Guiding Owners – Caring for Grieving Animals and Taking on a New Pet

Covering:
- Grief in animals
- Handout for owners: ‘Caring for a grieving pet’
- Grieving donkeys
- When bereaved owners think about getting a new pet
- Handout for owners: ‘Considering a new pet’

Grief in Animals

How and whether animals actually grieve is an area which continues to be researched in the world. A prominent researcher into this interesting area is Marc Bekoff, who is a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Colorado-Boulder. Having spent his life studying animals and their emotions, he discovered that animals grieve quite frequently. One haunting example he gives is having witnessed a wolf sniffing the body of her dead companion; he reports that the female wolf gave the most soulful and heart-wrenching howl he had ever heard. He has also seen that when a member of a wolf pack dies the rest of the animals walk away slowly with their tails down and head hung low.

It seems natural that companion animals can be adversely affected by the change in their daily lives caused by the death of or separation from another pet or their owner. Certainly I have seen marked changes in demeanour and behaviour in pets following the death of their owner or bonded animal companion.

It can be worrying for owners to see surviving pets acting out of character following bereavement, which, of course, might be exacerbated by any human distress from the loss within the household. The following handout, which can be downloaded, is designed to guide people through this and to help them recognize when they need to seek veterinary advice.

Handout: Caring for a grieving pet

Bereavement, whether from losing a person or a companion animal, is a difficult and painful time which can affect animals and birds as well as people. This handout is to help you care for a pet who may be mourning.

Generally it is considered helpful to allow a surviving pet to see and sniff the body of the pet that has died, if that is possible in the circumstances. But you may wish to double check this with your vet if you are not sure whether it will help or not. For example, it might be counterproductive when an animal has got used to not seeing their companion...
because he or she had been at the vet surgery for some time or has undergone extensive medical or surgical treatment which could have caused an unfamiliar scent.

A pet that is mourning or missing a companion might appear:

- Less interested in their food.
- Withdrawn and disinterested in what is going on around them – less enthusiastic about what they would normally enjoy.
- More anxious and reactive to things than usual.
- More vocal – a dog barking at any little noise which normally would be ignored.
- Unsettled during the night-time when they normally sleep easily.
- Unusually anxious when left alone for short periods.
- Pacing around and looking for their companion.
- Over-grooming, perhaps causing mutilation, such as feather plucking or licking paws until they are sore.
- Either seeking attention or avoiding human contact.
- Soiling in the house.
- Unusually aggressive to other animals or people.
- Unusually destructive.

If such changes in behaviour are noticed it is important not to escalate the animal’s reactivity and stress levels by admonishment or any form of punishment. Please note that if an animal has become unpredictable in behaviour, children and vulnerable people should be kept safe and all interaction needs to be supervised by a responsible adult. The loss of one animal in a multi-pet household can also trigger some squabbling between the remaining pets as a new hierarchy is established. Be aware that animals and birds can be affected by human emotions: the natural upset following bereavement can also have an impact on your family pet, so it helps to keep things as stable as possible within the home.

While it is sensible to allow some time for the surviving pet to adjust to the loss, if you are at all concerned about their health or behaviour, or if it seems prolonged (more than a few days) or severe, you need to consult your vet. This is because they may have developed an underlying medical problem which has occurred coincidentally or possibly been triggered by the recent upset. This is particularly important if you are caring for an equine who has just lost a bonded companion, so keep a very close eye on whether they are eating normally and report any concerns to your vet without delay.

Tips on supporting a bereaved pet:

- Keep your pet to its routine as far as is possible, as this helps to stabilize things, although some slight adjustments might help to perk them up, such as walking a dog on a different route or giving a cat a new toy.
- If they are not interested in their food, try offering them something more appetizing that is easily digestible.
- Although a little extra care and attention may help, and it is a good opportunity to enrich their environment, it is best to avoid over-fussing a distressed animal.
- If they have soiled in the house, do not react but just make sure that they have plenty of opportunity to toilet outside on a regular basis and praise them accordingly.
- Continue to keep an eye on your pet and be aware that they may not respond normally to commands, so you might need to keep a dog on a leash when out walking, or keep a cat in overnight for a while to prevent them from searching for their lost companion.
● If they seem destructive, ensure that they have safe toys to chew and remove anything that you do not want damaged or which could be hazardous to the pet.
● If they are being more vocal than usual, keep your voice calm and try to avoid shouting.

Obviously, this is not an easy time for either people or animals. But by understanding what is happening to your pet and seeking veterinary advice when needed, you will be able to help them to adjust.

---

**Grieving Donkeys**

Vicky Grove, a donkey specialist veterinary surgeon, gives important guidance on caring for donkeys following the death of a bonded companion.

As soon as the heart has audibly stopped it is best to leave the donkey quietly with the companion. The response of the friend varies and cannot be predicted. Extreme cases of distress can be seen, such as trying to get the donkey back onto their feet, often accompanied by much braying. These cases are upsetting for the hardest of hearts to observe. Other companions may sniff the body and quickly walk away, preferably to an offered feed. However, the important moment has occurred, which is recognition of the donkey being deceased. We cannot attach human emotions to these sentient beings but endless searching for their friend is as distressing as our idea of grief.

Donkeys are at high risk of the life-threatening condition hyperlipaemia, as a result of not eating sufficiently to meet energy demands. To reduce the chance of this, particular attention should be paid to food intake for at least two weeks. Perhaps suggest an extra ration is given so that their intake can be monitored.

How long to leave the companion with the body is a frequently asked question. The answer is to observe the donkey and look for the signs to indicate when they want to leave the vicinity of the body. Some individuals are clear, with dramatic kicking at the door to get out. Others may be content to stay for a while but the desire to move away normally comes within the hour. Make arrangements for the body to be collected with a delay of as long as an hour to give this vital process time to run its course.

Watch the companion closely for the following two to four weeks. Changes in demeanour will demonstrate if the need for a donkey replacement is urgent. If the pair of donkeys were part of a group, then this is less likely. Remember to instruct the owner that dullness or inappetence are urgent reasons to call a vet.

(Vicky Grove, Veterinary Surgeon)

---

**When Bereaved Owners Think About Getting a New Pet**

There are different reasons why owners consider taking on a new pet following a bereavement. For example:

● To fill the gap left by the one they have lost.
● To have continued companionship and prevent loneliness.