

# *Your Pet's Passing*

A Resource for Coping and  
Creating Lasting Memories

OAKLAND VETERINARY  
REFERRAL SERVICES   
*Specialty Care for Special Pets*



**Katherine Dobbs, RVT, CVPM, PHR**

**Your Pet's Passing: A Resource for Coping  
and Creating Lasting Memories**

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# DEDICATION

## Our Journey With

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Pet's Name)

Species: \_\_\_\_\_

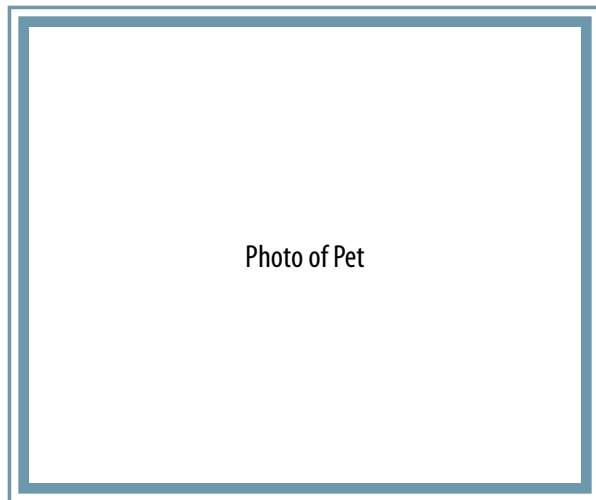
Breed: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Color: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Toy: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Activity: \_\_\_\_\_



# INTRODUCTION

## A Personal Note from the Author

This book is written for you, in tribute to this journey you are beginning with your beloved pet. You are "Your Pet's Voice," as the one who has loved and cared for him or her during their lifetime with your family. This book will help you give voice to your loving thoughts and desires. My hope is that it contains information to help guide you through the difficult decisions you are facing, and comfort you through this difficult time. I also hope that this book provides a place for you to reflect and write about the time you have spent with your pet.

It is recommended that you read through this book in its entirety, as there are sections that may or may not pertain to your immediate need, but may relate to a decision in the future. You will be facing many difficult decisions, but when these decisions are made from a place of love you have for your pet, you will make the right choices.

I would like to express my gratitude to Christy Rach, CVT, for providing valuable content, and to Valarie Hajek-Adams, CVT, for her inspiration in working with pet hospice and end-of-life families. My sincere thanks and love to those patients and clients who have touched me through my work; you are always in my thoughts as I strive to help others.

As a veterinary professional, my hope is that you will find here useful information and a private space to share your feelings. As a pet owner, my hope is that you will use this book to create a tribute to your time spent together. The book may end, but your spiritual journey with your pet will never cease.

*Katherine*

# BEYOND TREATMENT

## Your Pet's Passing

The passing of your beloved pet will be a sad time. On the topic of death, Steve Miles, M.D., said, "Death is not a medical event. It is a personal and family story of profound choices, of momentous words and telling silences."

## Creating Your Family's Story

### Death

Most of us hope that when the time comes for our beloved pet to pass away, he or she will do so in their sleep, painlessly and in the comfort of his or her own home. The reality is that "natural" or unassisted death is seldom without struggle and pain, despite our heartfelt wishes. Certainly, there are pet owners who do not believe in assisting with a pet's death. If this is the case, your veterinary team will do their best to support your decision.

### Euthanasia

In veterinary medicine, we are able to provide humane euthanasia to assist in a dignified and painless death for your pet. The word "euthanasia" is Greek meaning "easy death" (eu = easy + thanatos = death). The intention of euthanasia is to end suffering and to do so in a peaceful, kind and loving manner. It becomes the final act of love.

**Making the Decision to Euthanize** – The decision to euthanize a pet is an extremely difficult one fraught with emotions and questions. The most common question is "How will I know when it is time?" The most important thing you can do is take the lead from your pet. Really "listen" with your heart to what they are telling you about their condition, level of participation in favorite activities, and quality of life. If you are honest with yourself you will find the answer to your question. Remember that you know your pet better than anyone else. You have a special bond that allows you to instinctively have a sense of what your pet needs. Your veterinary

team will also play a critical role at this time. They will be able to give you invaluable insight about your pet's medical condition.

