



L O V E N E V E R L E A V E S <sup>SM</sup>

## Seniors and the Loss of a Beloved Pet

Everyone experiences grief, in one way or another, when faced with the death of a beloved pet. But elderly people who are grieving over their departed pet may be hit particularly hard by their loss. Often they are isolated from friends and family, so their pet is frequently at the center of their social interactions.

An elderly person's schedule may have revolved around the pet, including their own wake up times, bed times, exercise, and eating schedules. These activities may have corresponded quite closely with the pet's needs. As such, when the pet dies there can be a huge void in the senior's daily life. The structure is gone. Even the meaning of day-to-day life can evaporate when a pet dies, and there is no one left to care for. Now the home is truly empty, and too quiet.

Much like raising children and going to work, having a pet in one's life often makes people feel useful and needed. However, when a person is retired and the children have moved away, and perhaps even a spouse and several friends have died, caring for a pet can help the person feel needed again.

When the pet dies, then, feeling of being needed is gone too. The loss may be extremely hard if the pet had been a link to someone else who died before, such as a spouse. The loss of unconditional love and companionship can be devastating, especially if this was the senior citizen's sole source of unconditional love, and perhaps even true friendship, for a significant length of time.

Additionally, if the senior citizen is on a fixed income and unable to afford an expensive medical procedure for their pet, there may be an overwhelming sense of guilt. The grieving process, already something that most people face with dread, takes on an even more difficult aspect in these situations.

If you're a friend, family member, or caregiver to a senior who's dealing with the loss of a pet, you need to show support and understanding at this time. If you can (and with caregivers, as appropriate), help out financially. However, the main thing is the emotional support you can deliver during this time.

As with any friend, give them a safe environment to express emotions, and help out where needed. Assure them that whatever they're feeling is okay, and show them that you care about them.

An elderly person who loses a pet may also want to talk about other friends and family who have died, or perhaps talk about their own mortality (especially if they're in ill health). The death of their pet may renew their unresolved sorrow over losing other loved ones, such as their spouse, other family members or friends.

Your job is to listen and support them. And if you're concerned about knowing "the right thing to say," let go of that thought. Many times, spoken words are neither as important nor necessary as your presence.