

Exotic Animal Grief Packet

ARGUS INSTITUTE

Colorado State University



VETERINARY TEACHING HOSPITAL

300 West Drake Road
Fort Collins, CO 80523
(970) 491-4143

www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu

Grieving The Loss Of Your Exotic Pet

When an animal enters our life, a distinct relationship is created. Animals provide a truly unique relationship we cannot replicate anywhere else. Exotic animals in particular bring a remarkably special existence into our lives. They have a way of life often fascinating and foreign to our domesticated world. The bonds created with exotic pets are as diverse as the species of animals that have made their way into our homes and hearts. Each connection with a pet is as individual and personal as the response to the loss of a pet will be. A variety of emotions may be experienced including sadness, a dull ache, guilt, anger, confusion, regret, a physical weariness or a spiritual emptiness. Emotional responses vary on a continuum from extremely significant to simply minimal and where you fall is an acceptable response. There are no right or wrong authentic emotional responses. Different people grieve in very different ways.

Unfortunately, our society often fails to recognize the significance of losing a pet. This is especially true for loss of an exotic pet because fewer people have experienced the bond that can exist with these less common animals. In an attempt to ease the pain, well-meaning people may make comments that end up causing greater pain. One may hear statements such as “Oh it’s just a [hamster, rat, guinea pig, ferret, rabbit, bird, fish, lizard, turtle, snake]. You’ll get over it soon!” or “Look on the bright side. Your room won’t be so noisy at night,” or even “How can anyone become attached to a [snake, lizard, rat]?” “They aren’t even cute or cuddly!” Frequently, people who are not familiar with a particular species are surprised to learn of their individual character and unique personalities. Exotic animals elicit a wide variety of responses from the people in our lives, everything from complete interest and total fascination to indifference, disgust or even fear. A complex web of elements contributes to these reactions. It is not meant to be taken personally especially a during time grief. Nothing can erase the untold ways your pet has touched your life. When grief over the loss of a pet remains unrecognized by our loved ones it can create separation from our support group when we need them most.

Grief can manifest in a variety of ways including a lack of appetite or problems sleeping enough or getting too much sleep. A time of mourning is a time to take exceptional care of your physical body. Grief can often have physical manifestations and eating a healthy diet, getting adequate rest and regular exercise become more essential during a period of grieving.

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The diversity of exotic species is vast and the average lifespan of these animals has a very wide range. Within the world of birds alone, there are some species with life expectancies no greater than 1 to 2 years while others out-live most humans. Many turtles and tortoises have life expectancies over hundreds of years. Families that care for such animals often have done so through generations. An owner bringing the ill or injured pet to the veterinarian hasn't known life without that animal. Our friendly furry little pets more often have short life spans. Many exotic pocket pets such as hamsters and gerbils have a very short life span. It can feel like the relationship has just begun but the attachment is just as strong and true.

As a parent of child who will soon or has recently experienced the loss of a pet, recognize the potential for a significant bond between a child and their pet. Children also have a variety of ways of dealing with stress and grief in their life. The bond they develop with their pet will be individual and the behaviors they exhibit in the grieving process will be as well. Taking time to help your child deal with the death of a pet in a healthy way can be an amazing gift that will stay with them throughout their life. Validating their feelings, whatever they may be, can be a very positive step in facilitating their grieving process. This can be equally true for any individual experiencing loss. Realizing that you are not the only one going through this process can verify that your reaction is okay and natural. Pet loss support groups are developing in many areas for this very reason. Loss of a pet is an important and authentic reason to grieve.

Grief often comes in droves, 'when it rains, it pours.' If the grief you are experiencing about the loss of your pet surprises you, meet that surprise with understanding and compassion. Remember that everything in your life now and through the past may play a role in the experiences you are having today. Responsibilities, time constraints, financial constraints, job problems, living situations, daily stress will all be involved. During a time of grieving it is important to fight the temptation to compare yourself to others. Grief can be an initiator for slowing down, reflecting, and reconnecting with your center, eventually leading to growth and transformation. Do not compare yourself to others. Be gentle and generous with yourself. An emotional loss is a wound that requires the same time and attention to healing as would a physical wound.

Healthy Ways to Mourn

During a time of mourning, do your absolute best to treat yourself well. Take care of your physical, spiritual and emotional well-being. Create time to tend to your grief and be as kind and generous with yourself as you would be with a very dear and special friend. Below is a list of ideas to get you started.

1. Acknowledge the loss
2. Allow yourself to feel, to hurt, to cry
3. Expect to feel a multitude of emotions
4. Take extra time out of your day to rest
5. Talk to friends, family, pet loss hot lines or support groups
6. See a counselor
7. Memorialize your pet
8. Keep a journal
9. Read a favorite book
10. Borrow or purchase a book on the topic of pet loss
11. Reach out to others with a friendly card or note
12. Stop! Breathe deeply
13. Develop a new interest, something you've always wanted to do
14. Rediscover an old interest, a once favorite past time
15. Laugh: rent a comedy, see a comedian, or visit a friend who can make you laugh
16. Eat Well! Treat yourself to a very nutritious meal
17. Exercise: Go for a walk, head to the gym, play an aerobic video
18. Be gentle and generous with yourself
19. Take a hot bath without interruptions
20. Create a sanctuary for yourself
21. Take your phone off the hook
22. Do something you are good at
23. Plan a mini-vacation
24. Reconnect with a friend from the past
25. Write notes of appreciation to helpers such as the veterinarian or vet technician
26. Go on a picnic
27. Clean a closet or organize the junk door – create order out of chaos
28. Schedule a massage
29. Get a haircut
30. Plant a garden
31. Create a directory of your ten favorite ways to spend free time
32. Do something fun everyday
33. Volunteer
34. Enjoy time spent alone
35. Have patience with yourself and your grieving process

Memorialization

Memorialization is a way of making a memorial and creating a keepsake for remembering your beloved pet. The process of creating memorials can be therapeutic in dealing with grief and going through the process of letting go. Cherish your memories and remember nothing will erase the way your animal companion has touched your life. Below is a list of ideas for memorializing your treasured exotic pet.