**End of Life Planning** – An end of life plan ensures that you can see your pet out of this world in a way that is meaningful and true to you and your pet. For many people it allows them to have some control over an uncontrollable situation. A plan allows you to focus on your pet in his or her final moments without having to make last minute decisions. While making an end of life plan, it is helpful to start with what you feel most strongly about and what your ideal situation would look like. As always, plans may need to be modified depending on the unique circumstances of the situation or emergency condition. The following questions will help you make an end of life plan for you and your pet:

**1. Euthanasia can be provided either with you and/or your family in attendance, or privately with the veterinary team. The veterinary team will not judge your love or commitment to your pet if you choose to not be present for your pet's euthanasia; rest assured they will provide loving care until the end. Would you like to be present for the euthanasia? This is a very personal decision and whatever you choose is the right option for you. There is no right or wrong answer.**

**2. Where will you be the most comfortable euthanizing your pet? Some options may be at home, outside in nature, or at your veterinary clinic.**



**Understanding the Euthanasia Process** – If you choose attended euthanasia, you will be more comfortable with the process if you know what to expect, for both you and your pet. Whether you have been present for euthanasia before or not, you will want to ask your veterinary team to walk you through the process. This will allow you to ask any questions or make any special requests that you may want. There are a variety of protocols that can be utilized during humane euthanasia; the details of the procedure may vary slightly from veterinary practice to veterinary practice. We will describe the most common procedure for euthanasia, but please ask your veterinary team for what to expect in their practice. First your pet may receive an intravenous catheter to ensure that the process is painless and effective. Then your pet may be given a sedative which helps to bring a state of calmness and relaxation. Next an injection of a potent anesthetic drug is given directly into the animal’s vein that induces a deep sleep followed by death. It isn’t uncommon for the animal to take a final breath or have some muscle movement; this isn’t a sign of pain but is simply unconscious bodily reflexes. Your doctor will listen with his or her stethoscope to ensure that the heart has stopped. Your pet may not close their eyes after the euthanasia injection; this too is normal. Use this checklist to mark Yes or No if your veterinarian can provide what you check as desired.

	Yes	No	Desired
Scheduled euthanasia preferred			
Allow family adults to be present			
Allow children to be present			
Placement intravenous catheter:			
- In exam room			
- Away from room			
Administer pre-sedative medication			

### Special Requests

You may have a special blanket or toy that you want with you and your pet during this time. You may consider reading a poem, prayer or letter that you have written to your pet. While saying goodbye to your faithful friend, you may want to spend some moments alone with him or her after they have passed from this world. Please take as much time as you need to say goodbye. Your veterinary team will accommodate whatever feels most fitting to you.

There are many ways your pet can be memorialized by you and/or your family, possibly with assistance from the veterinary team. Methods include a paw print in clay, an ink or paint paw print on paper, or snips of your pet’s hair or fur. Ask your veterinary team how they are able to help you memorialize your pet’s passing.













## Common Emotions of Grief

You cherish your pet and he or she is a part of your family. Because of the intense love and bond that you share with your pet it is impossible to NOT feel all kinds of emotions! It is normal to feel like you are on an emotional rollercoaster with up's and down's that change quickly. Below we will outline some of the emotions you may be feeling and tips on how to cope.

**Shock** – The feelings of shock you may experience during this time can include disbelief and numbness; this is your body's way of slowing your mind down and allowing your mind to have time to adjust to your new reality. This is a necessary process because you have received intellectually and emotionally overwhelming information that you can't process in an instant.

**Panic & Fear** – You may be feeling panic and fear about the unknown. Setting boundaries and goals along with having a plan that you and your doctor have discussed can help you feel more in control. When you feel yourself spiraling into panic or fear, remind yourself of the things you already know about the boundaries, goals and plan you have set to help your pet have the best possible outcome.

**Sadness** – First of all, remind yourself that it is okay to feel sad. You don't always have to "put on a brave face". Allow yourself to have moments that you let your guard down and cry. Cut yourself some slack! Sadness is necessary and a normal part of the grieving process. *(See The Pet Lover's Code)*

**Anger** – You may be angry at the situation you have been dealt. You may be asking questions like "why me?" and "why my pet?" Sometimes you may feel angry with the doctor and staff that have given you bad news. The anger is probably arising from the loss of control you are feeling. Again, this is very normal.

**Guilt** – You may feel guilt surrounding the decisions you have to make on behalf your pet. You may feel guilty because you feel you missed "signs" of your pet's illness. If you determined that euthanasia was the most loving way of letting your pet go, you may

feel guilt at either waiting too long or prolonging your pet's suffering, or choosing euthanasia too soon and thus missing out on more time together. Both of these reactions are normal. Just remember that you made the best possible decision at the time it needed to be made. Guilt can also arise when you have time restraints, family responsibilities, or financial concerns that you feel limit the care that can be provided to your pet. Guilt can also arise when people feel a sense of relief that they no longer have to be a caregiver. All of the extra duties and time spent nursing your ailing pet has been huge part of your life. It is natural for you to be relieved that those duties have come to an end. The sense of relief you are feeling does not mean that you didn't love your pet or that you weren't dedicated to him/her. It simply means that you are looking forward to a reprieve from care giving duties. It is helpful to know that your veterinary team isn't judging you because of the decisions you have to make. We are here to help you and we understand how difficult this must be for you. Remember that all of the decisions you have to make, no matter how hard, are made out of the LOVE you have for your pet.

