

# FINDING HOPE

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*After The Death Of Your Pet*

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Jason Troyer, PhD

**GriefPlan.com**

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*With Dr. Jason Troyer*



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**Finding Hope:**  
*After the Death of Your Pet*

By Jason Troyer, PhD

Finding Hope After the Death of Your Pet  
Jason Troyer

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This book is not designed to replace information from a mental health professional or a physician. The reader should consult an appropriate professional in matters relating to his or her physical and emotional health.

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## To the reader,

I am deeply sorry about the death of your pet. Anyone who has shared his or her life with companion animals knows that their loyalty and love are unmatched. Therefore, the death of a pet always leaves a hole in our hearts. I hope this booklet will provide you with comfort, hope, and information following the death of your companion. Feel free to use the table of contents to skip around and find answers and support for your specific concerns.

I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you mourn the death of your animal companion.

Sincerely,

*JASON TROYER, PHD*

[www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com)

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## Mikey's Story

I was sobbing with tears streaming down my face as I sat on the examining room floor at my veterinarian's office. I was cradling Mikey's head in my lap. My wife and I had rescued Mikey eight years ago. After learning that cancer had completely overtaken him, we had to make the difficult decision to euthanize Mikey. This was my first experience with the death of an animal companion.

Thankfully, I had a wonderful veterinarian. She was supportive,



gentle, compassionate, wise, and gave me plenty of time throughout the process. Yet, as I sat on the floor with Mikey I still had many questions and concerns. What would I tell my one-year-old and three-year-old daughters when I got home? Why was my reaction so strong? Would our other animals be all right without their companion? What would my grief look like over the next weeks, months, and years, and what was normal?

Although I was an expert on grief (as related to deceased humans), I realized that I knew little about dealing with the death of an animal companion. Now I realize that my questions are common among those whose pets have died. After extensive study I have written this booklet to help provide some guidance, comfort, and hope for those who are suffering the loss of an animal companion.

Of course, no words can take away your grief. But this booklet will give you a starting point for dealing with your loss. I hope that you'll find some answers to your questions and strategies for helping yourself and your loved ones as you mourn your pet.

## Grief Reactions

### *Why is My Reaction So Strong?*

I'll be honest — the grief I experienced after the death of my first animal companion, Mikey, surprised me. After all, I am considered to be a grief expert. I have written a book on how to counsel grieving people. I have counseled bereaved people. I have a doctorate in counseling psychology and am a college professor. Yet, while I was on the floor of the veterinarian's office, I was overwhelmed by my response to Mikey's death.

As I grieved, I began to appreciate how deeply Mikey and I had been connected. My relationship with Mikey was built on daily physical contact and a deep emotional and psychological relationship. That type of connection with most people — even family members — can be rare. This realization was crucial in helping me understand why the loss of an animal companion can be so overwhelming. For those who have never had this type of bond with an animal, the loss we experience may seem excessive. Yet those of us with animal companions can point to thousands of daily interactions — a quick pat on the head, a nuzzle in the morning, a jump up onto our lap — that reinforce the deep bond we share.





For many people, pets not only serve as loving companions, but also as a symbol or reminder for significant events in our lives. Perhaps your pet was a key part of your life as you dealt with a loss: a divorce or break-up, your children leaving the home, or the death of a loved one. Through all of this, your animal companion was by your side and continually showered you with unconditional love and acceptance. Your animal companion was always ready to listen, never judged you, and reassured you that things would get better. The truth is that many of us are closer to our pets than we are to many family members. So when people tell me that we should not grieve the death of our animal companions, I feel sorry for them, because I know they have never been blessed with a close relationship with a pet. As difficult as it is to lose an animal companion, it is worse to never have had the relationship at all.

