

Tips for Helping Pet Families with Grief

Before, During, and After the Euthanasia Visit

- Refer to pet by name whenever referencing them.
- If there's an alternate entrance and exit to the clinic, offer it to the family so they can avoid the lobby.
- Consider all your words. Instead of saying, "Do you know what you want to do with the body," try saying "have you thought about cremation arrangements yet?"
- When the family schedules the euthanasia appointment, give them the option to prepay so they don't have to deal with it on the day of the appointment.
- Put a sign in the lobby requesting low voices.
- Have a "Quiet please!" sign on the door that leads to treatment so all staff have a visual reminder to avoid laughing or being loud near the room.
- Be sure a room is ready before the family arrives.
- Escort the family and pet into the room.
- Talk to their pet and show extra love.
- Acknowledge all that they have done for their pet.
- Let them know what to expect in the appointment. Sit with them while explaining to make it more personal.
- Get comfortable with sitting in silence and crying.
- If appropriate, offer a sincere hug or small physical touch (like a hand on shoulder).
- Offer the family a handout on understanding common grief reactions. Here is a great resource for grief: <https://refugeingrief.com/grief-resources>
- Let them know they don't have to, nor should they, go through this alone. There IS support out there. Lap of Love offers free pet loss support services. Learn more at: LapofLove.com/Our-Services/Pet-Loss-Support
- When the family is leaving the clinic, all staff members should avoid saying, "have a good day." Remember what they are going through and instead say, "take good care" or something similar.
- If the family hasn't prepaid for the appointment, allow them to check out in the room rather than in the lobby.
- Establish guidelines for what staff should say when telling families their pet's ashes have been returned. Suggestion: "Just letting you know that Max is back at the office and his ashes will be safe here until you're ready to pick them up."
- When the family arrives to pick up the ashes, avoid making them wait, if possible.
- Be prepared for follow-up questions in days/weeks after the appointment.

Simply Acknowledge Their Grief

- If a family has received a tough diagnosis, a simple, sincere thought like, "We'll be here and be thinking about you," is meaningful.
- If you don't know what to say, that is okay. "I wish I could find the words to ease your mind and your pain," or "I know it's so hard to say goodbye."
- Be prepared for follow-up questions in the days/ weeks that follow.

Platitudes vs Genuine Support

Avoid platitudes such as:

- You can get another cat/dog
- You'll get over it
- He/she is in a better place
- Be grateful for the time you've had

Instead use statements of genuine support, such as:

- He was one of a kind and we loved him, too
- She was so lucky to have such a loving home and I know you were lucky to have such a wonderful friend, too
- It's clear how loved she was and always will be
- I'm sending you warmth and heart space through this heartbreak
- Remember that just like love, your grief deserves to be nurtured in whatever way feels right to you

Tips for Helping Veterinary Professionals with Grief

How to care for your own grief after saying goodbye to patients you care about

- Talk about the pet who has passed. Surveys overwhelmingly show that people DO want to talk about their loved ones. The fear of not bringing it up to avoid a trigger of grief is a fallacy. The grief is there either way. To know their pet touched the lives of others will mean so much to them.
- If you are sad or grieving, it's okay to share that with the pet parent. You don't want to take away from their loss, but that sense of connection can help them feel less alone and show them that you genuinely care. Vulnerability is humanizing.
- If it feels right, do something in their honor.
- Have a place in the clinic where you can honor the memory of those you've said goodbye to (like a memorial whiteboard) with the name of anyone who has passed (in the last week or month) on it. This also helps keep everyone in the clinic informed.
- Send out a monthly or quarterly newsletter or email recognizing all the patients who both recovered and passed away. Include names and something memorable about them.
- Remember, death is not a failure. It's the natural progression of life.