## Physical Symptoms of Grief

When you are dealing with a traumatic event in your life your body reacts to that stressor. It is normal to have some or all of the symptoms listed below. In most cases these symptoms are temporary; however if you have any symptoms that you are concerned about please see your physician. Listed below are some common physical symptoms of grief.

- *Muscle aches & pains*
- *Exhaustion & weakness*
- *Tightness in chest & heart palpitations*
- *Changes in eating habits (increased or decreased)*
- *Upset stomach*
- *Inability to sleep*
- *Forgetfulness*
- *Agitation*

What symptoms are you feeling or expect to feel?

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## Spiritual Components of Grief

In the face of losing your beloved pet it is natural that you search for meaning within your own spiritual beliefs. There are many beliefs surrounding animals and the afterlife. Remember that you are allowed to have your own beliefs! You may find yourself questioning your faith, bargaining with your god to prevent the loss of your pet, questioning your ideas about an afterlife or your pet's soul, and you may have feelings of being either blessed or punished. Take this time to search for what feels right for you within your beliefs. Talk to someone you trust about your spirituality and how that relates to your pet.

What are your guiding spiritual thoughts or ideas?

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## Ways to Cope with Grief

Most people have a difficult time slowing down and taking care of themselves on a daily basis. You are experiencing a life changing event and that requires you to take special care of yourself. We are giving you permission to take some time to relax and be kind to yourself! The following are some suggestions for self care.

- *Surround yourself with people who enjoyed your pet and are supportive of you and the decisions that you made for your pet. Don't talk about your situation with people who are judgmental or critical of your choices.*
- *Get your sleep and nap if you need to.*
- *Don't take on extra responsibilities at this time.*
- *Eat small healthy meals and drink plenty of water.*
- *Exercise and get outdoors to breath in fresh air.*
- *Pamper yourself with a professional massage.*
- *Attend a support group, speak with a counselor or visit online chat rooms that can offer support. There are others who are going through what you are; you are not alone. (Refer to the Resources section)*
- *Journal what you are experiencing and feeling. Journaling allows you to express what you are feeling outwardly. If you are uncomfortable sharing with others this may be a good outlet for you.*



What we have once enjoyed  
we can never lose.

*All that we love deeply  
becomes a part of us.*

– Helen Keller



## *The Pet Lover's Code*

Ten Inalienable Rights After the Death  
of a Special Companion Animal

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

**You have the right to grieve the death of a pet.**

**You have the right to talk about your grief.**

**You have the right to feel a variety of emotions.**

**You have the right to be tolerant of  
your physical and emotional limits.**

**You have the right to experience "griefbursts".**

**You have the right to make use of ritual.**

**You have the right to embrace your spirituality.**

**You have the right to search for meaning.**

**You have the right to treasure your memories.**

**You have the right to move toward your grief and heal.**

*(Reprinted by permission from Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com))*



## Grief and Developmental Stages

Age	Understanding of Death	Expressions of Grief
Infancy to 2 Years	Is not yet able to understand death. Separation from mother causes changes.	Quietness, crankiness, decreased activity, poor sleep, and weight loss.
2 to 6 Years	Death is like sleeping. Dead person continues to live and function in some ways. Death is temporary, not final. Dead person can come back to life.	Asks many questions ( <i>How does she go to the bathroom? How does she eat?</i> ). Problems in eating, sleeping, and bladder and bowel control. Fear of abandonment. Tantrums. Magical thinking ( <i>Did I think something or do something that caused the death? Like when I said I hate you and I wish you would die?</i> ).
6 to 9 Years	Death is thought of as a person or spirit ( <i>skeleton, ghost, bogeyman</i> ). Death is final and frightening. Death happens to others, it won't happen to ME.	Curious about death. Asks specific questions. May have exaggerated fears about school. May have aggressive behaviors ( <i>especially boys</i> ). Some concerns about imaginary illnesses. May feel abandoned.
9 Years & Older	Everyone will die. Death is final and cannot be changed. Even I will die.	Heightened emotions, guilt, anger, shame. Increased anxiety over own death. Mood swings. Fear of rejection; not wanting to be different from peers. Changes in eating habits. Sleeping problems. Regressive behaviors ( <i>loss of interest in outside activities</i> ). Impulsive behaviors. Feels guilty about being alive ( <i>especially related to death of a brother, sister, or peer</i> ).

Chart courtesy of National Cancer Institute

Do not stand at my grave and weep  
I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am a *thousand winds* that blow  
I am the diamond glints on snow

I am the *sunlight* on ripened grain  
I am the gentle autumn rain

In the morning hush  
I am the *swift uplifting rush*  
Of quiet birds in circle flight

I am the *soft star* that shines at night

Do not stand at my grave and cry  
I am not there, *I did not die!*

– Anonymous

## THE RAINBOW BRIDGE

Just this side of *heaven* is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge.

