Navigating pet loss during the holiday season
By Carina DeVera

About six weeks ago, my husband and I had to say goodbye to our quirky and snuggly little toy poodle, Lily. When we adopted her as a senior dog, we knew her time with us was going to be relatively limited. Yet over the past four years, she became deeply ingrained in our little family, and discussing her daily antics was a popular conversation topic. She became an inseparable part of our lives, which made saying goodbye so very painful.

If you've ever had a pet, you already know that losing them is a unique kind of sorrow. And now that the holiday season is upon us, it's difficult to feel very merry when you're missing your best friend. (This is the time of year when we'd dress Lily up in ridiculous holiday outfits and hide special treats in her stocking.) The season, with all its nostalgia, can make the absence of a beloved animal feel sharper than ever.

According to pet memorial service Resting Rainbow, one way to create meaning during this season is to intentionally honor your pet's memory. This could be something as simple as hanging an ornament with their name or photo, lighting a candle in their honor or setting up a small holiday display with their picture or favorite toy. These gestures can offer a heartfelt way to keep their presence alive in your life.

Some people also find comfort in visiting a place their pet loved, such as a favorite trail or park, and allowing themselves to feel the sadness and gratitude that come with those memories.

Set boundaries

The holidays come with expectations: gatherings, photos, parties and endless seasonal cheer. But when you're grieving, it's OK to rethink traditions that feel too daunting right now. You might choose to skip certain events or let loved ones know that you need a little extra quiet this year.

It's also healthy to give yourself permission to feel whatever comes up. Grief isn't linear. You might feel sad one moment, followed by a burst of joy when you remember something funny your pet did. Accepting all of it without judgment honors the strength of your bond.

Talking about your pet, sharing stories with someone who understands or journaling your feelings can also help ease overwhelming emotions. Writing about what your pet meant to you gives your grief a place to live.

Some people find that acts of kindness, like donating to a shelter or volunteering with animals in need, give grief a tangible outlet that feels meaningful. Helping others doesn't erase your loss, but it can help honor your pet's legacy with compassion and purpose.

Support for pet loss

For some people, pet loss can feel especially isolating because not everyone recognizes it as a "real" loss. That lack of understanding may make it harder to speak openly about your grief, for fear it will be minimized or misunderstood. But the bond we share with our animals is real, and the pain of losing them deserves care and acknowledgment.

You might also consider professional or peer support if you feel stuck in your grief. Several organizations and support groups exist specifically to help people navigate pet loss — sometimes just knowing you're not alone can make the holidays feel less isolating. If you need extra help coping with your grief, Marin Humane's Pet Loss Support offers free resources and compassionate guidance to help you through this difficult time. Go to marinhumane.org/get-help/pet-loss.

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