- Take many photographs. Consider getting professional photos taken.
- Have a photograph transferred to a T-shirt, mug, welcome mat or tote bag.
- Have a professional portrait, sketch or sculpture done or create one yourself.
- Use the food dish, aquarium or water tub for a new purpose: plant a flower, decorate and use as a container, make a display representing memories of favorite times with your pet.
- Write a poem, story or song dedicated to your pet.
- Write a letter addressing:
 - What I miss most about you is...
 - What's hardest for me now is...
 - I'm keeping my memories of you alive by...
 - Since this happened I'm feeling so...
- Create a scrapbook with photos, special memories, feathers, a shed or clipping of hair.
- Videotape your pet doing anything and everything.
- Create something that reminds you of your pet: a drawing, sculpture, needlework project
- Create a ceramic imprint of the paws, tail or even a feather. The material for Claypaws™ is available at some veterinary clinics or Sculpty clay can be purchased from a craft store. With the imprint made, the pet's name or a favorite message can be added before baking.
- Keep a lock of fur, a feather, or scale and place it in a locket.
- Make a donation in memory of your pet to a special cause – money, items or equipment
- Read about the natural history of your pet's species. Where do they come from? What is their history? How can you explain certain behaviors?
- Post an Internet Memorial: www.In-Memory-of-Pets.com
- Talk about your pet. Pet loss support groups or hot lines provide an attentive audience ready to hear stories about you and your pet.
- Have a burial ceremony. If it isn't possible to bury the pet's body then bury a representation such as a clipping of hair or feathers, a tag or collar, or even a drawing. Make it a time to say final good-byes.
- Summarize the lessons you learned in the time you shared with your pet and share those lessons with a new owner of a similar species or a class of interested youngsters.
- If you decide to cremate the remains, put the ashes in a garden or potted plant, in a favorite area of the yard or a special place from your time together.

Exotic Animal Resources

It can be difficult even for the experienced exotic pet owner to find genuinely good information on how to care for their pet. Our knowledge of exotic animals varies from species to species. Unfortunately, for many of our exotic animals the information one receives from the pet store, from books, or the Internet may contain bad information that can actually be harmful to the animal's health. As well, our understanding of the best way to provide a healthy life for our exotic pets is constantly growing. Don't be afraid to ask your veterinarian to recommend a good source for accurate information. Below are lists of websites for locating information you seek.

General

The Association of Exotic Animal Veterinarians: <http://www.aemv.org>

Creatures in Heaven, Pet Resource Guide: <http://www.creatures.com/StateGuide.html>

Animal News: <http://www.animalnews.com>

Exotic Hobbyist: <http://www.exotichobbyist.com>

Pet Station: <http://www.petstation.com>

Net Vet: <http://netvet.wustl.edu>

Small Mammals

Rat and Mouse Club of America: <http://www.rmca.org>

The American Ferret Association: <http://www.ferret.org>

Ferret Central: <http://www.ferretcentral.org>

National Gerbil Society: <http://www.gerbils.co.uk>

Rodent Fancy: <http://www.rodentfancy.com>

National Hamster Council: <http://www.hamsters-uk.org>

House Rabbit Society: <http://www.rabbit.org>

Chin Care, Chinchilla Site: <http://chincare.com>

Birds

Association of Avian Veterinarians: <http://www.aav.org>

The Parrot Preservation Society: <http://www.parrotpro.com>

Parrot Pages: <http://www.parrotpages.com>

African Parrot Society: <http://www.wingscc.com/aps>

Exotic birds: <http://www.exoticbird.com>

Amazona Society: <http://www.amazonasociety.org>

Duck Care: <http://www.duckhealth.com>

Pet Bird Page: <http://www.petbirdpage.com>

Reptiles & Amphibians

The Bean Farm: Herpetological and Animal Husbandry Supplies: <http://www.beanfarm.com>

Association of Reptile and Amphibian Veterinarians: <http://www.arav.org>

Melissa Kaplan's Herp Care Collection: <http://www.anapsid.org>

The Reptile Information Network: <http://www.reptileinfo.com>

Herpetology: <http://www.herpetology.com>

American Tortoise Rescue: <http://www.tortoise.com>

AmphibiaWeb: <http://elib.cs.berkeley.edu/aw>

Frogland: <http://allaboutfrogs.org/frogland.shtml>

Fish & Invertebrates

The American Zoo and Aquarium Association: <http://www.aza.org>

The American Tarantula Society: <http://www.atshq.org>

Aquarium Hobbyist: <http://www.aquariumhobbyist.com>

Fish Information Service: <http://fins.actwin.com>

Aquatic Network: <http://www.aquanet.com>

Aqualink: <http://www.aqualink.com>

Arachnopets: <http://www.arachnopets.com>

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4/28/03