There are meadows and hills for all of our *special friends* so they can run and play together.

There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who had been ill and old are *restored to health and vigor*; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.

The animals are *happy* and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all *run and play* together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in *joyous reunion*, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

*Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together...*

– Author unknown

## Book Resources

### Preparing for Loss and Anticipatory Grief

**Final Farewell: Preparing for and Mourning the Loss of Your Pet;** Marty Tousley

**Loss and Anticipatory Grief;** Theresa A. Rando

**Preparing for the Loss of Your Pet: Saying Goodbye with Love, Dignity and Peace of Mind;** Myrna Milani DVM

**Smiling through Your Tears: Anticipating Grief**  
Harriet Hodgson BS, MA, Lois Krahn MD

**Kindred Spirit, Kindred Care;** Shannon Fujimoto Nakaya, DVM

**Pets living with cancer: A pet owner's resource**  
Downing, R. 2000. Lakewood, CO: AAHA Press.

### Coping with Loss

**Absent Friend: Coping with the Loss of a Treasured Pet;** Laura Lee, Martin Lee

**Blessing the Bridge: What Animals Teach Us About Death, Dying and Beyond**  
Rita M. Reynolds, Gary Kowalski

**Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost A Pet**  
Gary Kowalski

**Legacies of Love, A Gentle Guide to Healing from the loss of Your Animal Loved One;** Theresa L. Wagner

**Surviving the Heartbreak of Choosing Death for your Pet;** Linda Mary Peterson

**When Only Love Remains: The Pain of Pet Loss;** Emily Margaret Stuparyk

**When Your Pet Dies, A Guide to Mourning, Remembering and Healing**  
Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D



## Online Resources

### **Animal Love and Loss Network** <http://www.ALLN.org>

An organization of pet loss counselors and professionals; offers links to support groups, plus a chat room.

### **Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement** <http://www.aplb.org>

An association of pet loss counselors and professionals. The site offers links, articles, a bookstore and directories of counselors and pet loss support groups.

### **APLB Support Chat Rooms** <http://www.aplb.org>

The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement's Chat Rooms are designed to provide a safe and supportive haven for those who have lost a beloved animal companion.

### **Paws 2 Heaven** [www.paws2heaven.com](http://www.paws2heaven.com)

This site lists various state's support groups, cemeteries and crematories. Also, sells urns and pet memorials.

### **Veterinary Wisdom** [www.veterinarywisdomforPetParents.com](http://www.veterinarywisdomforPetParents.com)

Get expert advice about loving and losing your companion animal. They also have memorial gifts and supplies to commemorate beloved pets.

## Religious Online Resources

### **Animals in Heaven: Proof that Animals Go to Heaven**

[www.ourchurch.com/member/w/wlasalle/](http://www.ourchurch.com/member/w/wlasalle/)

A number of useful scripture references on the topic.

### **Creatures in Heaven** [www.creatures.com](http://www.creatures.com)

A site that offers books, videos and music as well as information on scripture and whether pets go to heaven.

### **Do Animals Go to Heaven?** [www.eternalanimals.com](http://www.eternalanimals.com)

A number of loss-related resources, a book and articles dealing with the "pets in heaven" issue.

### **Scripture and Animals** <http://dogshavesouls.com/scripture.html>

Do pets go to heaven? Some comforting Bible verses.

## Phone Resources

**Grief Recovery Hotline:** (800) 445-4808 | M-F 9am-5pm PT

**Minnesota Social Work Services, Univ of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center :** (612) 624-9372

**Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine**  
(517) 432-2696 | T/TH 7:30-9:30pm ET

**Animal Allies Humane Society, Pet Loss Support Group, Duluth, MN**  
(218) 722-5341 | [www.animalallies.org](http://www.animalallies.org)

### **Companion Animal Related Emotions Pet Loss Helpline**

University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine  
Toll Free: (877) 394-2273 | [www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE](http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE)

### **Pet Grief Support Helpline:** (602) 995-5885

Calls to the Pet Grief Support Helpline are received on an answering machine. Your message will be picked up by one of the Pet Grief Support Service volunteers, who will return your calls as soon as possible. Our trained Helpline Volunteers are caring, understanding listeners who have loved and lost their own dear friends, and want only to help you cope with losing yours. (Although there is no charge for this service, please be aware that long distance calls will be returned collect.) The Pet Grief Support Service (PGSS) is offered to the public at no cost by the Companion Animal Association of Arizona, INC. For further information please contact the Pet Grief Support Service Helpline, (602) 995-5885

## More resources I have found:

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# *An OVRS Commitment*

The health of our patients is our top priority. We will always work in close partnership with the referring veterinarian to promote the best course of care.

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