### *Most Grief Reactions are Normal*



A wide variety of reactions to the death of your pet are normal. For example, it is completely normal to find yourself looking for your pet or even calling out to him before remembering your pet has died. It makes perfect sense to feel pangs of grief when you see her bed empty and her toys unused. You may cry when you look at places in your home where your animal companion loved to play. Hearing about and seeing other people with their pets may be a painful reminder of what has been lost. You may be unable to stop crying. These are normal reactions to the death of your animal companion — don't let anyone tell you differently. Of course, just because they are normal reactions doesn't mean they aren't painful.

Furthermore, people express their grief in different ways. Some people express grief through thinking about their loss. For example, I found myself thinking about Mikey while I drove to and from work. I felt most comfortable grieving for him by myself and in a private way. Others will want to put their grief into action. They may choose to donate money, time, or supplies to a local animal shelter or rescue organization as a way to honor their pet. Others will express their grief through tears and sharing memories with family and friends. All of these expressions of grief are normal and healthy. Finally, do not assume that your grief

should follow any predetermined stages. Psychologists now realize that grief is very individualized.

### *Grief Reactions After Euthanasia*

Your grief may be influenced by how your pet died. Like many others, you may experience tremendous guilt after deciding to euthanize (i.e., “put to sleep”) your pet. You may feel this guilt even if your animal companion was in terrible pain or was incurably ill, and you may experience guilt regarding the relief you feel after not having to provide special care for your animal companion. You may also dwell on all of the times when you weren’t the “perfect” pet owner — you may beat yourself up for not taking enough time to spend with your animal companion. Thoughts such as “Why didn’t I take my animal to the vet sooner?” and “Should I have waited?” are common following the choice to euthanize a pet. I know that I often think back and imagine times when I could have been more patient with Mikey or when I could have played with him more. But when I’m really honest with myself, I realize that the perfect pet owner doesn’t exist (just as the perfect parent, spouse, or child doesn’t exist). These thoughts and reactions are a normal but difficult part of grieving for a companion animal.

Obviously each of us would love to have another day with our animal companion — as long as that day was spent when our pet was feeling his or her best. But the truth is that if you had to euthanize your pet, he or she was not in good health and was not his or her normal self.



If you think about the qualities that made your animal companion unique and lovable — perhaps his or her personality, energy, playfulness, friendliness, etc. — it was likely that many of these characteristics were being repressed by illness or pain. Because your pet can't tell you when the pain is too much, you have to rely on these clues (like when your pet just doesn't seem like him/herself anymore) to know when it is the right time.

There are no words that will remove your feelings of guilt after choosing euthanasia. But I'll bet your decision was made in partnership with your veterinarian and that it was a decision you didn't take lightly. If you decided to euthanize because your pet was in pain or ill, then you put your pet's needs before your own — and that is what is important. Putting our animal companions' comfort and needs before our own is the ultimate demonstration of care, concern, and love.

### *How Long Should My Grief Last?*

In many cultures funeral ceremonies for deceased family members can last for several weeks or more, and grief is viewed as a natural reaction — not a disorder. Unfortunately in the United States, many



people expect grief to be something that we “get over” in a matter of days or weeks. This expectation to rush through grief is even more pronounced when an animal companion dies because many people cannot appreciate the special bond between humans and animals. Your grief may last a year or more, and animal lovers will occasionally feel grief even longer than that. Most people find that their grief will slowly lessen over the first several months.



### *Common Grief Reactions*

You may have a wide variety of reactions to the death of your animal companion. Furthermore, your reaction may change throughout the day and over the weeks and months following the death. Here are several common grief reactions following the death of a pet.

- Sadness & Crying
- Guilt & Self Blame
- Helplessness & Shock
- Loneliness & Yearning
- Anger & Irritability
- Fatigue & Lack of Energy
- Insomnia & Restlessness
- Forgetful & Absentminded
- Lack of appetite
- Dreams about the deceased
- Regret

## *Should I Get Help?*

You should always seek professional psychological assistance if you think it would be helpful to you. I have listed several resources at the end of this booklet including online resources and telephone hotlines. If you believe you need individual counseling, begin by talking with potential psychotherapists (i.e., professional counselors, clinical social workers, psychologists) about their views on animal loss and how they work with grieving people before you begin working with them. Most mental health professionals recognize the importance of the death of a companion animal, but you always want to ensure you are working with a professional who is taking your concerns seriously and with whom you feel comfortable. It is also important to realize that a significant loss, such as the death of your pet, may trigger previous problems. For example, if you have struggled with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, or other mental health concerns in the past, a significant loss may cause a relapse.



