



Veterinary Wisdom®

for pet parents

Helping a Pet Grieve for a “Buddy”

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It's a well-known fact that animals can become attached to other animals (including humans!) When two or more family pets share daily routines and leisure time activities, the bonds between them often grow exceptionally strong.

Strongly “bonded” animals might play and sleep together, eat at the same time, and follow one another around. And, when highly attached animals are separated, either by circumstances or by death, the survivor may exhibit what animal behaviorists call a distress reaction.

Signs of an animal's distress can look very much like human grief, often characterized by anxiety, depression, changes in sleeping and eating habits, disinterest in usual activities, and a reluctance to be alone or away from human family members. Yet, other animals won't show any signs of grief at all.

Very little research has focused on a pet's reaction to another animal's death. What we do know is your pet's reactions will be influenced by the relationship between him or her and the pet who died, as well as by your reaction to the loss. For example, if the pet who died was the “leader”—the one who started the barking and the playtimes—your surviving pets may engage in these activities less because they were in the habit of “following the leader.” In addition, if you are feeling more anxious or restless in reaction to your loss, your surviving pets may also react to changes in *your* routines. This is especially true for cats.

Some grieving animals seem to “search” for an animal buddy who has died, wandering around the house or yard aimlessly and persistently. In an attempt to prevent this behavior, some pet parents and veterinarians allow surviving pets to be present during euthanasia or to see and sniff their “buddy's” body after death. While some who've followed this plan believe it helps, others report no reactions at all from their surviving pets.



What can you do if your pet seems to be grieving? Although there is no definitive data to tell us what works best, many veterinarians and animal behaviorists make the following recommendations:

- **Keep routines as consistent as possible.**
- **Keep your pet's diet and mealtimes the same.** If your pet hasn't been interested in eating for several days following the death of his or her “buddy”, it's tempting to offer table scraps, treats, and even tastier pet food as temptations. Yet, if pets learn that *not* eating results in a treasure trove of delectable tidbits, they may become less likely to eat their regular meals!
- **Although it's human nature to want to comfort your pets, try to spend time with them when they are behaving in desirable ways.** If pets receive more attention from you when they are depressed and inactive, these behaviors may become a way for them to get more attention from you. You can create opportunities to provide positive reinforcement by keeping your surviving pets active. Exercising together may help you feel a bit better while you're grieving, too!
- **Allow your surviving pets to work out their own relationships.** When several animals live together, they often form hierarchies, with clear understandings of who is dominant and who is not! When a member of the group dies, the group can become temporarily unstable, with survivors competing for the vacant spot. This might result in conflicts involving growling, hissing, barking, and even mild attacks. If this happens in your household, don't punish the animals as this only brings your attention to their undesirable behavior. Instead, try to distract them with food or toys or, even better, leave the room and let them work it out themselves.

In our society, where grief is not very well understood or tolerated, immediately “replacing” a pet who has died has become a common solution. Yet, this solution often backfires. There is no guarantee that your surviving animal will bond with a new “buddy.” In fact, just like you, a grieving animal may not have the energy, patience, or desire required to make a new friend during this time. Remember, if you don't feel ready to bring a new pet into your home, chances are it's not right for your surviving pet either. Take a deep breath, hug your pet, and allow some time to pass before you and your pet introduce yourselves to a new “buddy.”

If you'd like to find a **veterinary grief counselor** or contact a **certified animal behaviorist**, visit www.veterinarywisdom.com

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