.
3. You have the right to feel a variety of emotions. Confusion, anger, guilt, and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey after the death of a pet. Feelings aren't right or wrong; they just are.
4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits. After the death of a pet, your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel like doing.
5. You have the right to experience “griefbursts.” Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening but it is normal and natural.
6. You have the right to make use of ritual. After a pet dies, you can harness the power of ritual to help you heal. Plan a ceremony that includes everyone who loved your pet.
7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality. At times of loss, it is natural to turn to your faith or spirituality. Engaging your spirituality by attending church or other place of worship, praying, or spending time alone in nature may help you better understand and reconcile your loss.
8. You have the right to search for meaning. You may find yourself asking, “Why did my pet die? Why this way? Why now?” Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. Ask them anyway.
9. You have the right to treasure your memories. Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of a special companion animal. Instead of ignoring your memories, find ways to capture them and treasure them always.
10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal. Reconciling your grief after the death of a pet may not happen quickly. Remember, grief is best experienced in “doses.” Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of a beloved pet changes your life forever.

The Pet Lover's Code – Dr. Alan Wolfelt



Wondering What to Say to a Grieving Client

These pointers are intended for exchanges between veterinary professionals and adult clients who are having a beloved pet euthanized. They are meant as suggestions to help increase a sense of trust and effectiveness, relieve stress, and strengthen and retain relationships with clients. With each specific clinical situation, attune to your client and trust your judgment to decide which of the different tips seem most useful.

Here are Some Dos and Don'ts to Consider

Do

- **Do** – Present with a neutral body posture facing your client, a kind facial expression, and soft and steady eye contact. These simple features go a long way in communicating compassion and providing comfort.
- **Do** – One of the most important – and challenging – aspects of witnessing client grief is putting other responsibilities aside in order to be as fully present as possible. Then, follow their lead, listen closely, reflect their energy, and respect their perspective.
- **Do** – Because grief associated with pet loss still tends to be disenfranchised by society, explicitly acknowledge and validate that this experience is heartbreaking and life-changing, and encourage them to express themselves as freely as they'd like.
- **Do** – Offer affirmation that they want the best for their pet and are acting from a place of love in making final decisions. Euthanasia is the ultimate act of devotion.
- **Do** – Reflect on your own values and beliefs about death, respecting differences with your clients.
- **Do** – Nonjudgmental support is the key to helping the bereaved since end-of-life decisions tend to be distressing and sometimes ambiguous, causing a whole host of “woulda, coulda, shouldas.”
- **Do** – Remind them that there's no such thing as the “right” time, and instead we try to choose the “best” time, if that's even possible.
- **Do** – Reassure them with the adage, “better a week early than a day too late,” because this cautious approach to timing may prevent undue suffering and regret.

- **DO** - Look for signals that they may be struggling with guilt, remorse, doubt, and even relief because these reactions often occur if the animal was disabled, physically difficult to manage, or in severe pain. Create space for them to share their often conflicting thoughts and feelings. It helps to offer the phrase “let go” (this describes a considered and caring response once the pet’s quality of life is poor) if they’re struggling with whether they “gave up” (this implies a lack of concern and effort). Help them to understand the significant difference.
- **DO** - Accept that they may resist efforts to ease their distress; they may associate any shift away from it and toward healing as a betrayal of their loved one.
- **DO** - Offer affirmation that they want the best for their pet and are acting from a place of love in making final decisions.
- **DO** - Provide an active listening ear as they navigate the roller coaster of grief. They often want to share memories and can exhibit a wildly fluctuating range of feelings and reactions, even laughing and crying at the same time.
- **DO** - Be mindful to take long, slow breaths — this helps you to stay calm and focused on them.
- **DO** - Keep in mind that grief can sharpen one’s radar for insincerity so pay close attention to your own internal states, especially fear and anxiety.
- **DO** - Share a favorite story about the pet if you have one.
- **DO** - If you’d like help with specific wording, some of the most caring things you can say tend to be simple, such as:

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“I understand that you’re hurting. Deep grief is the direct expression of the deep love you’ll always share.”

“This is so difficult — I’m here for you.”

“You loved (pet’s name) so much.”

“I know you would have given anything if (pet’s name) could have stayed healthy and happy.”

“(Pet’s name) was so special and will be missed by many.”

“Thank you for trusting both your intuition and me to guide you. I hope you’re comforted going through this together.”

“It takes courage to face the end of a pet’s life and to advocate for their best interest.”

If the client expresses guilt or relief: “Such complicated feelings are natural and don’t diminish the love you have for (pet’s name) in any way.”

“(Pet’s name) was so fortunate to share his/her life with you. What a tremendous blessing for both of you.”

