

## **Handout: Considering a new pet**

Pet loss often leaves a roller coaster of emotional turmoil in its wake and it is advisable to give yourself the space to work through your grief before considering having a new pet, so that you can be sure that you are not simply trying to make the pain go away. Although taking on a new pet immediately after your loss will help to fill the emptiness in the home, if you are not ready it can cause difficulties in bonding, making it stressful for both you and the animal who is trying to adjust to new circumstances. Therefore, try not to rush into making important decisions – pause and allow yourself to be aware of how you truly feel and give yourself time to think. This handout is to help guide and support you through this process.

## **A family decision**

It is important that the feelings and thoughts of everyone in the family are considered before deciding to take on a new pet. It is not always easy to make a collective decision, because while one person may feel ready to love another pet, another may still be struggling to come to terms with their loss. Occasionally, someone can be so deeply affected by the death of a beloved pet that they do not think they could ever risk having to go through loving and losing again.

## **Things to think about initially**

Below is a list of things you might want to consider prior to committing to another pet.

- Would you benefit from having time out from the responsibility of caring for a pet? (You may have found caring for an elderly or sick pet stressful and need space to rest and recover.)
- Do you currently need time to focus on other areas in your life? (There may be things you would have liked to do, or needed to do, which were not possible when your pet was alive.)
- Have your circumstances changed, making it more challenging to look after an animal? (Perhaps your current work or family responsibilities take up more of your time and energy, or you have health issues with which to cope.)
- Do you have a steady income that will enable you to care for a pet? (Job insecurity could make covering the costs of pet insurance, vet bills or special dietary pet food difficult.)
- Are you planning on moving home in the near future? (You would need to be sure that where you live will be suitable and safe for the type of pet you are considering.)
- Are you intending to have building works done in the home? (These could well be upsetting to a new pet and would create risks to their security if doors are left open by builders, for example.)
- Does the same type of pet still suit your lifestyle, age and stage in life, or would another kind of companion animal be more suitable?
- Should you own or foster a pet? (Some charities need people who are willing and able to foster the animals in their care for long or short-term periods. This may be a more viable option than taking full responsibility for a pet's life-long care.)

## **Other family pets**

There may be other pets to consider. Elderly animals may not take well to a youngster invading their territory, and survivors of a bonded group or pair could react badly if a new pet is introduced without careful planning. Check with your vet if you need some guidance on this.

## **Volunteering**

If you decide to have a break from caring for a pet but are worried that you will miss the human–animal contact, volunteering in some capacity within animal welfare could provide you with the chance to be involved with animals without the responsibility of owning one yourself. Many organizations depend on the regular support of their volunteers and it can be satisfying to give your time to a meaningful cause. There are many options, such as dog walking, fostering pets for people who are unwell or in hospital, or transporting animals to the vet if the owners are unable to do so themselves. There may be opportunities at your local animal sanctuary, involving hands-on work, raising funds, helping at events, or becoming a board member.

## **Guilt**

Sometimes people worry that they are being disrespectful to the pet they have lost if they think of taking on a new one, which can cause feelings of guilt. If you feel this way, know that nothing can diminish the special connection you had with your beloved pet and consider what a good thing you would be doing by offering another animal in need of a loving forever home.

## **Finding and forming a bond with a new pet**

Although sometimes a new pet just seems to turn up and it feels like it was ‘meant to be’, generally it is best to take your time and wait for the one that feels just right for you. People often say, ‘I just knew she was the right one as soon as I saw her’, when they find their next forever companion. Even so, there is likely to be a period of adjustment as you get used to a new pet. Do not worry if the initial period does not go as smoothly as you had anticipated. Try not to compare them to the one you have loved and lost. This is a crucial time for a new pet so just focus on giving them the care they need and allow them to settle in, in their own time.

## **Planning for unexpected eventualities in the future**

Some pets can be particularly long-lived, such as parrots, tortoises and equines. You can put plans in place if you are concerned about your new companion possibly outliving you, or if you are worried about what would happen to them should you no longer be able to care for them for any reason in the future. Some charities have a scheme which allows you to sign the animal over to them in an emergency, if you cannot continue their care for personal health reasons or if you die before the pet. Difficult as it may be to think about such issues, especially when you are young, having a back-up strategy will give you peace of mind and ensure that your pet’s future is as secure as possible.

In conclusion, remember that you do not have to rush this and by listening to your inner voice, you will know if and when it is time to open up your heart and home to another pet. It is a personal choice and only you really know what is right for you. But be open to change your mind from ‘never again’ to ‘I’m ready to love again’.