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Anticipatory Grief: The Sadness Before the Loss

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When we learn that our beloved pet has a terminal illness, or we realize that they are struggling with the changes that old age brings, many of us feel a deep sense of loss or grief even though the pet is still with us. This experience of coping with loss before our loved one has died is called *anticipatory grief*, and it is a common and natural reaction to the realization that you will soon be saying goodbye. We tend to think of grief as a reaction to the death of a pet, but in some situations the grief process begins the moment we learn of a terminal diagnosis or face the difficult decision of euthanasia. When a pet dies, we often think of and refer to the death as one loss, but in many cases it can actually feel like a series of many losses. For example, as a dog ages, she may one day be unable to go for her daily walk. Or perhaps an elderly cat becomes unable to climb to the top of the couch where she always spent her days sunbathing. These changes represent endings, and they remind us of the inevitable goodbye that everyone who loves a pet must face. To witness and reflect on the losses occurring during the end-of-life stage is a heartbreaking process that can sometimes feel like a rollercoaster. In tandem with our pet's physical health, we experience the good days and the bad days with them and it often reflects in our grieving.

How people experience anticipatory grief varies greatly. People may experience many or few symptoms. Some of the most common symptoms include sorrow, dread, anger, anxiety, and depression, and may include physical symptoms such as changes in appetite, weight, and sleep patterns. In addition, people may experience times of acceptance, peace, growth and reflection. Some people may feel the urge to distance themselves from the pet and the end-of-life process. While this is a distressing feeling, it can be a natural part of the process and is something that can be faced and worked through. For most people, it is this combination of anxiety of what's to come and determination to make things count that leads us on an emotional rollercoaster. It is important to acknowledge your experience and give yourself permission to feel it and process it.

In many ways, anticipatory grief is a form of coping as it helps you prepare yourself emotionally for the loss. However, there are some things that can help when you are feeling overwhelmed:

- **Reach out and use your support system.** Like other forms of grief and loss, it is important to process your anticipatory grief experience with others you can trust. Whether it is a spouse, a friend, a support group or a mental health professional, it is important that you find someone you can turn to for support. When people ask “what can I do”, let them know honestly what they can do to help you.
- **Be extra kind to yourself.** Understand that anticipatory grief may come in waves, and you may experience it in ways you do not expect. Your anticipatory grief may bring tears, anxiety, dread, difficulty sleeping or anger. Sometimes it may also bring growth, reflection or peace. Often, it brings a combination of these feelings at different times throughout the experience, and that is okay. Grieving, both before and after a loss, is hard work. Be sure to give yourself permission to feel what you are feeling and to make extra time for self-care.
- **Make time to cherish your pet.** This may seem obvious, but sometimes we can be so overwhelmed with what needs to be done and who to call that we miss the moments that we will long to remember. This may be a time to create and tackle [a bucket list](#) for your pet, or talk to them about how much you love them. Take special photographs of and with them, or begin a journal or scrapbook now while the memories and images are fresh in your mind. Some people enjoy making memorials while the pet is still here, such as paw prints, gardens or shadowboxes of their favorite things. While it is important to acknowledge your deep sense of sadness about saying goodbye, it is also important to make sure your sadness doesn’t “take over” and prevent you from living in the moment. Directing your pain and anxiety toward actions that create wonderful memories can help provide balance in an overwhelming time.
- **Use this time as an opportunity to plan.** In cases of sudden or unanticipated deaths, many people feel overwhelmed with the decisions they are unexpectedly facing and often regret decisions they were forced to make in the heat of the moment. When we experience anticipatory grief, we are provided with a special, albeit painful, opportunity to make end-of-life plans such as where you would like to say goodbye, what you will do in the case of an emergency, and whom you may want to include in saying goodbye. Planning and making decisions about end-of-life care allows us to gain a sense of control in an uncontrollable situation, and it helps ensure that your final memories with your pet are positive and peaceful.

The grief that you feel as you prepare to say goodbye to your pet can produce intense sorrow and anxiety. It can also provide a foundation to mindfully plan and reflect on your relationship and memories with your pet. As with all grief experiences, there is no right or wrong, and no one can ever be fully prepared to say goodbye. It is okay to feel overwhelmed at times, and it’s okay to ask for help. If you need support while navigating the anticipatory grief experience, lean on those around you whom you trust, and reach out to our counselors if you’d like to talk more about your experience.