



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

## Understanding Grief

Grief is one of the most normal and natural emotions that we can feel, yet it is one of the most misunderstood.

Grief is a normal, and unavoidable, reaction to the loss of a treasured loved one. Because grief often involves very painful and difficult feelings, most of us think that our grief is wrong or "crazy" in some way. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Grief is a very healthy psychological response that requires expression and acknowledgement. Attempts to suppress feelings of grief can actually prolong the healing process. Our discomfort with grief comes from a variety of sources, but can often be traced back to how our own families have dealt with loss, and how society in general responds to a bereaved person.

Unfortunately, many of the responses we hear reinforce the notion that grief is unnatural, and perpetuate the myths that grief should be avoided and expressed only behind closed doors. Society tends to reward the more unhealthy responses (stoicism and avoidance), while punishing the more healthy ones (expression and acceptance).

Some common responses we hear when a death occurs include:

- "Try to stay busy."
- "Big boys (or girls) don't cry."
- "No sense dwelling on the past."
- "You must be strong right now."
- "Support groups are for weaklings."
- "Out of sight, out of mind."
- "He had a good life. Think of all your good memories."
- "You still have other pets."
- "Count your blessings."
- "If you look around, you can always find someone who is worse off than yourself."

These responses suggest to us that we should not feel badly about our losses. They encourage us to avoid our feelings, and put pressure on us to get over the loss as soon as possible. Grief just doesn't work that way, and cannot be put onto a time schedule. Everyone grieves in their own time and in their own way, and creating artificial deadlines or expecting grief to disappear overnight only creates more stress for the bereaved person.



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These responses also minimize the griever's pain, and do not acknowledge the loss that the griever feels. They also suggest to us that we have no right to be upset or distressed about the loss. These kinds of responses can make a griever feel guilty or ashamed about being upset, reinforcing the notion that grieving is wrong, and making it that much more difficult to cope with the grief.

Other common responses like, "Life goes on," "You'll find new friends to love," or "Just go out and get yourself another dog," suggest that loved ones are easily and readily replaced. They tell the griever to handle the pain by replacing the loss and forgetting the past. The notion of replacing a loss as a way of handling the grief comes to many of us from a very early age.

Many of us can probably recall from childhood losing a favorite toy or beloved object and being told, "Don't feel bad, we'll buy you a new one tomorrow." Responses like these minimize and complicate the griever's pain by insinuating that the loss was relatively unimportant, and should be "fixed" by replacement.

Given that our society promotes many of these myths about grief, it is important to remember that **a grieving person needs acknowledgement, validation, and support**. One of the best ways to deal with our grief is to understand that it is normal, and to not make any judgments about our emotions.

There are times when we can handle these feelings with the support of family and friends, and there are other times when professional assistance may be very helpful. There are many professional counselors, therapists, and members of the clergy trained in the areas of loss and grief who can provide assistance through the grieving process. There are also many books, articles, and other resources about the grief process available in most public libraries and local bookstores.

*Durrance/Butler/Lagoni 7/97 Changes: The Support for People and Pets Program  
Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital*