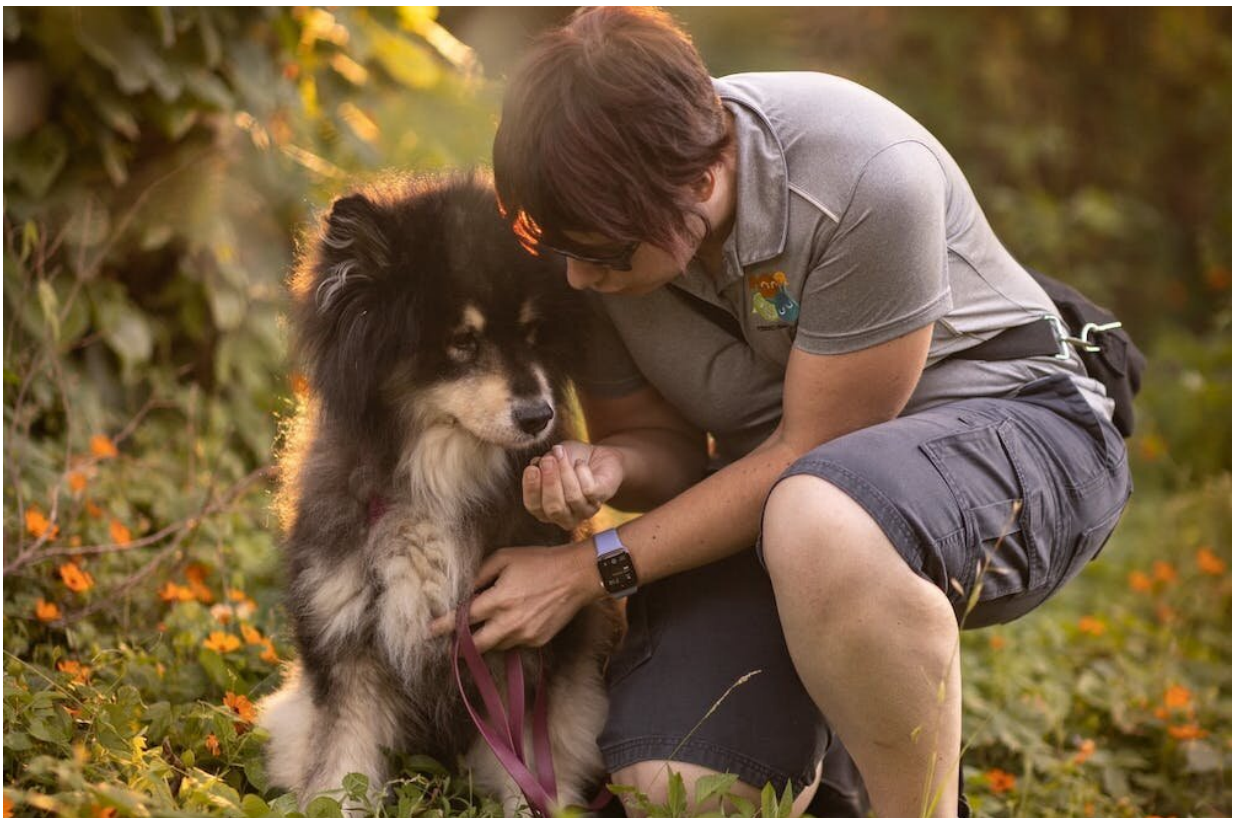


# Profound grief for a pet is normal—how to help yourself or a friend weather the loss of a beloved family member

November 25 2022, by Melissa Starling

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The author, Melissa Starling, with Kivi. Credit: Melissa Starling, Author provided

It's been three weeks since my partner and I lost our beloved 14.5-year-

old dog, Kivi Tarro. It's impossible to describe what Kivi meant to us, or put words to how his death has affected us.

As I am still working through what life without Kivi means, there's perhaps no better time to examine how [grief](#) impacts those who have lost an animal. This is also what a [new review](#) of scientific literature, published today, explores.

The review aims to give counsellors perspective into how to help people grieving the death of a pet. The authors highlight that the bond between humans and animals can be extremely similar to that between two humans, and so the loss can be just as profound.