## *Signs You May Need Professional Help*

- Your grief has not lessened (or has gotten worse) after several months.
- You are experiencing symptoms of grief, depression, or anxiety that impair your ability to take care of yourself, be effective in your work, or maintain your relationships with others.
- You experience any thoughts of self-harm or suicide (always seek help in these situations).
- Your use of alcohol, medications, or illegal substances impairs your ability to be a fully-functioning person.



# Helping Children After the Death of a Pet

A child's first experience with death is often through the death of an animal companion. I firmly believe that children learn "rules" about grief through these experiences and these rules are often applied to later deaths (animal and human). For example, if a family never talks about a family pet after his death, then the child may learn the "rule": we never talk about the deceased. Later, the child may incorrectly believe that we shouldn't talk about grandma after she dies. Therefore, the way we help children grieve the death of their animal companion may have important implications for understanding later losses.



## *Books and Resources for Children After the Death of a Pet*

Inside the back cover of this booklet I have listed several popular and informative books designed to assist children after the death of a pet. See [www.petgriefbooks.com](http://www.petgriefbooks.com) for a summary of each book and information about ordering. The website also includes advice for helping grieving children of specific age groups (preschoolers, children, adolescents).

## *Helping Children — General Concepts and Advice*

- Encourage your child to talk about your pet, the process of the pet's death, and related topics.
- Children will infer a great deal from your actions and demeanor. Be honest about your reactions and demonstrate to children that it is appropriate to express sadness and talk about your animal companion.
- Children may respond to grief by acting out, being frustrated and angry, feeling sad, wanting time alone, and other responses. Try to be especially patient with them.
- Avoid rushing the transition — it is ok to leave out bowls, pet toys, etc. for a few days or weeks while the entire family adjusts to the loss. There are no prizes for “getting over” one's grief as quickly as possible.
- Be as clear as possible about the cause of death. Don't simply say, “the pet went to sleep forever.” Children often confuse the concepts of sleep and death, and statements like this make it worse.





- If your pet was euthanized, reinforce that death was not painful and the pet no longer experiences any discomfort.
- Find a way to allow the child to participate in a funeral or other rituals. See the section on “Honoring Your Pet” for examples.
- Don’t be worried if your child doesn’t express grief or sadness right away. Children may not fully grasp the implications of death and may not know how to show their reaction.
- Be sure children understand that the pet’s death was not their fault, nor was it punishment for any action they might have done or any thought they had.
- Avoid lying to a child of any age. Stories about pets “going to live on a farm” may seem like a convenient way to avoid upsetting your children, but they will likely feel betrayed when they are old enough to discover the truth.



## Service Options: Cremation or Burial?

### *Cremation*

About 2 million animals are cremated each year in the United States. Cremation provides you with many options for memorializing your pet. You can keep the ashes in an urn, spread them at a place of significance (for example, a flower garden), bury them at a meaningful location, have the ashes incorporated into memorial jewelry, etc.

Animal crematories typically offer several options. In a private cremation your animal does not go through the process with any other animals and you will receive all the ashes of your pet. If it is important to you that there be no co-mingling of ashes, then a private cremation is the only process you should consider. Another option is separate or individual cremation (also called “partitioned cremation”) — which typically means that multiple animals are cremated at the same time, but are kept divided by partitions while going through the process.

Many crematories also offer a communal or group cremation option. For a smaller fee they will cremate your pet as part of a larger group — in these situations, it is impossible to keep the ashes separate. With group cremation, you may receive mixed ashes or no ashes. These terms (private, separate/individual, communal, group) are not standardized across all providers, so be sure to ask specific questions about the process.

