



## The Experience of Loss . . .

Cara Fernandez

Death is a difficult, but unavoidable fact of life for all living things. What makes it even tougher is that the topic of dying and death is something of a taboo in our society. It is an uncomfortable subject to discuss and a heart wrenching event to deal with when it happens in your world. When the event involves a human loved one, we frequently feel confused, isolated and alone in our experience of loss. Many of us experience these same emotions on the death of a companion animal. Many times our animal companions are more of a constant or consistent presence in our lives than even the humans we love. With our animal companions the experience of loss may be even further intensified because we literally have to make the decision to end the life of an entity that is so incredibly precious to us.

There are characteristics of humans that really are universal. It doesn't matter what your religious beliefs are, your heritage, geographical identity or your IQ. It doesn't even matter if we are talking about a person living today or 500 years BC. When we experience loss, and loss is trauma, there are emotional phases that a vast majority of us go through. Now, that sounds simple doesn't it? I wish it was. Just as each of us is an incredibly complex and unique being, each of our experiences with this process is complex and unique. The cycle of loss not only impacts our world during and after the actual death of a companion, but often before. If you were fortunate to have your companion animal for a long time and shared years of life together or if you were in the difficult position of having an ill or injured companion, these phases will be familiar features in your life well before actual death occurs. The stages of grieving or the components of the cycle of loss are generally outlined in 5 phases.

### Denial

Just as the body goes into physical shock as the result of trauma, denial is a psychological reaction to emotional trauma. Just as a physical shock is an innate survival response, denial is an emotional survival response. Just as the body can decrease non-essential systems and beef up others to mask pain, emotionally we do something very similar. Denial is related to our survival trait of fight or flight. Flight is a form of avoidance, which is another way of looking at denial. Usually this is at the time of loss, when a terminal diagnosis is learned or existing issues such as aging become more acute. It's only human to try to avoid something that hurts us.



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Now, here's the tricky part, denial may also take the form of dealing very matter-of-factly with the situation or the death. The reality of loss is absolute; however, the emotional impact of loss is controlled or hidden. This can be helpful when there are "things" that need to be taken care of or others involved are, well, breaking down. But it needs to be of short duration. Sadly, when denial takes this form, there are times that we see this as emotional strength. I am not trying to be sexist, but this trait tends to be promoted and expected in the human male. Honestly, it is simply not fair and it is not healthy. If there was an emotional bond, there is an emotional impact. When something hurts, we need to allow it to hurt and not view it as a weakness. When you lose something precious, it is OK to grieve, no matter who you are or what is expected of you. Denial can also take the form of, well, denial fantasies. Mine have included "the lab tests were wrong and he's fine", "it has just been a horrible dream and when I walk in she's gonna be there". As long as these don't become obsessive and you know what reality is, these are normal and you are fine.

### Bargaining

Bargaining is the world of "what if" scenarios, "if only" fantasies. This is the period in your life when you desperately want to change the reality of the situation. It is also a period where you tend to beat yourself up with the "vision of hindsight". Some of this is totally natural and seems to be an emotional requirement when something traumatic happens. The only problem is that things do happen. There are times that nothing can be done to prevent them from occurring or there is nothing that can be done to change them once they have. If the "curse of hind sight" is focused on you or someone you care about, remember that good, loving and totally wonderful people usually cannot predict the future, cannot change fate, can make mistakes and that sometimes things just happen. If you get stuck in this phase it can lead to intense feelings of anger, guilt and depression. Please, be careful with yourself during this period. I know that this will sound a little moronic, but if you are at the center of the "if only" fantasies, give yourself the same compassion and consideration that you would give to someone you dearly love if placed in the same situation. You know the saying about "death and taxes", in my experiences taxes have been a lot more open to negotiation.



