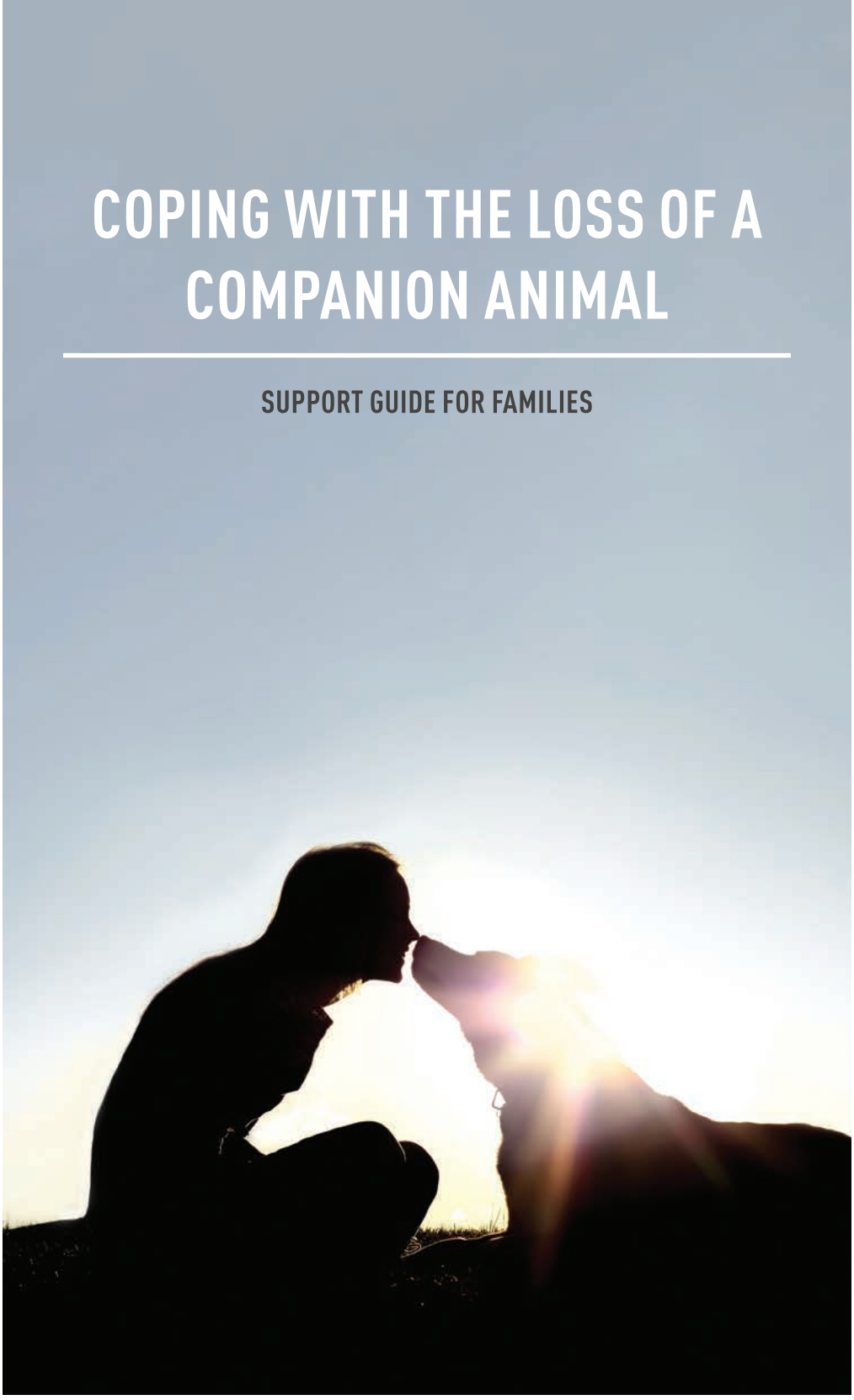
COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A COMPANION ANIMAL

