



Grieving Dog

One of the things that we love most about our dogs is their ability to form deep bonds with each other, as well as with us. However, the downside of this suggests that they can experience grief as a result of being separated from a family member – whether human, dog or even other species – with whom they have developed an extra special connection.

Grief can often be seen in households with more than one dog, or pet. When one animal dies, other surviving pets may become 'clingy', be more sensitive to things going on around them, might appear anxious or depressed, even losing interest in playing, sleeping, or eating. These changes may be a temporary response to the loss of their friend, a response to their owners' sadness, or a response to changes of routine and no longer being able to interact with their friend.

However, as these types of behavioural changes might also relate to an underlying medical condition, it is always important to consult your vet following any sudden change in your dog's behaviour.

How you can help your grieving dog

Although experts are still undecided as to whether dogs can experience true grief and understand the permanence of death, we know that they experience distress related to being separated from their close friend. We can't expect them to be able to cope with this – we know how hard it is for us! – but there are lots of things we can do to help make this difficult time of transition as gentle as possible for them!

You will need to factor in how you are coping with having your bereft pet's things remaining present in your home, as these might very difficult for you to see every day while you are coming to terms with your loss, however be aware that if your grieving pet still seems interested in and attached to the items that were often used by their bereft friend, then suddenly removing things like beds and blankets might make them panic. All dogs will respond differently so take care to observe how your grieving pet is behaving – as for some dogs having their old friend's things lying about without them might add to anxiety, but for others these might provide comfort. There's no right or wrong time to remove any unused items from your home, it will all depend on how you and your surviving pets are managing.

If you have more than one surviving pet, watch for changes in their relationships. The pet you are all mourning might have provided a great deal of daily support for a surviving pet, especially if they are naturally shy for example, so now they might appear to have lost confidence without their friend to help them out. It helps to bear in mind that your surviving pets now have to work

out how to live without their old friend. They might feel extra vulnerable during this transitional period as they now only have each other to rely on.

For the most part, allow them to work out their own relationships but if changes concern you or you see any signs of aggression then please contact your vet about referral to a qualified behaviourist for additional guidance.

Remaining animals may begin to show signs of separation distress. These behaviours include panting, pacing, whining, drooling, howling, barking, and not eating treats while alone, or even refusing food entirely in some cases. This can be very distressing for owners too, because owners might feel helpless to help their existing pets, while also still grieving themselves. Seeking professional help will be useful. Your vet will be able to refer you to a qualified behaviourist for support, but in the short term try not to leave your pets alone.

Video can help you to monitor your dog's behaviour when they are alone. Consider sourcing a camera set-up (there are many available, including mobile phone and tablet Apps) to be able to see how your pets are coping when you are not present. Set it up in a safe position where your dog will be unable to interfere with it. Again, if changes are worrying or persistent then please contact your vet about referral to a qualified behaviourist for additional advice.

Exercise can be an excellent stress reliever for dogs. It can also be a helpful tool in managing your grief. Visiting both familiar – to give confidence – and new – to encourage curiosity – places might reignite your dog's energy and provide a nice distraction for you both. Take care to let your dog explore at their own pace, and if they do just want to go home then that's fine, calmly take them home and try a little closer to home to begin with.

Try to keep to your normal routines as much as possible as predictability can help dogs cope with changes. Try not to change the way you interact with your surviving pets. Dogs have shown certain aspects of empathy and are likely to become more anxious if they sense your grief as well.

Avoid punishing your dog for any 'annoying' behaviour they might have started, as this increases levels of anxiety and fear, and can lead to aggression. Instead, reward positive behaviours and ignore unwanted behaviours. Interrupt any behaviours that you can't ignore by asking for an alternative behaviour, if your dog already knows what to do when asked or redirect your dog into a more appropriate activity.

A new dog may not help your surviving dog feel any better and may actually make them feel more anxious as further changes to the family can be stressful. It might be something you wish to consider longer-term, however taking your time and not rushing means you'll get this timing right for your whole family.

Seeing your beloved pets struggling at any time in their lives can be incredibly emotional and upsetting for owners, let alone at a time when you're going through the same experience. Making sure you talk to friends and family about how you're feeling and the situation can be helpful, as well as letting a daily pattern or routine keep you focusing on your pets and feeling you are helping them as best you can.

Dogs Trust provide lifelong behavioural support for all our adopted dogs.

If you need help for your Dogs Trust Dog please email: reception@dogstrust.ie

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