“You were so wonderful to (pet’s name). Be gentle with yourself. It’s natural to feel really raw and sensitive.”

- **DO** - Ask open-ended questions about their favorite memories and what they loved most about their pet.
- **DO** - Know that if you believe the offer of a hug or gentle touch is welcome, this can be a wonderful response, and soothing sounds can take the place of words.
- **DO** - If the bereaved has other pets who you continue to care for as patients, when you see the client in the future, ask about their grief regarding the deceased pet with a question like, “It’s been a while since (pet’s name) passed, I’m wondering how you’re doing?” Be sure to give them your undivided attention as they share their grief process, asking suitable follow-up questions.
- **DO** - Consider these same “DOs/DON’Ts” with the bereaved long after the death occurred; you’ll likely notice the content and tone will shift, so adjust accordingly.

Don’t

- **DON’T** take over the conversation, since you want to be of service to them and they’re vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed and withdrawing. That said, it can help to empathize if you’ve also had a beloved pet die, being careful to keep the focus on them. Consider making a brief remark like, “I am so sorry that

(their pet’s name) time has come. When I lost (your pet’s name), I was so upset. It was really, really hard, and I will always miss him.”

- **DON’T** rush them because you’re feeling uncomfortable with the intensity of the experience or any silence between you. Keep in mind, “What we resist, persists,” even when you’re supporting others. By being receptive and patient, you’re giving the bereaved permission to move with their grief and this validation makes it easier and healthier for all involved.
- **DON’T** downplay the loss as “not a person” or rush them to “accept it.” Likewise, despite good intentions, it’s not comforting to hear, “You knew this day was coming,” or “There are plenty of other pets who need homes.” (The big decision to invite a new pet into our lives is best made after the “funk and fog” of early grief have, at the very least, started to lift.)
- **DON’T** impose your personal spiritual or religious beliefs on the bereaved, and avoid platitudes and cliches. Only use expressions like, “(Pet’s name) is in a better place,” “Everything happens for a reason,” “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle,” or “Heaven needed an angel,” if you’re absolutely certain they’ll be welcome based on the client’s explicit comments. Instead, **DO** make space for them to formulate their own thoughts about higher powers, spirits/souls, death and what may or may not occur after it. For example, while some pet lovers take great solace in the Rainbow Bridge, it may not align with your client’s world view.

What if a distraught client asks, “Will it always hurt this much?”

- **DO** - Acknowledge that the pain of deep grief is the direct expression of the deep love shared with their beloved pet — these are two sides of the same existential coin, forever connected and therefore inevitable for all conscious beings. Admit that you wish you could tell them it won’t always hurt this much, but each person’s grief is unique and worthy of being honored, therefore every experience unfolds at its own pace and in its own way.
- **DO** - Advise them to “try to move with their grief rather than trying to go around it.” While “leaning into the discomfort” may go against our reflexes, it actually helps us feel better.

- **DON’T** promise that “time heals all wounds,” because grief is highly complex and unpredictable.
- **DO** - Mention that they may have heard of the stages of grief — shock/denial, anger, bargaining, depression, working through, acceptance, meaning — emphasizing that these really aren’t stages because they don’t occur in a linear sequence. In fact, not everyone experiences all of them. Instead, these are common features of grief and they tend to happen more as a spiral that overlaps, circles back, and crosses itself as we continue to remember and reflect on the bond and the loss.
- **DO** - Acknowledge that some bereaved persons find it helpful to remind themselves that their beloved companion would want them to be happy, and that this abiding desire can become a source of strength, hope and inspiration.
- **DO** - Note that it’s often the acute interval right before and after a death that’s especially hard because we lose our bearings without our loved one and all the intimacies we shared. It helps them to know that the trauma of the loss can affect us on every level — emotional, cognitive, physiological, social and spiritual.
- **DO** - Use the phrase “become reconciled to the loss” (rather than “closure”, “recovery” or “resolution”) to more accurately capture the processes of adjusting to the reality of the loved one’s absence and of coming to understand our new identity without them. As this happens, the pain does tend to soften as we gradually integrate the loss into the new rhythms of life.
- **DO** - Alert them to the likelihood that sudden bursts of grief will occur at any time in the future and they’re often triggered by a vivid “flashbulb” memory. While such experiences may be unsettling jolts, they are totally natural and normal.
- **DO** - Advise them to reach out to close friends, family members, and counselors who truly understand the heartbreak of pet loss in order to receive the ongoing support they need. Offer a referral to a pet loss support group to each client who has lost a pet. Nearly 1 in 2 clients said they would have considered such support if it had been offered to them.