

## Growth from Grief: Recovery from the Death of an Animal

People experience the death of a companion animal in unique ways. This model is a guide: some people progress through grief in this order, while others move back and forth from phase to phase or even skip a phase at some point in the process.

### **The initial awareness of loss phase**

This early phase is also called “anticipatory grief”. People realize that their present circumstances hold the potential for the loss of their animals and, even before their animal dies, they begin to display symptoms of grief.

### **The coping with loss phase**

In this phase, death is imminent and people are faced with making difficult decisions about facilitating or otherwise supporting the dying process.

### **The saying goodbye phase**

In this phase, people say goodbye to their animal in a variety of ways. Some choose to say goodbye before, during and/or after euthanasia, while some prefer to not be present at euthanasia but to view the body afterwards. It is not uncommon to feel stuck in this phase of grief. Many believe that once they say goodbye, they will forget their animals and lose the special feelings they had for them. This is also the phase of burials, cremations, commemorative rituals, and memorial ceremonies. Ceremonies and rituals are often a very helpful and meaningful way to pay tribute to the bond you shared with your animal.

### **The painful awareness of loss phase**

In this phase, people experience the full extent of grief: depression, loneliness, guilt, self-neglect. The adjustments they must make in their daily routines due to their animal’s death trigger feelings of grief over and over again. This is the time that the reality of loss sets in. It is normal for people to need extra support from their friends, family, veterinary professionals, or human service professionals at this time.

### **The recovering from loss phase**

In this phase, people redefine their relationship with their deceased animals and find themselves able to talk about their animal without feeling intense pain and sadness. It becomes easier to remember the good times and the special characteristics that made their animal unique. Some people may also feel comfortable investing in a new companion animal relationship during this phase.

### **The personal growth through grief phase**

In this phase, people find meaning in their animal’s death. They report a lesson learned or an attitude changed due to their experience with loss. People often feel they have grown emotionally and measure their personal development in terms of their recovery from the loss. At this point, people may also be able to have a new animal in their lives without feeling disloyal to the one who died.

This model was originally adapted from John Schneider’s book, *Stress, Loss and Grief* (1984) by Laurel Lagoni, M.S. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D. (additional revisions by the University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center). Taken from *Coping with the Loss of Your Companion Animal* 2012 Edition from University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center.