

Name

**It Was Just a Cat**

***by Sherry Williams White***

When your family or companion pet dies there can be overwhelming feelings of pain and loss. You are grieving. But few people recognize the death of a pet as a very real loss. Many people even say things like, “it’s just a dog” or “just a cat,” “you can get another one.” Little do they know how they are diminishing the strong feelings you have for this “little or big” creature that has loved you and your family unconditionally.

A pet is taken into a home as a family friend, companion or mascot. The pet loves you and your family members and asks for nothing in return except food, water, a little recognition, and playtime every now and then. That pet is happy to see you come home and greets you eagerly, wagging its tail and kissing whoever will allow it. You can tell this little creature all of your secrets and never worry that your confidence will be broken. Your pet is there when you are down, and playing with you when you are excited and happy. Your pet loves you in a way that is indescribable.

Today, pets are integrated into family life, support services and health care in such a way that immense feelings of loss and pain are felt when they die. Pets are being used to teach physically challenged children balance and coordination. Pets also teach children how to love, experience joy, and set priorities. They may also give kids their first real experience with death and grief.

In addition to seeing-eye dogs, pets are being used as companions and aids. Dogs are being trained to help invalid people open doors, get different items in the house, and hear doorbells and phones. Pets are also being used in senior centers for therapy. Pets are known to lower blood pressure and keep the elderly more alert and motivated.

For families, the pet has become an extension of their unit, providing a mutual interest for the entire family. They provide laughs, exercise, and the experience of nurturing, love and companionship.

Knowing all of this about pets, never let anyone tell you that “it’s just a pet” if your pet dies. Your pet has become a significant part of your family and who you are. Your feelings of loss and grief are very real. Don’t ever feel embarrassed or afraid to acknowledge them. You are grieving.

Grief is a physical, social, emotional, psychological and spiritual reaction to loss. It is natural, normal and necessary.

When you are grieving, you may feel tired, unable to sleep, or want to sleep most of the time. Grief can alter your appetite. You may feel hungry or you may not want to eat at all. Grief may cause anxiety. You may feel as though your heart is racing and you can’t catch your breath. You might feel worried and excited at the same time. You may feel like doing nothing or you might feel empty and hollow inside. It might be hard to concentrate or to remember things. Grief can make you feel helpless, angry and frightened.  **What can you do?**
Recognize and acknowledge that your grief is real. Do not be afraid of the intensity of your pain. You may experience a wide range of feelings and feel confused. Write about it or talk about it with someone who will listen and hear your pain. You may want to create a journal or scrapbook about you, your family and your pet. This can be a personal project just for you or a family project that is shared by everyone.

Have compassion for yourself and don’t allow others to diminish your feelings. Grieving takes time.

Honor your pet with a special funeral or burial service. It can be a private ceremony with your family and friends. Today, there are even pet funeral homes. If there isn’t a pet funeral home or cemetery in your area, you can bury your pet in a special place in your yard. You can create or buy a special marker for your pet’s grave.

Many owners choose to have their pets cremated. If this is your choice, you can still have a memorial service.

You may choose to bury the cremated remains or scatter them in a special place. If you choose to bury the remains, there are a wide variety of pet urns available. If you do not have a pet cemetery or funeral center, check with your local funeral director.

You might consider purchasing a sand-cast replica of your pet and place it on the mantel or on a bookcase. Many times, people have made photo groupings of their pet with different members of the family to accompany these statues.

You can also consider creating a rock garden in memory of your pet. You can purchase garden stones and have the name of your pet engraved on it. Put it in a garden of flowers or bushes in memory of your pet.

Children love to create memory boxes. They can use a shoebox, decorate it, and fill it with special things that remind them of their pet: a photo, a special toy, the pet’s leash, collar, or dog tags. They may choose to write a poem or story about the pet and keep it in this box.

You can make a donation to a pet rescue group or your humane society or animal shelter in your pet’s name. You may even choose to donate any dog food or dog bones you have left in your pantry to these groups or consider making a gift bag of dog bones and toys for the dog next door.

Don’t rush out and buy a new pet. It can take a while to sort out your feelings, and your pet deserves to be grieved. Your old pet needs to be buried in the memories of your heart. A new pet cannot replace your old pet but it can help ease the pain. Trust yourself; you will know when it is right to buy a new pet.

Remember, what you are feeling is very real grief. You do not have to apologize for your feelings or be ashamed they feel so intense. We grieve because we love, so don’t let anyone rob you of that love or the need to honor it.