Paws2Walk – Dorset



Health, Welfare, First Aid & Saying Goodbye

Time spent enjoying our companion animals and the important trusting relationships we build with them means we rarely think about the challenges if they are or become unwell. Of course our aim as pet guardians is to build lasting loving and happy memories of our beloved pets. These are often constructed from the numerous hour’s days and years of joyful experiences.

Below is information intended to help us all maintain our pets in great health and wellbeing and what to consider if first aid is required. If in the unfortunate and sad event that we are parted temporarily or permanently from our friends through loss and straying or due to their demise there is some guidance on what to do and how to cope. It is not an exhaustive account but may help in assisting us as owners to take our first step amid the many questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’. Remember also that if you are worried about the health of your pet contact your vet immediately for clinical assessment, advice, treatment and support.

**Health and Welfare**:

* Most animals when healthy will have shiny glossy coats without any signs of balding/thinning patches or matting knots. Their skin should normally be free of parasitic mites, fleas, tics or skin irritations, wounds, sores, scabbing, growths, swelling or scaling caused by infections, infestations, injuries or lesions. Their fur, and in particular, their tail ends should be clean because most well and able bodied animals take great care with their personal hygiene. Some aging pets may have difficulty grooming, so look out for the tell tale signs as they may need that extra bit of help to keep clean. Long haired animals will need regular brushing to avoid knots and mattes which can lead to skin infections. Tics can be a particular problem as certain tics are related to Lyme disease.
* Most animals when well are alert and interested or curious of their surroundings and environment. When animals seem guarded, withdrawn, isolating themselves from other animals or humans it is often a sign of concern. Monitoring your pets behavior can help to identify the first signs of illness or injury.
* Almost all animals when well will have bright clear eyes. Eyes that are closed, swollen, semi closed weeping, dull, inflamed or show signs of green/yellow discharge, pus or sticky eye will need swift attention. Eyes infections and injury can cause great pain and suffering and need urgent treatment. Animals can suffer from foreign body injury to the delicate area of the eye. Cat fights, claw injuries and conditions like entropion can lead to complications. Entropion usually causes an uncomfortable watery eye because the lashes irritate the front of the eye (cornea). It is a genetic condition in which a portion of the eyelid is inverted or folded inward against the eyeball.
* Ears should be clean and there should be no evidence of unpleasant odor or discharge, including brownish or blood stained discharge. The ear should appear clean apart from natural wax and should be without odor. When an odor is present it usually indicates infection. Animals may seem pre-occupied with scratching, cleaning/rubbing of the ear or shaking their head. This is most common from a mite infestation of the ear or if there is a grass seed or other foreign body lodged in the ear canal. Signs of infection are increased temperature, localized heat, redness, swelling and irritation.
* Oral cavity – domesticated pets can suffer from teeth and gum problems. The pigment of gums in animals is most likely to be pink or black. If animals lose their appetite it may be a sign of mouth pain or tooth ache or a more systemic (illness) condition. Inflamed bleeding gums can mean infection or periodontal disease; whereas pale gums may indicate the animal has a condition known as anemia, a lack of red blood cell. If your animal has bad breath or gingivitis then a vet should see them to discuss either polish and cleanse, tooth extraction where teeth may have become rotten or infected, dietary advice or a dental hygiene plan. Some foods are manufactured and deigned to help clean the teeth of cats and dogs, otherwise there are specially formulated tooth brushes and creams. **Never** brush or treat domesticated animals’ teeth with human dental tools or toothpastes designed for humans but seek the advice of a veterinary nurse or specialist. Rabbit’s teeth continue to grow throughout their lives and should be regularly assessed and treated by the veterinary team. Their bite should be consistent so that the teeth meet to ensure they are naturally worn down through knowing and eating but a check with the vet will determine if teeth are overgrowing (malocclusion). If your rabbit is losing weight or appears to have lost their appetite teeth length and bite should be checked first to rule out overgrowth and misalignment of the bite. Most animals’ nose and nasal passage should be cool, moist and without discharge, sneezing or crusting. Specially designed dental chews and toys can be purchased to help reduce tartar build up. Your vet or a trustworthy pet store should be able to advise according to your pet and breeds needs. These toys etc should be of good quality and safe and designed for the purpose intended. Unattended teeth or oral problems may lead to abscesses which are very painful so prevention and information can save suffering, costs and complications. A dental health check by the vet means they can demonstrate how to clean teeth safely and correctly.
* Claws n Paws – should not become ingrown, too long or be cut too short or left impacted with grit/ice – wash with luke tepid/ warm water and dislodge gently with a soft brush or child’s soft toothbrush.

