

Tails Of The City

Coping with the loss of a pet – by Amelia Glynn with Dr. Nancy Kay

Sage, my childhood dog went to that great dog park in the sky while I was away at college. She was my constant adventuring and snuggling companion growing up and I still remember her well. She had a spotted tongue, patiently allowed me to apply peanut butter to her nose and would primly cross her front paws whenever she lay down.

My father called me one afternoon during the winter of my sophomore year to tell me that she had taken her last breath in my brother's arms on the way to the vet. Sage's health had deteriorated rapidly over the course of just a few days and then, poof! she was gone. Her death didn't feel fully real to me until I came home that summer to an empty doghouse.



Because the holidays can stir up such a hefty (and varied) mix of emotions and memories for all of us, I asked Dr. Nancy Kay, author of "[Speaking for Spot: Be the advocate your dog needs to live a happy, healthy, longer life](#)" for her advice on how to cope with the loss of a pet, especially during this potentially challenging time of year.

Seek support: Just like the old adage says, "What we resist persists." It's important to share your feelings about your loss, just make sure you do it with the right people. "I strongly encourage talking about things with a selective audience, meaning people who really understand what you are going through," suggests Dr. Kay. "This is a good time to take a sabbatical from people who say 'Oh, it was just a dog (or cat); get over it.'" She also recommends journaling about your feelings and experiences. (See below for information about drop-in support groups at the [Animal Care Center](#) in Rohnert Park or call 707-584-4343 for more information.)

Dr. Nancy Kay and 17-year-old Lexie.

Forget "normal": Try not to define what's normal or not normal. You may need to keep the water bowl and leashes out for several weeks (or even months) or you may have the urge to put everything that reminds you of your pet immediately out of sight. Your relationship with your pet is unique and only you know what's best for you.

You'll know when it's right: Some people run out the next day to get a new animal while others need time to mourn without the distraction of a young puppy or kitten to care for. However, Dr. Kay advises, if you're going to the shelter with the hope of finding the same pet that you lost, you may not yet be ready to open your heart and home to a new animal.

Let yourself off the hook: The grieving process for most of Dr. Kay's clients begins at the first mention of illness and they often vacillate between feelings of anger, sadness and guilt. "My clients worry that they euthanized too soon or not soon enough. They worry that they waited too long to have their pet diagnosed and treated. Or that they weren't as loving as they could have been," she says. "I try and remind them that they had the best intentions and they did the best they could. That's what is most important."

Create rituals: You may want to continue hanging your pet's Christmas stocking or purchase a gift to place under the tree. During your holiday meal, you could also place a special candle on the table and light it in memory of your pet. Another great suggestion is writing a dedication to your pet on the inside cover of a favorite book or two and donating them to your local branch of the public library. Or simply write a letter to your pet telling her the things that you miss and thanking her for the friendship she gave you. "Most of my clients opt for private cremation with return of the ashes," says Dr. Kay. "Some people travel with the ashes to keep their pet as part of their life." She also receives many holiday cards from clients that are still signed with the name of the pet that was lost.

Volunteer: Helping animals in need can lift our spirits and take the focus off of our sadness. Working in a local shelter or animal rescue organization allows us to forge new connections with animals and animal lovers alike. You might also consider making a donation in your pet's name to a favorite shelter or other charity.

Colleen Mihelich, president and founder of Pternity.com offers this advice for helping a friend who has recently lost a pet:

- Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Many people feel silly sharing how devastated they are by the loss of their pet, so they will welcome your reassurance and your ear.
- Give them a card or gift to express your sympathy and remind them of the joy the pet provided.
- Support them in holding a ceremony or ritual to commemorate the pet's life.

ACC support groups in Rohnert Park: First and third Wednesday of every month, 6:30 p.m., facilitated by Dr. Nancy Kay and Dr. Connie DeHaan; Every Monday, 6:30 p.m., facilitated by grief counselor Jayne Sorenson.