## *Burial*

Another popular option is burial. A burial can be a simple affair or can include all the meaningful details of a human burial. Many service providers will conduct animal burial services and many communities now have pet cemeteries. With burial, the location is one of your most important decisions. Many people want to bury their animal companion in a place they can return to later.



## Honoring and Remembering your Pet

Grief experts used to think it was important to eventually “let go” of the deceased. Therefore the assumed goal of grief was to forget the deceased. We now know that this is not a healthy and adaptive way to grieve. Instead, it can be healthy and normal to have “continuing bonds” with our animal companions after they die. These bonds may include thinking and dreaming about them, talking to them and about them, visiting a gravesite or special place, and other ways of feeling connected to them. I believe these different ways of honoring and remembering our pets can be an important part of the grief



process, even if others don't understand why it is so important.

A note of caution: It is possible to be too heavily invested in your continuing bonds with your pet — to the point where it interferes with grief and maintaining your relationships with the living. But this is not a common reaction. Most people are able to balance remembering and honoring their pet while continuing to love the important people and animals in their lives who are still living.

## *WAYS TO HONOR AND REMEMBER YOUR PET*

### *1) Do something meaningful with your pet's ashes.*

One benefit of cremation is that your pet's ashes can be kept or spread at a variety of meaningful locations (or even divided to be used in multiple ways). You may find some of the following options meaningful for you:

- Spread your pet's ashes at a meaningful location such as a local animal cemetery, a favorite walking or playing area (hiking trail, park, lake), etc.
- Keep your pet's ashes in a meaningful urn or other container.
- Incorporate a small amount of ashes into jewelry or other containers (see [www.petgriefbooks.com](http://www.petgriefbooks.com) for examples).

### *2) Create a photo album, scrapbook, memory book, video montage, or other visual way to remember your pet.*

Having visual reminders can be an important way to honor your companion. All of these variations can help you remember your pet and reinforce how important his or her role was in your life.

### *3) Volunteer for and/or contribute to an animal organization whose mission you support.*



Many grieving people find it necessary to do something active as part of their grief response. They feel the need to “do something.” Volunteering for a local organization or providing financial support can be a wonderful way to honor your pet.

4) *Keep a special reminder with you.*

Most people feel an extreme sense of loss after their animal companion dies. We're accustomed to having our companion around us. Therefore it may help to have something with you that reminds you of your pet: a picture, a figurine, their tags, or something else of significance. Items like these can help you continue to feel close to your animal companion.

There are many different ways to honor and remember your pet. It doesn't matter if other people don't understand why a specific item, action, or ritual is significant for you. As long as your way of honoring your pet doesn't hurt you or others and doesn't cut you off from other important relationships, then you should choose ways to remember your animal companion that are meaningful to *you*.





## A Final Word of Hope

While no words can take away your grief, I hope this booklet has provided you with information and comfort. I want to remind you that experiencing grief over the death of a companion animal is normal, and your sadness may resurface at seemingly random times. In addition to these moments of pain, you will also experience unexpected pleasant memories. For example, you may smile whenever you remember first meeting your animal companion. For most people the ache of grief will lessen over time. However, dealing with the death of a pet is never easy because animal companions are an integral part of our lives.

My hope is that you are surrounded by supportive loved ones as you grieve the death of your animal companion and that eventually your happy memories endure longer than the sad ones.

With sincerest condolences,

*JASON TROYER, PHD*

[www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com)



## About the Author



Dr. Jason Troyer is the creator of [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com). In his professional experience as a therapist, grief researcher, and professor, he discovered that grieving people wanted a plan to help them on their grief journey. His GriefPlan Programs include videos, information, activities, writing prompts, and other tools to guide people to heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. Dr. Troyer also offers 1-on-1 GriefPlan Coaching for those who want additional help. He provides engaging presentations and workshops on a variety of grief-related topics. Dr. Troyer earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology and masters in Counseling. You can contact Dr. Troyer at [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com).

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