Apply gentle pressure to the top of the foot and cushion pad underneath. This will extend the claws.

Use appropriate cat standard nail scissors to cut off the white tip of each nail, just before the point where it begins to curve.

Take care to avoid the quick, a vein that runs into the nail. This pink area can be seen through the nail.

If you do accidentally cut into the pink area, it may lead to bleeding, seek veterinary help.

Seek veterinary treatment if you are not proficient in managing claws to prevent complications or unnecessary injuries.

**Important health tips:**

* Puppies are usually vaccinated at about 8-10 weeks, while kittens tend to be vaccinated between 9 and 12 weeks of age and rabbits from six weeks – discuss with your vet. Vaccinations in dogs include canine parvovirus, canine distemper virus, Leptospirosis , Infectious canine hepatitis. For cats, vaccinations include feline infectious enteritis, feline herpes virus, feline calcivirus, feline leukemia. Rabbits need to be vaccinated against myxomatosis, viral haemorrhagic virus. Some vaccinations are followed up after many months as part of their expectations.
* Animals have a different heart rate to humans. For example a normal cat heart rate could be between 130 and 240 beats a minute, whereas a dog’s heart beat could read 100 – 150 beats a minute. Bunnies’ heart rate can register at anything between 130 – 325 per minute. Vaccines administered to dogs within the UK include inoculations for leptospirosis, hepatitis and parvo virus. Kennel cough is generally only given if a dog is being considered for kennel boarding.
* At rest, a dog’s normal respiration rate is between 12 to 25 breaths per minute. The average dog at rest takes 24 breaths per minute but can vary between breeds. Cat respirations average at between 20 – 30 per minute and rabbits between 32 – 60 resps per minute. When stressed all animals can breathe more rapidly and this can increase their heart rate too.
* Normal rectal temperature readings for dogs is 101`-102` Fahrenheit, cats 100`-103`F and rabbits 103.3` – 104`F
* Dogs and cats can be affected by worms and there are a variety of types. Dogs can suffer from Tapeworm, Roundworms and Ringworm and Ringworm is passed via spores in the animal’s general living environment. Worming tablets can help treat certain parasitic worms but vets also have other treatments available. Dogs should be wormed three monthly however vets have a range of treatments so it is worth discussing the worming plan with them first. Cats who regularly hunt prey are at greater risk of worms and again should be wormed regularly according to the instructions of the particular worming treatment used. On occasions, dogs may pull their rear along the floor which is usually a sign of constipation or blocked anal glands and these may need clearing by the vet.
* Weight is a topic of concern for both humans and animals but these days many more pets are suffering from obesity. Obesity can lead to similar problems for animals as humans including, diabetes, joint strain, heart conditions and general poor health. There are lighter prepared dried and wet foods available to help reduce and maintain a healthy weight however it is best avoided and prevented. Age, lack of exercise and overfeeding are all contributory factors. There are some medical conditions that may cause an animal’s weight to increase, or in fact decrease but these can be checked by the vet to rule out medical reasons before a weight plan is drawn up.
* Poisons. There are a variety of compounds, chemicals and noxious plants that can lead to emergencies in cats, dogs, horses and indeed small animals so it is worth getting to know the main culprits. Below is a list of such to avoid:

**Dogs:**

* Sugarless gum and sweeteners containing xylitol
* Raisins / grapes/sultanas/currents
* Vitamin D
* Chocolate - theobromine
* Rodent poisons / slug & snail pellets
* Certain insecticides/pesticides/fertilizers, bone blood meal and iron based compounds
* Human drugs including NSAID – ibuprofen, naproxen/antidepressants – Praxil, Prozac etc/human cough and cold remedies/linctus etc/amphetamines and other treatments for ADHD & ADD
* Many household detergents cleaners and polishes
* Industrial chemicals – these can be leached into rivers streams and nearby wild areas so take care

**Cats:**

* Paracetamol
* Anti-histamines
* Lilies (*Lilium spp*)
* Sago Palm (Cycas revoluta)
* Tulip daffodils and Narcissus bulbs (Tulipa and Narcissus sp.)
* Azaleas and Rhododendrons (Rhododendron sp.)
* Oleander (Nerium oleander)
* Castor Bean (Ricinus communis)
* Cyclamen (Cyclamen sp.)
* Kalanchoe (Kalanchoe sp.)
* Yew (Taxus sp.)
* Amaryllis (Amaryllis sp.)
* Autumn Crocus (Colchicum autumnale)
* Chrysanthemum (Chrysanthemum sp.)
* English Ivy (Hedera helix)
* Peace Lily (Spathiphyllum sp.)
* Pothos (Epipremnum aureum)
* Schefflera Schefflera (Brassaia actinophylla)
* Ethylene glycol –the active ingredient in [**Antifreeze**](https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/cats/health/poisoning/antifreeze) & rock salt
* Spot-on flea treatments for dogs – many contain Permethrin; poisonous to cats
* Metaldehyde - in slug/snail baits/pellets
* Decorating materials – e.g. paints, varnishes, preservatives, paint and glass cleaners can contain petroleum distillates; harmful to cats / **luminous necklaces – the main chemical used for lumination.**
* Toad toxicity
* Alcohol
* Chocolate
* Coffee, Tea, Energy Drinks
* Dairy Products
* Fat Trimmings, Raw Meat, Eggs, Fish
* Grapes and Raisins
* Onions and Garlic
* Tuna
* Xylitol
* Bones
* Certain inhalations

**Horses:**

* Acorns / ragwort / deadly nightshade / foxgloves / buttercups / yew / privet / rhododendron / sycamore /acers / maple / bracken
* Rodent poison – cholecalciferol

**General:**

* Caffeine / salt / avocados / onions garlic and chives / alcohol/ certain nuts

**Pet Poison Helpline have details on their website if you need to learn more**

[**http://www.petpoisonhelpline.com/poisons/**](http://www.petpoisonhelpline.com/poisons/)

**Other sites:**

[**https://www.pdsa.org.uk/taking-care-of-your-pet/poisons-and-hazards**](https://www.pdsa.org.uk/taking-care-of-your-pet/poisons-and-hazards)

[**https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-advice/nine-poisonous-plants-horses-should-avoid**](https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-advice/nine-poisonous-plants-horses-should-avoid)

[**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\_of\_plants\_poisonous\_to\_equines**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_plants_poisonous_to_equines)

[**https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/health/poisoning/common**](https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/health/poisoning/common)

[**https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media/605397/poisons.pdf**](https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media/605397/poisons.pdf)

[**http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/common\_household\_dangers\_pets.html?referrer=https://www.google.co.uk/**](http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/resources/tips/common_household_dangers_pets.html?referrer=https://www.google.co.uk/)

[**http://pets.webmd.com/dogs/guide/top-10-dog-poisons**](http://pets.webmd.com/dogs/guide/top-10-dog-poisons)

Animal Health Check Form

By keeping records and simple checks on your pet you are most likely to pick up on something wrong and seek early attention. Below is a checklist guide which may help to focus attention on the key health and wellbeing checks:

|  |
| --- |
| Animal’s name:  Date of check:  Animals age: |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Area checked: | Normal Expectations/concerns: | Findings: | Actions |
| Coat | Shiny, thick, glossy, clean, groomed, full thickness, no patches / check for over grooming - sign of stress |  |  |
| Skin | Clean, intact, absence of wounds, sores, infections/infestations |  |  |
| Ears | Pale, clean, clear, no odor, no swelling, redness, behavioral scratching |  |  |
| Eyes | Bright, clear, sparkly, no discharge or soreness, inflammation or excessive blinking |  |  |
| Nose | Cool, moist clear, no discharge, no sneezing |  |  |
| Mouth/gums | Pink/black, absence of redness swelling ,inflammation or bleeding/ unpleasant breath |  |  |
| Teeth | Secure, none loose, eating ok, not dropping food, absence of excessive saliva or drooling/presence of bad breath |  |  |
| Claws n paws | Check all animals for their claw length / & health of their paws |  |  |
| Stools | Normal shape size colour amount, frequency, consistency |  |  |
| Urine | How often, duration and amount, concentrated or dilute (this can vary between species) |  |  |
| Breathing | Normal according to guidelines for cat/dog etc  Resps per minute:  Rate/absence of difficulties/labored/shortness of breath, excessive salivating/panting? |  |  |
| Heart rate | Rate as per species:  Significant increase/decrease? |  |  |
| Temperature | Normal expectations in Fahrenheit for breed:  Fever / hot / shivering / cold |  |  |
| Weight | Consistent/ No excessive gaining or weight loss  Healthy weight  Weight at previous health check: |  |  |
| Gait | Normal, stable, balanced & in control. Lop sided gait, movement/willingness to move  Equal on both sides/limbs / limping, pain present? |  |  |
| Behavior | Normal for animal  Pacing, guarding  Change in behavior – unexplained aggression |  |  |
| Overall appearance | Well kept, self maintaining, self grooming, eating & drinking, enjoys play, alert and curious on walks, eager |  |  |

You may also like to read the following book:

New choices in Natural Healing for Cats and Dogs – Amy D Shojai and Editors of Prevention for Pets ISBN 1-57954-057-0

**First Aid:**

It is always best to be prepared. Make sure you have a full pet first aid kit at home and when you travel. It is advisable to carry a clean bowl for drinking water and food especially when intending to travel and always for planned and unplanned journeys. A well stocked first aid pack is likely to include the following but may need to be tailored to the species, so seek veterinary advice:

* Disposable vinyl or latex gloves to prevent cross infection and contamination
* Sterile cleaning solution like saline to wash out dirt from an open wound
* Animal cleansing wipes. These are even more useful if you run out of saline and come in good sized packs
* Gauze swabs to assist with cleansing the wound when using saline or other approved cleaning fluids
* Safe plastic tweezers for removing foreign bodies like splinters from open/superficial puncture wounds
* Non stick melolin, (avoid fibrous gauze or cotton wool) as a first contact dressing on top of the wound
* Assorted bandages and conforming bandages to cover dressings and or to help control bleeding. Remember that bandages can be applied to reduce and stop bleeding but if too tight or applied for too long can lead to complications and further problems. Conforming bandages can also be gently applied for sprains & strains.
* Medical tape to secure bandages and dressings in place – **never** use safety pins.
* Round-end scissors for cutting bandages, releasing pets from entwinement/cutting away fur from injury
* Plastic pouches to cover and protect foot injuries, these will need to be fastened with tape.
* A foil blanket to help prevent shock & to keep your pet warm/prevent further heat loss
* Spare clean towels/sheets or other blankets in case you have to treat larger wounds or swaddle them from further harm
* Digital thermometer to check animals temperature
* Emergency contact details: Your regular vet contact phone number/emergency /out of hours vet numbers, Pet ambulances and a friend or relative who would be willing to reach you and assist.
* Always keep your mobile phone topped up.
* If your pet is taking regular medication make sure you have a supply with you in case you become stranded and cannot return home in time to administer.
* A medical card showing all of your animal’s medical conditions and their medication, dose/strength/ amount and time administered – an emergency vet will not know this and you will be relying on your memory in a stressful situation, mistakes happen.
* Sign up for a pet care First Aid course or find out where your nearest pet CPR/life support training is offered

One resource that may help is: ‘First Aid for Animals – A guide to emergency aid for pets’ ISBN 0-283-99903-9

**Signs of Alert:**

Animals displaying any of the following signs clearly require urgent medical veterinary intervention and assistance so do not delay. Get help or get the animal to the nearest vet – ask others nearby to help if necessary.

* Collapse or loss of conscious state, heart stopping, choking, gagging, mouth breathing, mouth pawing, seizures, fits or convulsions, mouth foaming, rigidity, incontinence of urine or faeces, a state of absence of mental alertness or glassy eyed vacancy, screaming, excessive or uncontrolled bleeding (known as hemorrhage) excessive dribbling drooling, salivating or difficulty breathing, shallow slow or noisy and rapid breathing or absence of breathing, foreign body stuck in throat, obvious broken bones, reluctance to move, pain on movement /any risk of spinal injury, accidental poisoning, accidental electrocution, drowning or serious impact injury, deep puncture wound/ fly strike in rabbits and small furry animals.
* Other signs of illness or injury will also require a veterinary assessment and these may include: reduced movement, sitting hunched, fur erect, loss of appetite, vomiting, absence of poo, constipation or hard poo pellets, loose stools or diarrhea, blood in urine, runny sore eyes, nose, sneezing coughing or wheezing, unwillingness to clean themselves, shaking, trembling, unable to maintain a stable body temperature, raised temperature, isolation and social withdrawing, change in usual behavior - especially if they become aggressive.
* Less obvious signs of ill health can be crouching, guarding, panting pacing, vocalizing, a slow decline in appetite, straining to pass water or stools, increase or decrease in toileting needs, unusual discharge from any orifice or natural opening. Dogs may repeatedly lick their lips – a sign of pain and distress.

To find out more about First aid go to:

<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/vet-services/first-aid>

<https://www.vets4pets.com> – First Aid for pets courses run by Vets4Pets

<https://www.narpsuk.co.uk>

You will have to join up however as a member to access the NarpsUK course

Or speak directly to your vet or visit:

(Please note these sites below have not been officially vetted)

<http://www.dog-first-aid.com/programmes/>

<http://walksnwags.com/pet-first-aid-distance-learning/>

Straying and loss

If you have ever had a pet that has gone missing you will no instantly the anxiety and heart break this leads to. For those who never learn the fate of their beloved pets this can be a traumatic and distressing time. The anguish continues as long as there remains no answers to close the gap of where, how, what and why?

The information below is provided to help in two ways. The first, to reduce the risks of straying and a lost pet, and the second, the actions you can take to increase the chances of a safe return. In times of distress we can panic or find it hard to think straight or operate logically and precious time is lost which could be put to good effect in other more productive ways.

**Reducing the risk of a ‘lost’ pet:**

**Prevention**

* Ensure that small animals are supervised at all times when enjoying garden time
* Pets like guinea pigs, rabbits and hens etc are vulnerable to poisoning just like other animals. Plants like strawberry leaves for example can make guinea pigs very ill. Small animals may hide amongst plantation and easily become lost.
* Small animal hutches and runs need to be robust and in good order to prevent damage leading to animals leaving their hutch and exercise pen and becoming lost in the general environment.
* Once out and unsupervised they are at risk of cat attacks or harm from foxes and other animals and birds of prey.
* Hutches and pens need to be checked regularly and repaired and be fox proofed.
* All animals are driven to find a mate and raise a family. Hormones can be powerful and indeed dogs and cats will stray when driven by such a strong desire to find a suitable mate. Dogs and cats in particular that are not neutered/spayed are at a much higher risk of becoming lost.
* Cats we know to be naturally curious, they will jump into open car doors and the back of vans left open and will investigate sheds and garages outhouses – these are all fun places to seek out but once the door is closed that are trapped until found and released.
* Secure all of your own fences and gates so that dogs cannot stray
* Micro-chipping is a fast, safe and effective way of re-uniting pets with their owners and this makes tracing an owner if a pet is found much quicker.
* Collars can also be useful as pets can be returned much faster if found by others. It is best to put a telephone number on the collar – please ensure these are safety approved collars particularly for cats to reduce the risk of strangulation if they become snagged. Easy snap collars from a reputable company like Kitty Collars at <http://www.kittycollars.co.uk/> 01983 200201- I prefer the soft material personalized. They make them in arrange of beautiful colours.