There is a tendency, however, for society to [invalidate that grief](#). This can leave people isolated and feeling ashamed or unable to express their grief, which can increase the intensity of grief and inhibit resolution.

The authors' advice for counsellors is to step away from their own biases and acknowledge that the human-animal bond can be deep and complex. Indeed, in some cases, animals have taken on roles of emotional and [social support](#) usually reserved for fellow humans.

As we come to better understand grief associated with the loss of an animal, more specific guidelines for counselling may occur. For now, it's important to recognise that the loss of an animal can be every bit as painful as the loss of a human, and the grief experienced is similar.

Here I outline a few ways to help you weather their death, and to help a grieving friend.

## **Losing a pet hurts**

Anyone who has loved an animal companion knows losing a pet hurts.

Every relationship we forge with an animal is unique, and they become tightly woven into our existence.

To lose such a friend is not just to have sudden hole where they used to be. There are constant reminders of time spent together, threads in the tapestry of daily life left ragged and loose.

Everywhere we go with our other two dogs evokes memories of Kivi. So too do daily routines that frequently include our dogs.

Grief is an emotion associated with a sense of loss, a feeling of emptiness when something important to us is gone. It is considered normal to grieve the loss of a relative or close human friend. But as the review notes, there are many kinds of grief, some especially relevant to pet owners.

Kivi's decline was slow and we experienced [ambiguous loss](#) and anticipatory grief as we were forced to cross off one previously loved activity after another that he could no longer do with us as he aged.

We agonised over his quality of life and second-guessed ourselves, as we knew the time was coming and feared making the decision too early or too late. This process can lead many pet owners to experience responsibility grief, where they may feel guilt for not having done enough to extend the time they had with their pet.

[Disenfranchised grief](#) is where a person experiences a significant loss, but society does not acknowledge it as valid and worthy of social support. Society may view pets as "just an animal", and therefore not a worthy or appropriate cause of grief.

This can make people feel ashamed or guilty for the effect losing a companion animal has on them, and strive to conceal it or move on

without resolving it.

## How to weather the loss of your animal friend

Grief is a very personal journey and no one can tell you how you should or shouldn't experience it. Here are some things to remember:

- embrace the grief. I found peace in accepting that I would be heartbroken and letting myself exist in that place
- grieve in whatever way comes naturally, for as long as it feels right to. Everybody grieves differently and it takes as long as it takes, whether that be weeks or years
- seek support from your social network. The review emphasises the importance of social support. If friends or relatives don't seem to understand, reach out to other animal lovers. Perhaps seek out an animal bereavement group online
- find ways to honour your pet's memory. The review suggests writing a letter to them and a letter from them back to you. Or you could create something that expresses your feelings for them, hold a memorial, or perform a ceremony or ritual
- mind your other animals. [Some animals](#) barely seem to notice when their housemate disappears while others may show signs of grieving themselves, such as reduced eating or increased fearfulness. Their distress is real as well, and you should speak to your veterinarian if it persists for more than a few days or is extreme.

Our two younger dogs did not look for Kivi at all and we were glad we

hadn't included them when we said goodbye to him. Our distress would have affected them more than Kivi's passing

- seek professional help if you are struggling. This IS grief, and professional psychologists and counsellors are trained to help.

## **How to support someone grieving their pet**

If you have a friend or relative who has recently lost an animal, here are some tips for being a positive and helpful presence:

- acknowledge and validate their pain and grief. You don't have to understand it to believe in it
- sharing your own experiences of loss can show people you understand, but it may also make someone feel more isolated because their experiences are different. Step carefully and keep the focus on them
- send a card, a gift or a message. I did not have the emotional bandwidth to respond to all of the heartfelt messages I received when Kivi died, but I appreciated every one of them. It meant a lot to know my grief was recognised and my social circle knew I was heartbroken. I particularly appreciated other people sharing their memories of Kivi
- maintain your support without judgement. It takes some people years to recover from such a loss, and that's okay. Society may have expectations for how long grief of an animal should take, but the review points to research that shows the stronger the bond between a human and an animal, the more intense their grief at losing it.

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