SUPPORT GUIDE FOR FAMILIES

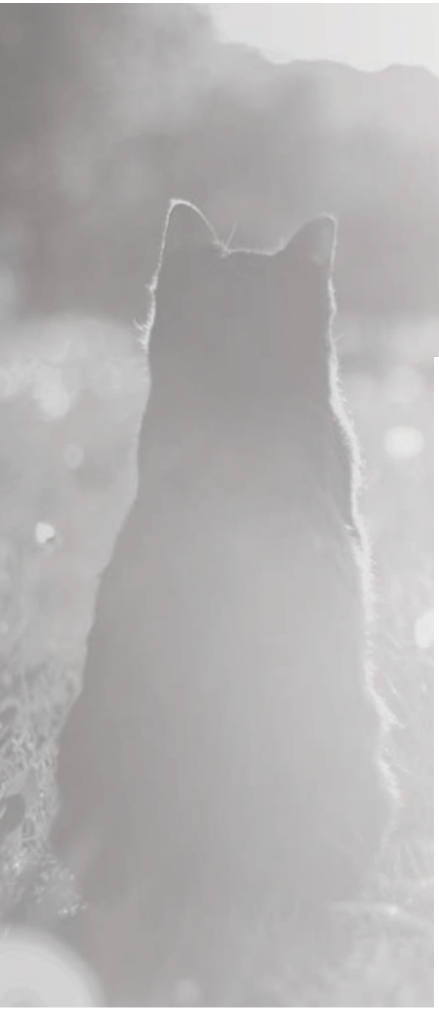


GRIEF

Grief is a healthy and normal response to loss. Attempting to suppress feelings of grief can actually prolong the grieving process. Grief can feel like being lost. The familiar things we relied on to live each day are gone. We must find new anchors or stabilizers along the way and learn a new way of relating to the world and people around us. It is also common to replay the last moments of your pet's life repeatedly in your mind, like a videotape that keeps playing the same scene over and over. No one can hurry the process or provide a magic cure for grief. When grief is new, it is common to feel exhausted: physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Changes in appetite, sleeping patterns, or health are frequently reported. Those who are grieving often describe feelings of being out of control, isolation, and loneliness. Things that seemed so important before may now seem trivial. Others may experience a sense of "life isn't fair" or being in a tunnel or fog while everyday life swirls around them. All of these feelings are normal and part of the grieving process, which follows no organized plan, rules, timetable, formula, or schedule. Don't be surprised if you start to feel better, and then feel as if a wave has hit you. There will be ups and downs in the process of grieving.

"I HAD NEVER GONE THROUGH THE LOSS OF A PET AND IT HIT ME A LOT HARDER THAN I EXPECTED"

The purpose of healthy grieving is not to "get over" the death of a loved one, but to integrate the experience of a pet's death into present life. In this process, it is not unusual for certain memories of your pet to become blurred. This does not mean that you are forgetting your pet or that your love is diminished. The truth is, you will ALWAYS love this very special member of your family. The hope is that as time goes on, the feelings of sadness will become less difficult. In the beginning, you may be sad to think or talk about your companion animal. Eventually, the hope is that you will be able to talk and even smile or laugh at good memories.



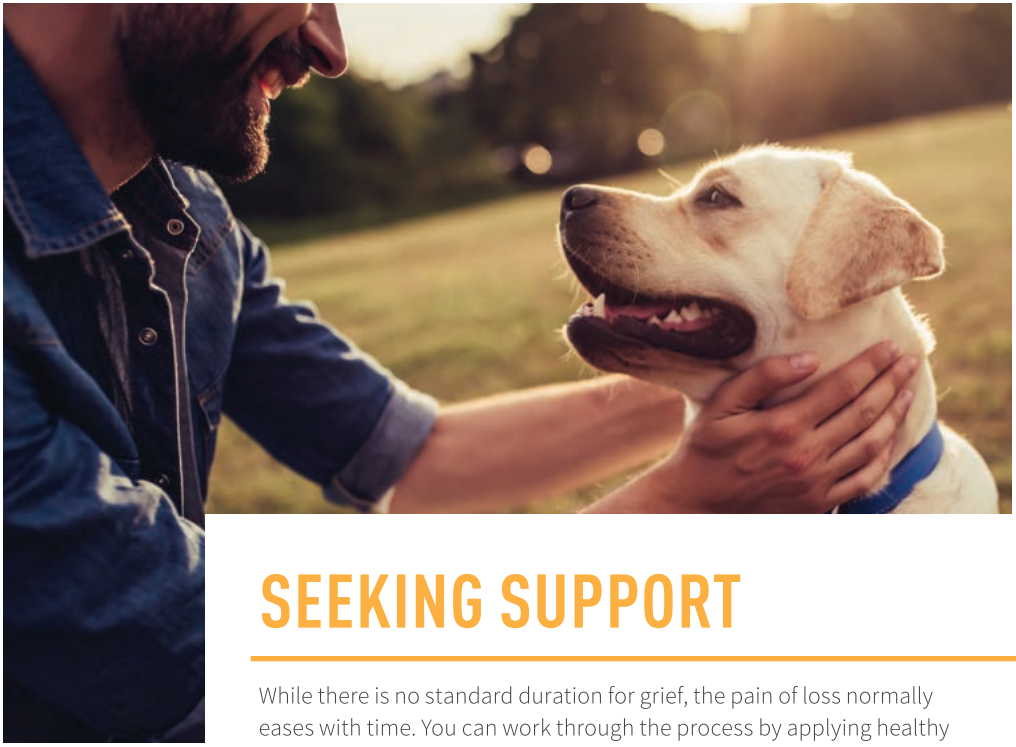
"I THINK IT'S GOOD TO HAVE SOMETHING TO READ BEFORE OR AFTER LOSING A PET. IT'S A REALLY NUMBING EXPERIENCE AND YOU MIGHT NOT WANT TO TALK, BUT READING SOMETHING IS QUIET AND REFLECTIVE THAT YOU CAN DO AT YOUR OWN PACE"