**Pet Recovery – increasing your chances of a safe return or finding out what has happened**

* Pet dogs and cats know the sound of their owner’s voice and the familiar sound of feeding plates or special treats shaken in their bag. If they are close by they are likely to respond
* The more friends you make with your surrounding neighbours the easier it is to approach them if a beloved pet has gone missing. Generally, people want to help others when in trouble and many share empathy in these situations. Some of them are likely to be pet owners as well and will naturally look out for your pet.
* If the pet is registered with a vet and becomes lost then inform your vets and other local vets and pet shops as soon as possible.
* Contact animal charities near to you to inform them and provide them with the identification details.
* Print a good quality picture of your pet and photocopy or download this to distribute widely within your area.
* Social media can also be a useful way to get people looking but be cautious as well because there are unscrupulous people who seek to take advantage of such a situation. Take the necessary security actions and weigh up the risks and benefits and attempt to reduce the obvious risks besides those of personal safety and security.
* Email and text your nearest and dearest friends and family as you will need all the practical help and support you can get to be re-united.
* If your pet is micro-chipped it may be worth informing the chipping company of the situation so that they can add an alert to your account & check their database.
* Local libraries, coffee shops and community centers may be willing to put up posters to help.
* In the sad event that an animal has been injured or worse, killed in an accident, if the pet is chipped you have a better chance of being informed. However, it is worth contacting the local council as well to alert them and indeed the local dog warden who may keep records or who can alert others and get back in contact with you.
* If you live in an area that uses dog pounds for lost or stray dogs, obviously check these as soon as possible.
* Contact your nearby animal shelters and rescue centers and provide them with the details.
* If you have several favorite walks you will probably know several other dog owners so visit your usual areas in case your dog has gone to familiar places and to alert your dog owner friends to be alert and aware. Again posters and a description may help.
* Make contact with your local professional dog walkers who can also be your eyes and ears and they are about and visit many different dog walking sites.
* Some people will also put adverts in their local papers, newsagents and local radio stations
* You can download some very good poster fliers from the internet which allows you to put essential details and this will save you time trying to create your own. You may wish to view the following:

<https://www.findtoto.com/lost-pet-flyers/>

<http://search.petfbi.org/lost-pet-flyer.aspx>

<http://www.adoptapet.com/blog/free-and-easy-template-lost-or-found-pet-flye/#.WIkWDblKJR5>

<https://whiteboomerang.com> - a site that shows lost and found pets in the UK but you cannot copy and paste this you have to type it into Google or another browser.

<https://nvds.co.uk/> Provides information and advice on lost and found

<https://www.petslocated.com/> Recommended by RSPCA

<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/straydogs>

One resource on dog behavior: Dog Behavior Explained – by Peter Neville ISBN 1-8200 034 4

Pet Bereavement and Loss- When the time comes to say goodbye

Losing a beloved companion animal can be a lonely and difficult time to navigate your way through the stages of loss that we may be unprepared for. When the death of a much loved pet happens, whether expected or unexpected the gap left behind can be quickly filled with a volume of emotions. Besides this, the void and space remaining can take time to adjust to.

Most of us will experience bereavement at some point in our lives and it may be helpful to understand some of what we might experience. Although there are approximately four stages associated with loss – we may experience these stages in different ways and at different times. We may experience all, part, or none of the stages of loss

**Disbelief:**

A sense of shock within us, may follow the death of our pet, the emotion is so powerful and strong that we are unable to absorb the reality of the situation, leading to a sense of immediate void and feelings of helplessness, Sometimes people have described the immediate feelings as being caught in a bubble, and finding it difficult to understand how the world around us seemingly continues with its daily activities, unaware of what is happening to us in the process.

