

FROM CHAPTER 8

WHEN LOVE HURTS

Sometimes there is nothing we can do; their body wears out, runs off, flies away, gets hurt, or is kidnapped. We ourselves may get old, sick, or disabled. We outlive most of the companion animals who grace our lives. At some point, for some reason, we must face an inevitable reality and figure out how to cope with the loss of a beloved companion animals, whose relationship that has meant so much.

Death is not a comfortable topic in our society. We avoid talking or thinking about it, as if doing so bestows immunity. Until death imposes itself, we try to pretend that it is not a part of life, ignoring the fact that none of us gets out alive.

Experts from various pertinent fields now realize that people experience the same symptoms of grief when their companion animal dies as they do when a close family member or friend dies. Sometimes more. And why not? Companion animals are considered family members with distinct roles, most related to emotional and social support. Consequently, they are sorely missed when they die or disappear, and their deaths cause great grief.

The depth of the grief is directly related to the meaning the animal had in our lives. Grief reactions may vary widely, even within a family, depending on the animal's age, the magnitude of the relationship, and how the animal died or disappeared.

The grief and the associated emotions are real, and we suffer deeply. Yet, this is the time when people with companion animals are most alone. Although the grief is “legitimate and justified,” our culture provides no acceptable way to grieve on these occasions. Our feelings are frequently trivialized by our friends, extended family, as well as therapists. Everyone understands how difficult it is to cope when a person you love dies, but when an animal you love dies, few people understand. Even veterinarians, to whom we might naturally turn, often underestimate the enormity of the grief. Consequently we are reluctant to share our grief for fear of being criticized or rejected.