GUILT

Guilt and uncertainty are probably two of the most common emotions that people experience after the death of their pet. You may find yourself thinking continuously about what you perceive you could have, should have, or would have done to prevent or postpone your pet's death.

Some suggestions for coping with guilt include:

1. Be truthful with yourself about why you feel guilty.
2. Write a letter to your pet expressing feelings you may be struggling with.
3. Do a reality check. Most people assume that if they had done something differently, the outcome would have been better. It's just as likely, however, that if you had done things differently, the outcome would have been the same.
4. Remember that you are human. No one is perfect. Accepting your imperfections will aid you in working through your emotions.
5. Remember that all living things die. There is not always an answer to why bad things happen and you do not have to find someone (yourself or others) or something to blame. Realize that sometimes you are powerless and that you cannot control everything that happens to your loved ones. What you can control is how you choose to respond to the events that happen in your life.
6. Try writing or talking to a trusted friend or advisor about your thoughts and feelings of guilt. Expressing your concerns in a safe and supportive environment can help you examine your emotions from a different perspective.



SEEKING SUPPORT

While there is no standard duration for grief, the pain of loss normally eases with time. You can work through the process by applying healthy coping skills, such as talking with others about your memories and emotions and facing the grief, rather than trying to stay distracted or busy to avoid intense emotions. If your feelings of sorrow or guilt have not diminished after several weeks or if they impair your ability to engage in family, social, work, or other functions, you may wish to reach out for support. Many people have found comfort in calling a pet loss support hotline, joining a pet loss support group, reading books about coping with the death of a pet, or talking with a trusted counselor or advisor.

"I HAVE A FRAMED PICTURE NEXT TO MY LIVING PLANTS, SO SHE IS SURROUNDED BY BEAUTY IN A SPACE THAT STILL FEELS ALIVE"

CELEBRATE YOUR PET'S LIFE

Some owners would like a way to memorialize their companion animal. The following are some ways that others have found helpful:

- Conduct a memorial service
- Keep your pet's tags, toys, collars, bedding, etc.
- Keep your horse's shoes, tail, mane hair
- Save condolence cards or e-mails from friends and family
- Create a picture collage, scrapbook, story, or poem about your pet
- If you chose cremation, you may keep the ashes in an urn or locket, or you may choose to scatter them in a place that was special to your pet
- Journal your pet's story; how, when, and where you met, unique personality traits, nicknames, what you love the most, and what you'll miss the most
- Donate time, money, or talent in your pet's honor

ADOPTING AGAIN

The decision about bringing another animal into the home is very personal. Some families may decide not to adopt a new companion animal because of the emotional, physical, or financial demands involved with companion animal care. Others may feel the time is right to share their home and heart with another pet.

The time to consider adopting a new companion animal is when the entire family has had sufficient time to deal with the emotions of grief. Adopting too soon can lead to feelings of guilt or resentment toward the new family member. The important thing to remember is that bringing another animal into the home is not a betrayal of the one that is gone. You will never replace the one you've lost. You will simply be opening your home and heart to a new friend.

For families who want to consider adoption, it will be important to remember that each companion animal has a special and unique personality. Take time to discuss different sizes, breeds, or colors before making a final decision. Consider the needs and temperament of any surviving companion animals.

Booklet content courtesy of:
The Ohio State University - Veterinary Medical Center.
Honoring the Bond, Support for Animal Owners

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