Others have described this stage as ‘overwhelming’ particularly if it is the first pet loss we have experienced. Coping and dealing with ‘death’ and ‘loss’ is different for everyone, yet little can really prepare us for managing the emotions and feelings associated with loss, as the tools to help us are not the kind of tools and skills we use in everyday life, and the emotion can feel just too raw. Some people conversely report feeling very calm and organized, or even relieved, especially if the death was a difficult death or the animal had experienced a long period of illness. That feeling of ‘relief’ can of course feel like a paradox, and can cause us to feel ‘guilty’. Why would we feel relief? Of course we would not wish to lose the pet from our lives, yet during a period of illness, it is not uncommon for owners to report feeling as if they are ‘suffering’ too, as well as the pet they are caring for. So this sense of ‘relief’ is understandable. Of course, vets can help to bring about a more peaceful closure for our animals if we are aware that our animal friends have reached close to the end of their natural lives. All the same this is a time of pain, sadness, adjustment and hopefully in time healing.

**Accepting loss:**

This period of time often involves ‘searching’ and ‘searching behavior’. When we have lost our pet companions – we still search for them, think we have seen them or sense their presence, smelt their scent or felt they had brushed beside us. For some this brings brief moments of comfort. Again, it can be paradoxical to experience this because part of us desperately wants to have them back yet when the reality of death becomes apparent the sadness and pain returns. Many people report this and often comment that they have never experienced this before. It is however, experienced by many, uniquely, at this sad time of loss.

**Feelings of despair, sadness or depression:**

It would seem unusual for us to not experience sadness and isolation at a time of such loss, and there is a range of feelings that we may become aware of. Pet owners can feel lost or describe having lost their pathway and the meaning in their lives. This is unsurprising; given the often intense friendships and bonds we form with animals. Sudden loss can leave us feeling empty and confused about what we are supposed to be doing with our days, and how to fill all the sudden unexpected time, space and play time with our friends. It is common for people to chew over every detail. This can feel torturous as we unpick every decision we made questioning whether it was the right decision at the right time for the right reasons. At these times we can feel a sense of guilt or self blame even over the smallest decisions actions or inactions. Trying to seek answers or justify decisions is part of the process of coming to terms with the reality of the event.

**Being prepared:**

Because so few of us ever seriously think about the ends of our lives this often means we put off the same conversations and decisions for our animals. It can feel like an unpleasant acknowledgement of life… the inevitable ending. However, one way we can reduce the impact of guilt and self blame is to take time to consider what we want for our beloved pets. Planning ahead for different situations can help us think clearly when we have the ability to think rationally. Regular health checks mean that any disease or illness can be caught and diagnosed quickly and hopefully treated. Planning here forth gives us the opportunity to talk to the vet about what to expect, options for treatments at different stages and the signs of what to look out for when our animals are close to the end of their life’s journey.

A plan of some type helps us feel in better control when we might otherwise be falling apart at the very time our animals need us to be strong for them in their hour of need. It may be of course that some of us simply cannot be the one who asks the vet to call and assist our pet friends on their final journey. Or we may have to rely on a loved one to take our pet on their last visit to the surgery. This said, we will have had the chance to talk openly about our fears and our wishes for our friends. From this, the vet will understand better how to support our decisions when the time comes and will know what is important to us and this will help us to heal more quickly. When making the decision, remember to think about what is best for your pet, however hard that may seem. Talking to your vet will help. They are less emotionally involved; it can be easier for them to think about what’s best for your pet and will help talk you through the options to consider.

Not all pets leave the world in such a considered way. In an emergency it can be impossible to know what to do first. We can take some actions by learning pet first aid or attending a course to help us give our animals the best chance of survival. We can also ensure that we are ready for such an event by keeping essential numbers to hand like emergency out of hours vet practices, knowing how to contact a pet ambulance in an emergency or simply making sure that we have an emergency plan of what to do and who to call for help. Just like with ourselves and our own friends and relatives there will be times when loss of life is going to happen and it may be fast with little or nothing we can do to change the outcome. Having loved our companion animals and experienced a positive bond and a life full of good memories it will be these memories of unconditional two way love that will serve to heal our broken hearts in the time ahead.

