



L O V E N E V E R L E A V E SSM

Comforting the Grieving Pet Parent

The golden rule in expressing sympathy is the observance of silence. Remember that silence is golden, or divine if you prefer. Whenever in doubt as to what to say or what impact your words may have on the bereaved, don't say anything. As unusual as this may sound, it's perfectly appropriate behavior.

Use nonverbal language. Holding hands, shaking hands, giving a hug, or a smile with eye contact, can "speak" adequately about what you want to express.

There are no rules when helping someone through their grief. The most important thing for you to consider in helping someone you love through the grief process is that "just being there" is the best. Again, silence can be golden, as there will be no right words or statements that will take the grief away.

Your role as a friend is to simply listen. Many people don't want advice; they just want a shoulder to cry on. As an animal lover, you can empathize and understand their grief, but their grief is individual. They will handle this process in their own way, and as much as you want to, you simply can't take their grief away from them.

A few things for helping the bereaved in grief:

- Hug them, give them a comforting touch
- Be there for them, and let them know you care
- When they want to talk, listen to them
- Don't just "hear them" – really listen to them
- Don't interrupt, just listen
- Feel what they're saying
- Remember, they have just lost a very special companion in their lives and life will never be exactly the same for that person again
- Don't tell them "Time will heal all wounds" or "Life goes on"
- This is not a time to try to cheer someone up
- Saying things like "I'm sorry, I know he was important in your life" means a lot
- Acknowledge their loss as if a human family member has died
- Send cards and flowers
- Make a donation in the pet's memory



LOVE NEVER LEAVESSM

On the other hand, there are a few statements to NOT say to a person who is grieving. As presented by Vijai P. Sharma, Ph.D., re-phrase the following so that they can be more supportive of the bereaved.

"We know how you feel." The problem with that statement is that it makes a pretty big claim. You can only know how you feel, but you can't know how the other person is feeling. It may be appropriate thing to say for a person who is also in mourning at the time as you, and his or her loss is pretty equitable. For everyone else, the more appropriate response is, "I can't even imagine (or I can only imagine) what you must be feeling."

"How old was your pet?" Mourner says, "twelve." Person in sympathy says, "He lived a great life. You should be thankful that you had him for so long." It seems that the person in sympathy is saying, "Look. Your pet was old. He lived a full life. I'm off the hook. I don't need to feel bad for you, and you don't need to feel bad for yourself either." The correct response, if the age is mentioned at all, is to say, "It doesn't matter how old your pet is. You always miss them when they're gone."

"You may not believe it now, but you'll get over it." It appears to be the right thing to say. After all, you're holding hope out to the bereaved. You're only saying there's light at the end of the tunnel, and how could anybody argue with that? But it can rub the bereaved in the wrong way. The bereaved, in fact, may be saying, "I will never get over it. Nothing can ever fill the loss for me for the rest of my life, as long as I live." To make a statement like that, you've to know where the bereaved is at. If it's made prematurely, it will create resentment. But let's suppose, the bereaved asks you, "Will I always be hurt like this?" Then, it's all right to say, "I know you're hurting badly right now, but one day you shall overcome it."

"It was just his (or her) time to go." Maybe so, but saying it doesn't make it easy for the bereaved. A person grieving can't see it that way. It's only outsiders who can think along those lines. Those who are in mourning may be in protest against what just happened in their lives. However, if you see that the bereaved is tormented over what he or she could have done to prevent the loss, it may be in order to say that there are things that are not in control of anybody.

"You're strong enough to deal with it." Who says so! Only the person in bereavement decides if and when they are strong enough to deal with it. A person's strength shouldn't be weighed against how well they are dealing with their grief. Mourning is about the loss one experiences, and not about how much strength the mourner has. An appropriate response may be to say to the bereaved, "May you get the strength to bear your loss."

We want to be effective in whatever we do. So when we express sympathy, we want to see immediate results. This builds up pressure on the person in bereavement. It is as if we are saying to the bereaved, "I've sat here for the last thirty minutes, now you should feel better."

Don't expect anything. They just need your support.