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### Anger

Anger is a natural response to something that hurts us. When we are physically injured, there is a primal instinct right underneath the surface saying “hurt what hurt us”. It’s a part of the fight or flight response, you guessed it, it’s the fight part. Anger is simply an emotion we experience when we have been hurt, when we feel threatened or powerless. Anger is a way of placing focus or blame on something or someone for the pain we experience. Again, it is natural, but be careful. It is OK to be really angry at the jerk speeding down the road who ran over your cat, it’s OK to be mad at Billy for leaving the gate open, it’s OK to be mad at the vet because there had to be more that could have been done, it’s OK to be mad at yourself because it happened and it is even OK to be mad at him or her for dying. The problem with anger is that we tend to dwell on things until they consume us. Anger in one area of our life tends to generalize and spread to other areas. With anger, you have to take a hard look at what you are really angry about and why. If the focus is actually something rational, something that you can and should do something about, then do it. Work with your municipality to get speed bumps on your road, get self-latching gates, talk to your vet. These things won’t change what happened, nothing can, but you can channel the anger into something constructive. AND when those crazy thoughts pop into your head (like running over the guy that hit your cat or never letting Billy touch any gate, ever, again!) let them go. Anger is like an infectious cancer; don’t allow it to get you or the ones you love.

### Despair:

Simply put, despair is depression, and depression is often described as anger turned inward. It is when the grey veil of hopelessness or helplessness descends. Your companion is gone. Part of your family is missing. These are times when you feel how lonely your home is without them and how empty your life feels with them gone. In your mind you may replay the last days or minutes over and over. You may beat yourself down with the things you wish you could have done differently or how unfair life can be. Let the tears flow, for a while. When despair hits, we are focused in our own loss and pain. Sometimes so deeply focused that we forget why this being was so precious and that we were blessed, even if just for a short time, to have had them in our world. With something so precious, we owe it to ourselves and to them to celebrate their life. When you feel yourself bottoming out, when the pain is all consuming,



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force yourself to remember what your companion brought into your world and reminded you of every day of their life. First, that life is in the here and now, and meant to be lived with a childlike wonder. Secondly, that you were loved, no matter what.

This will be difficult, but change hats for a little bit. Think about what you would want from those who you love upon your own death. You would want to be remembered, you would want some tears shed, you would want their memory of you to focus on love, the good times, the cherished moments. You would probably not want them to pine away. When you make a precious impact on another life, you become a part of their world. You continue to be a part of their lives, as well as the lives they touch. In a real sense, it's a type of immortality. Now, credit your companion animal with this same type of wish for you. Carry them near and dear in your heart. When you think that you can't stop crying or the pain of loss is intensely raw, go back in time and remember the day your companion came into your world and what you felt. With each tear that falls or each ache in your heart, force yourself to remember something beautiful, or silly, or warm, or tender about your companion. When you start to smile through the memories, and you will, simply tell them that they are loved and missed. Help yourself to start learning to live with the beautiful memories and the part of them that will always be a part of you. This is all that they had to leave you with and there can be no more beautiful a gift.

### Acceptance

There is simply no better or more beautiful way to describe or explain acceptance than this quote from Rita Mae Brown:

"I still miss those I loved who are no longer with me, but I find I'm grateful I loved them.

The gratitude has finally conquered the loss."

Acceptance is a place you come to emotionally where you miss them and you wish they were still beside you. It is the place where you allow the memories to bring a smile rather than a tear.

### The Tough Part

Now, here is the tough part about this. As the phrases "cycle of loss" or "stages of grieving" infer, this is a process. I wish that I could tell you that the process will occur in some exact sequence and it will progress in some specific time frame..... Well, it does not work that way.

Depending on your personality, your unique situation and your life experiences, some of the



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phases may be minor and fleeting while others may be strong and consuming, or something in between. A very important characteristic of this process is that these phases are usually reoccurring. Honestly, in time, the intensity of “denial”, “bargaining”, “anger” and “despair” will diminish, and acceptance will dominate the loss experience. After buying Puma’s same cat food for 21 years, I found myself loading up the old grocery cart weeks after he had died. When I realized what I was doing, the tears started (OK, and I probably talked to myself a little). What happened after that, in the pet food isle, was nothing short of wonderful. With the empathy of one fellow pet food isle shopper, and others soon joining in, well, there was an impromptu gathering of kindred hearts. Just be as patient and kind with yourself as you would be, on your best day, with another.

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