**Reorganization:**

People have often said that ‘Time is a great Healer’, yet this can be inappropriate to suggest at a time of loss because it is raw and people can find it hard to envisage feeling healed from the pain of death. Realistically, it may be that ‘time’ helps but it may not necessarily ‘heal’. Yet, with the passage of time, gradually we can learn to find new meanings for our lives and maybe even look back on our animal friends remembering them without feeling overwhelmed with emotion. It is different for each of us. Sometimes photos and videos can help but it is for each individual to find what helps and what heals.

This can take time… and for some.., a very long time it is different for each of us. It is important we are not rushed through any of the stages when we are experiencing them. Acceptance of the bereaved pet owner and how they are feeling can be of great support and comfort.

**What helps?**

Again it is different for each person, but having support from our friends and family can help the bereaved pet owner in travelling that pathway on the passage of recovery.

Aside from the feelings of grief, some people may experience any of the following, from loss of self confidence to anger, guilt, panic and panic attacks, fear and anxiety. While these feelings can be distressing they are also very commonly associated with bereavement and loss.

Making time to listen to those who have been bereaved is important and therapeutic, but for some it can be difficult to talk about the loss. Most important, is to give people who have been bereaved the **opportunity** to be listened to and to talk about their feelings and experience, an empathetic and sensitive approach can be all that is needed, if that is what is wanted.

For those who have not experienced death, they may feel awkward or feel it is best to avoid the ‘loss’ or the subject of loss or feel afraid they may make someone upset and cry, yet the bereaved person can experience this as further isolation. It is best to gauge the situation and time and when it feels appropriate, be brave, take a deep breath, and ask how the person is doing. The response will help gauge whether they want to talk further. Not knowing what to say can be a barrier, and the bereaved pet owner can also help by being aware that others may feel unprepared of how to approach them.

Sometimes saying the words of loss and death can actually be a relief and open up a more comfortable place to start to listen and speak about what has happened but it is important to know that we are all different and need different things at different times.

Taking care of ourselves physically, socially, emotionally and psychologically is important in helping people find the place to begin their gradual recovery. Sleep may be troubled, dreams and memories can prevent sound restorative sleep so taking rest and finding ways to relax can help. Make the effort to eat well and nurture your physical needs with nutritious foods, take time to be with others when we need to be, and have space when we need moments of quiet reflection.

Getting out and about may first seem difficult and just finding the motivation to do these things can be a challenge. With a little effort, people often feel the benefit very quickly.

Celebrating the life of our companion animals can also form part of the journey of healing. This may start with the decision of whether to prepare for a burial or a pet cremation. Writing a poem for our pet or writing a letter to help express our feelings. Collecting special pet photographs and pictures may help to invoke happier times or looking at things that bring us comfort and a sense of sentiment. Remember that other pets, like siblings, may feel the loss too. Consider what might help them to feel more secure and reassured. Counseling can also help the process for some people and this can be sought via your GP, private counselors and those working for charities involved in bereavement support. There is further help and advice below:

**If you have recently been bereaved and lost your animal friend there is help available:**

The RSPCA provide useful information on their website at:

<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/bereavement>

Equine support, The British Horse Society’s [**‘Friends at the End’**](https://www.bhs.org.uk/welfare-and-care/euthanasia-and-friends-at-the-end) is designed to make sure that no horse owner faces losing their companion alone.

<http://www.bhs.org.uk/welfare-and-care/euthanasia-and-friends-at-the-end>

For further online support for pet owners on this issue, the [**Animal Welfare Foundation**](https://www.bva-awf.org.uk/pet-care-advice/saying-goodbye) and [**World Horse Welfare**](https://www.worldhorsewelfare.org/Just-in-Case) both share helpful advice on saying goodbye.

[www.bva-awf.org.uk](http://www.bva-awf.org.uk)

‘Saying goodbye – the ultimate kindness’ – What you need to know about euthanasia

The Blue Cross has information and advice on their website and run a Pet Bereavement Support Service. The bereavement line is: 0800 096 6606.

<https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-support>

Blue Cross: ‘Coping with the loss of a pet – We’re here to listen’ publication.

Go to [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) and type in ‘pet loss books’. Reveals a list of books covering how to cope after the loss of a pet.