



Helping a pet cope with the loss of a loved one

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Just like us, our animal companions may grieve when a loved one dies. It's tough to worry about your surviving pets' emotional health while still processing your own feelings of loss. While our four-legged family members need time to adjust to the new normal, almost all go on to be just fine in the long run.

What to expect

Based on our observations, sibling pets appear to process and understand what is happening when present for the death itself or allowed to visit the deceased afterward. You may even notice changes to the relationship as early as when their sibling starts to become seriously ill. Animals may mother, watch over, or snuggle with a dying companion, or they may sense that the dominance structure is changing and become more assertive or competitive.

How an individual pet acts during the active dying of a loved one will depend on how closely bonded they are, the general family dynamics, and their own personality. It is fortunately rare for a sibling pet to become extremely agitated or upset if they are present for the death. Many animals respond to the energy in the room and will be rather subdued or may try to comfort their loved ones. They may or may not wish to be near the dying pet. They may seem oblivious or indifferent, or matter-of-factly sniff the deceased's remains and then walk away. All of these reactions are normal and none are cause for worry.

In the days and weeks following a death, the families we help have reported many different behaviors from the surviving pets. Here are the most common we hear about:

- Loss of or decreased appetite for a few days
- Searching for the deceased, such as checking or sniffing all the places they used to spend time, although anecdotally this seems less common if they were present for the death
- Sleeping more, appearing depressed or lethargic, or spending time/sleeping in places their loved one used to frequent
- Changes in family dynamics. Dogs and cats are social beings who negotiate access to resources such as sleeping areas, food, and the attention of their humans. If multiple pets remain in the home, there may be some reshuffling. We often hear tales of a previously reserved pet becoming more affectionate or gregarious after a family member leaves the household

- It is also possible, and nothing to worry about, if your pet does not appear to have any reaction at all

How you can help

During euthanasia or when a pet is actively dying at home, we recommend allowing the other pets the choice to be nearby or present, but not forcing them to participate, stay very close by, or “say goodbye” to their companion if they don’t want to.

In the days following, stick to their normal routines as best you can. This will provide them with a sense of security in their world while they process this big change. Give them extra affection if they seek it, but don’t force it. Most of all, just give them time to work it through. Both of you need to adjust and heal.

When to worry

If lethargy and loss of appetite last for more than a week or two, or if your pet refuses to eat at all for more than one or two days, you should schedule a checkup with their veterinarian. Stress can bring medical issues to the surface or your pet could coincidentally develop an unrelated illness. Don’t miss something important because you assumed they’re simply grieving.

With time, you will all adapt to the new normal, and most animals work through this transition and regain their equilibrium before too long. May you be a comfort to each other as you embark upon this new path.