

Pet Loss Can Trigger Intense Grief – and Many Suffer in Silence

Losing a pet can conjure intense emotions comparable to the loss of a partner or family member. When this happens, know that you are not just overreacting — you're mourning the deep bond that was lost.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Research published in PLoS One found that grief after losing a pet can meet the clinical threshold for Prolonged Grief Disorder, a recognized mental health condition
- The pattern of grief symptoms following a pet's death looked identical to those experienced after losing a human loved one, including yearning and sadness
- About one in three adults surveyed had lost a beloved pet, making it one of the most widespread, yet socially unsupported, forms of significant loss that people experience
- The brain's attachment and bonding systems react with the same distress patterns whether someone loses a spouse or a lifelong animal companion
- Experts advise against comparing grief, encourage connecting with supportive communities, and remind mourners that lingering pain is normal; not a sign of overreaction

Have you recently experienced the loss of a beloved pet? The grief can be so overwhelming that it feels like you've lost a human family member. While you may think this seems out of the ordinary at first, know that you're not the only one who feels this way. According to a recently published study, the intensity of your emotions transcends species barriers because of the special bond you and your pet shared.¹

Research Reveals New Insights About the Loss of a Pet

In a study published in PLoS One, researchers examined the deep, long-lasting grief that manifests after a beloved pet has passed away. Specifically, they looked at the path to Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD), which is a clinically recognized condition wherein grief remains intense, disruptive, and hard to move through long after a loss occurs. Currently, grief from the death of a pet is excluded in the criterion for PGD, and the researchers aim to determine if reversing this has merit.²

The study drew from 975 adults living in the U.K. who had completed detailed grief assessments designed to match the official criteria used to diagnose PGD. At baseline these participants had already lost human family members, but the researchers wanted to understand more about the type of grief experienced when a pet passes away.

A key finding of the study was how often people identified a pet's death as the most distressing loss of their life, even when they had also experienced major human losses. This validates that the pain of losing a pet creates significant and overwhelming grief, and that it is not just "an overreaction" you are experiencing. It is a reflection of the depth and

significance of the special bond that was lost.

The research also revealed that pet loss bereavement is a common occurrence. . About one in three adults surveyed had lost a beloved pet, making it one of the most widespread forms of significant loss that people experience across their lifetime. Yet, despite its prevalence, pet loss is often met with limited social support. Many mourners report being told that “it was just a pet,” which can make the healing process even more difficult than it already is.

Another key finding showed how grief is experienced after various kinds of losses. What’s remarkable; but not surprising to anyone who has ever loved a pet; is that the pattern of grief symptoms following pet loss looked identical to the pattern people experience after the death of a human loved one.

The emotional mechanisms behind grief — such as yearning for the lost loved one, trouble accepting loss, emotional numbness, or persistent sadness — operate the same way whether the loved one was a person or a cherished animal companion. This helps explain why moving forward after losing a pet often feels just as complicated and consuming as recovering from the death of a human family member.

One important detail the study highlighted was the length of grief intensity. Because PGD requires symptoms to persist beyond six months, the research focused on people whose losses had occurred long enough for meaningful patterns to emerge. Even after this length of time had passed, a sizable portion of those who were grieving pets still met the full clinical threshold for PGD. Knowing this may help you come to terms with why you are still struggling months after saying goodbye to your beloved pet; and why you shouldn’t feel pressured to “bounce back” quickly from the loss of a pet.

The researchers also examined how diverse groups of people were affected by pet loss. While certain types of human losses, such as losing a child, produced the highest rates of lasting grief, pet loss was not far behind many other human categories. It was like the grief levels seen after losing a close friend, a sibling, or another family member. This means that the emotional fallout of losing a pet is not only normal but comparable in intensity to several widely recognized and validated forms of bereavement set out by experts.

A Deeper Look at the Grief Felt by Pet Parents

The study went further by comparing several types of losses in terms of their overall impact on the population. Because pet ownership is so common, the grief linked to pet loss contributes meaningfully to the total number of PGD cases in society. In fact, the proportion of population-level suffering attributed to pet loss was higher than that of partner loss or child loss — not because pet grief is more severe, but because due to the shorter lifespan of most pets, it affects a large number of people.

What makes these findings even more compelling is how grief works biologically and psychologically across several types of bereavement. The underlying structure of PGD involves two main emotional clusters: core symptoms like longing or persistent preoccupation with the deceased, as well as associated symptoms such as emotional numbness, difficulty accepting the loss, or intense sadness.

Now, according to the analysis, these two groups of symptoms functioned the same way in people grieving a pet as they did in people grieving humans. This shows that the internal emotional circuitry of grief does not distinguish between species — it responds to the intensity of the relationship.

The grief mechanisms operate through the same pathways in the brain that manage attachment, bonding, and threat responses. When a deeply loved companion — human or animal — passes, the attachment system searches for them, fails to find them, and enters a state of distress. The study's findings show that this system reacts with the same internal patterns whether someone loses a spouse or a lifelong animal companion.

The researchers emphasized that the findings challenge the idea that pet loss should be excluded from professional diagnostic consideration:³

“If people can develop clinically significant levels of grief following the death of a pet, then it is essential that this is recognized in the scientific literature so that mental health professionals can communicate with the public in an appropriate and accurate manner, and people who need, and desire, clinical care are afforded the opportunity to access it. It was for this reason that the current study was performed.”

Are You Struggling from the Loss of Your Pet?

The loss of a beloved pet is one of the most difficult experiences that anyone will have to face. And as the featured study shows, grief can be so intense that it is on par with the loss of a human family member. If your pet has recently passed away and you are struggling to make sense of things, the National Register of Health Service Psychologists offers these tips to help you on your journey to healing:⁴

1. **Your grief is real and deserving of compassion** — Not everyone will understand the bond you have shared with your pet, but know that there are many who do understand — people who know how deep that love runs and how profound the loss can feel.

Reaching out to others who have experienced pet loss can ease feelings of loneliness or judgment. The Rainbow Bridge⁵ offers a free, supportive online community for those mourning a beloved pet.

2. **Try not to measure your grief against anyone else's** — Comparing losses or deciding whose pain is “greater” only minimizes your own experience. This is your loss, and you are allowed to move through it in a way that feels right for you. Even if others do not fully respect your process, make sure you do it for yourself.
3. **Feelings of guilt are common during bereavement, even when they are not rational** — Understanding that guilt is a normal part of grief will not instantly erase it, but it can help you respond to those thoughts with patience and self-compassion when they arise.
4. **Grief can feel endless, as though the heaviness will never lift; yet over time, the sharp edges tend to soften** — Memories that now bring tears will gradually bring warmth, gratitude, and even laughter as you reflect on the joy your pet brought into your life.
5. **You still carry the love you shared, and that love does not disappear** — Deciding whether (or when) to welcome another pet into your life is deeply personal. Loving a new pet is not a betrayal of the one you lost. In many ways, it can be a tribute.

If you are not ready, consider honoring your pet's memory by volunteering or supporting an animal shelter or rescue. Find a meaningful way to celebrate the life and love of your cherished companion.

Sources and References

¹ EuroNews, January 21, 2026

^{2,3} PLoS One, 2026 Jan 14;21(1):e0339213

⁴ [National Register of Health Service Psychologists, Understanding and Coping with the Loss of a Pet](#)

⁵ [RainbowBridge.com, Support Forums](#)
