

Helping Pets Adjust To the Death of a Companion

Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.

www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com

Copyright ABA, Inc.

We've recently spoken to a number of pet owners who are concerned about their dog or cat's reactions to the death of another family pet. Very little objective research has been done which can help us better understand a pet's reaction to the loss of another animal. In a non-scientific survey conducted by the ASPCA in 1995, no changes in grooming, elimination or aggression were reported in 75% of the animal subjects, which consisted of 104 dog owners and 61 cat owners. However about 50% of both dogs and cats ate less for a while after the loss, and about 35% of them slept more. How a pet reacts to the death of another will be influenced by the relationship between the two, as well as by the owner's reaction to the loss. If the deceased animal was typically the one who initiated play or barking at the door, the remaining pets may show less of these behaviors, because they have been in the habit of following the lead of the other pet. Surviving pets may also be anxious and frightened in reaction to owners' behavior changes, and cats especially may be upset in reaction to changes in their daily routine.

It's doubtful that pets experience the cognitive reactions to loss that people do, such as being angry at the deceased for leaving, but as evidenced by the ASPCA study, they may show some of the same behavioral changes. For example, some owners report the surviving pet wanders restlessly around the house, as though searching for the deceased animal; a behavioral sign grieving people also experience. There is also no research to tell us whether it is helpful for the surviving pet to either be present when the other pet dies, or to see her body afterwards. When our pets have died, we've done it both ways, but can't report any noticeable differences in the surviving pets behavior that can be attributed to this choice.

What can owners do to help their surviving pets adjust to the loss? Although there are no data that tells us what works best, keeping the routine as unchanged as possible is recommended. Unless your veterinarian recommends otherwise, keeping to the same diet, even if your pet's appetite decreases, is probably best. Try to find things that the surviving pet enjoys doing, and do more of them, whether it be chasing a feather or a walk in the park. Most owners report that pets can resume normal behavior patterns as quickly as a few days, while others report it may take several months until they are back to normal. Pets probably recover faster than we do, but both you and they need time to adjust to the loss before acquiring a new pet.