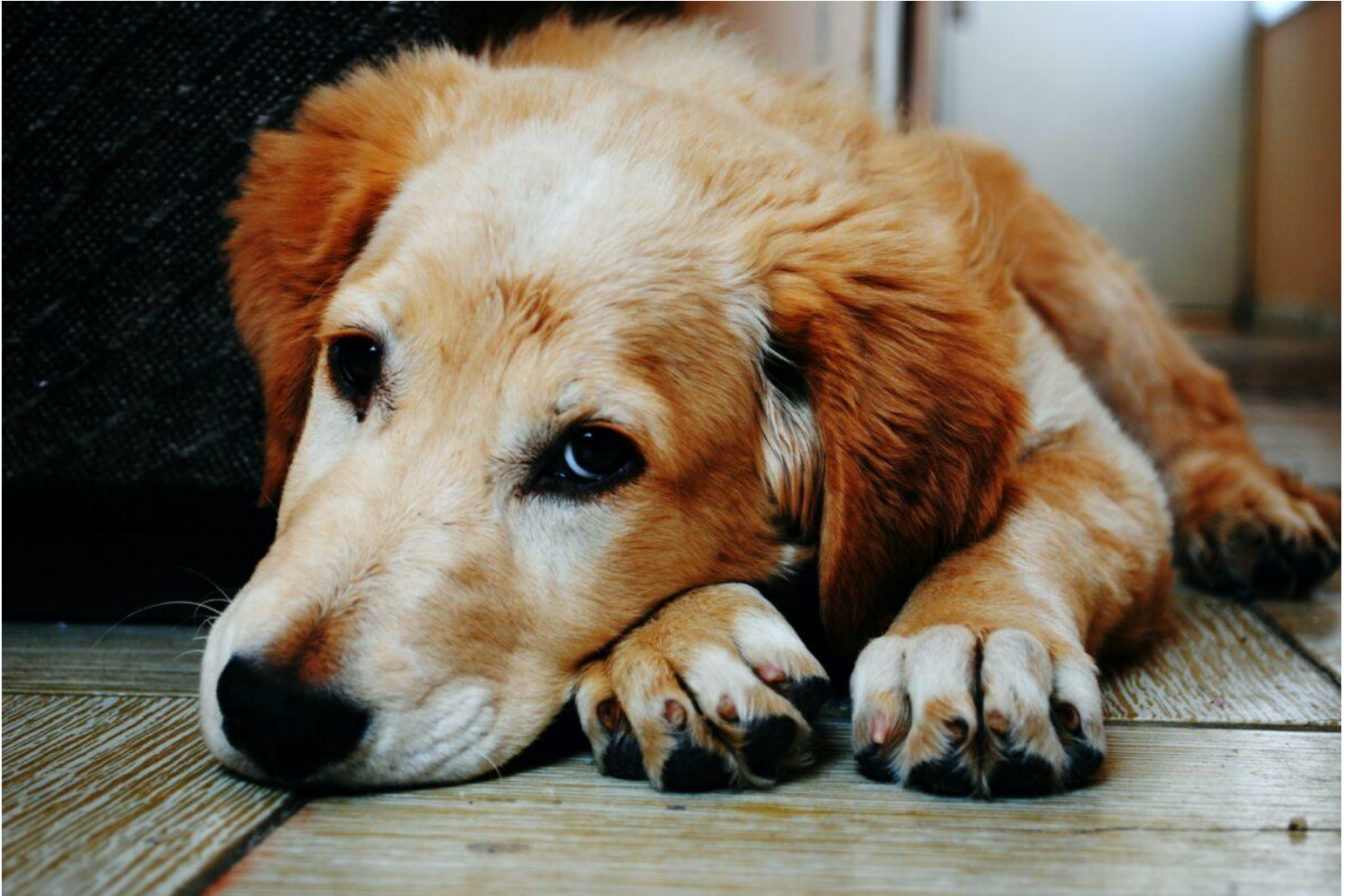


# Why the Loss of a Pet Is So Challenging & Tips for Coping With Grief



By Jen Reeder

The death of a beloved pet is excruciating. With their shorter lifespans, it's also, unfortunately, an inevitability.

Therapist Susan Anschuetz, LMFT, co-founder of the Denver-based nonprofit [Human Animal Bond Trust](#), has led free weekly pet loss support groups for more than 30 years.

“There’s hardly a week that goes by where someone doesn’t say, ‘I was close to my family. When my parents died, it was terrible. But I’ve never felt a loss like this,’” she said.

Usually people bring photos of their pets and meet in person to share their stories, though the meetings are currently online due to the pandemic. Anschuetz said many find comfort in knowing they’re not alone, their grief is normal.

### **Why Pet Loss Hurts**

“One reason why losing a pet is such a deep loss is because animals’ love is so unconditional and accepting,” she said. But it’s also because so many aspects of people’s lives are impacted. “Every single facet of life is part of the loss,” she explained. “Your cat or dog will sit in the bathroom with you while you take a bath, they’re there 24/7. When we are caretakers for animals, it multiplies the intensity just before they die. It’s like your whole life has been shredded.”

Our pets often have seen us through major life changes, from divorce or illness to starting a new school or job, so the relationship can be devastating to lose.

### **Ways to Cope With Grief**

Although pet lovers can relate to the heartbreak, grieving the loss of a pet, as opposed to a human, is still a disenfranchised grief in today’s society. Comments like “It’s just a dog,” or “Are you going to get another cat?” can feel hurtful and isolating. “Many who come to the group are people who had this once-in-a-lifetime special bond,” Anschuetz said. “They don’t want to hear about getting another pet. And they shouldn’t until their grief process is done.”

Some people draw comfort in finding ways to memorialize their loss, like scattering their pet's ashes on a favorite hiking trail or burying them in a meaningful place. Others host a service to honor their loved one.

Additional options include the following:

- Go through photos and create an album or enlarge and frame favorite pet pictures
  - Plant a memorial tree
  - Make a donation to a pet charity in their name
- Find and use resources, including pet loss support groups and the online chatrooms of the nonprofit [Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement](#). Your veterinarian might offer or be able to refer you to local groups.

### **The Added Weight of Euthanasia**

Anschuetz said people in each pet loss support group discuss feelings of guilt for having to euthanize a pet. Often they are upset because they felt uncertain about when it was time to let go. "It's a really heavy responsibility, but it can be such a gift to the animal," she said.

Alternately, sometimes those who cared for an ailing pet for years feel guilty for feeling some relief at their death or having moments in which they briefly feel better.

Anschuetz, who has lost many pets herself, emphasized it is okay to not be in a constant state of grief. "Grief is so variable," she said. "Take advantage of those moments when you're feeling a little bit better and then make sure that you leave yourself time to grieve, some time every day, as long as you need to.

Don't run away from it."

Perhaps most importantly, remember there is no single way to grieve the loss of a pet and that you're not alone. Anschuetz said her goal is to help people move through grief to grow into a richer capacity to love, rather than diminish into a lesser capacity to love because of fear of loss and pain. "We're all in this together," she said.

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