

Do Animals Grieve ?

Pet owners often describe behavior in surviving pets following the death of a companion that are similar to those attributes in humans that would indicate grief. Common examples included decreased activity, inappetence, lack of interest in favorite activities, increased vocalizations, restless behavior which owners often interpret as searching for the deceased pet, or spending more time in locations shared previously with the lost companion.

While the existence of emotions in animals can be inferred only from their behavior, the tendency is to assume that whatever emotions they do possess are similar to ours. There is, of course, the possibility that animals experience emotions which are unique to them and not like our own.

Death of a companion animal

For both dogs and cats, the death of one of the group can lead to social instability among the remaining individuals. Such instability can result in increased conflict, threats, or aggression. On the other hand, if the deceased animal was the source of conflict among the other pets, his/her death may result in a more harmonious household. Dogs and cats have very different social organizations, and changes in social relations depend, in part, upon the idiosyncrasies of each species.

Dogs that live together tend to be integrated into a cohesive group called a pack. The pack is organized around a dominance hierarchy, a "pecking order" by which the dogs determine which will get first access to things they perceive as important, such as food, toys, treats, sleep spots, attention from humans, and which dog gets to go through doorways first. Dominance hierarchies can remain stable for months or even years at a time with the same dog remaining as the top dog, or alpha. Once formed, the dominance hierarchy usually functions with very little conflict or aggression among the pack members.

When a high ranking dog in the household pack becomes ill, dies, or leaves the home for an extended period, lower ranking dogs may compete for higher rank. This may result in conflicts and/or aggression among the dogs.

Dominance isn't the only aspect of the social structure of dogs that can be influenced by the death of a pack member. Dogs living together often do the same things at the same time, a phenomenon known as social facilitation. A good example is that when one dog in the household begins to bark, the others often join in. Social facilitation can increase the frequency or intensity of some normal behavior patterns such as sleeping, eating, play, or even aggression toward unfamiliar people or dogs. Thus, when one member of the pack dies, the owner may see a decrease in some of the behaviors because of the lack of social facilitation. Over time, many of these upsets in normal behavior usually reverse themselves.

Death of a human

Although well-known reports exist of dogs and other animals showing strong reactions to the deaths of their owners, in many instances the animal's reactions may not be nearly as dramatic.

When behavioral changes are seen, it is difficult to pinpoint whether these are in response to the family member's absence, to the behavioral changes of the remaining family members, and/or to the pet being moved into another home. Anxiety, fear, or depression can be seen in response to any and all of these life changes.

As with responses to the death or loss of another animal, significant individual variation will be seen in how a pet responds to the death of a person.

The Final Goodbye

If euthanasia is being planned for a pet, owners often want to know if it would help surviving animals to "witness" the death. Although there is no scientific evidence that animals have a concept of death in the way that humans do, some owners who have followed this practice have reported that the surviving animals laid down next to the bodies of the deceased pets.

If other pets are present, they should be restrained by leashes or held by a family member to prevent any interference during the euthanasia.

Abstracted from "The Cardifair", February, 1995.



Photo: Dorota Paz

Case stories

*Have any of you ever noticed when a pet goes to the Bridge if another pet in the home notices? I'm asking because I've noticed that none of mine seem to have noticed when another left. Do they miss the one that has gone or is that just a human characteristic?
Evelyn Hlabse*

It was this question on Corgi-L back in 2010 that prompted a number of responses which show the many individual reactions of dogs (and cats) on the death of another animal or a human.

I wish to thank all contributors for allowing me to bring their stories here. *Anita Nordlunde.*

After the death of a companion animal

Carolyn Medlock:

I can answer that one with a BIG YES!! We lost our Belle on Nov 1 due to cancer. Her buddy was Duncan; they were in the yard together and slept in the same room at night. He looks for her every day to the point I told my husband we may have to get another one to keep him company, sooner than we thought we would.

Patty:

Since you said 'pet' I'm going to generalize this to all my dogs and cats, as my corgis are newer and nobody has died since we got them (they're only 3 and 2, and my oldest cat is only 10 ... no health issues yet).

Some of mine have cared and some haven't. Some of my cats have definitely seemed to notice when one has died. Two of them – different cats, different times - made a big deal of searching the house and meowing for days, with one of them even running outside (which he never did!) and meowing out there. After my much-beloved elderly cat Myriah died at age 17, her closest 'friend' Fraggie who just adored her, most definitely changed her behavior drastically, so I'd say she noticed. They used to sleep on my pillow together and various other places; Fraggie no longer sleeps on any of those places, after a while of keeping it up. She also became completely intolerant of the rest of the cats.

When Myriah was a young cat, our German Shepherd died; she just adored dogs and she most certainly seemed to notice and look for the dog.

When my mother's last dog died, all of her cats reacted. And, as a kid, our oldest cat died at age 18 - and our youngest cat appeared very upset, for about a month. His grieving and his reactions to us caused dormant *feline leukemia* to come out, and he died at age 8.

As for the dogs ... I've only had one dog at a time until now. Over the years, the dogs didn't seem too concerned about the cats 'vanishing' (although some cats were concerned when the dogs vanished). I've had some cats that I think celebrated when the dogs went away!

So if you mean, how does one dog deal with another dog dying, that one I personally can't answer.

It seems to depend a lot on the animal - the animals that seem more 'concerned' about others, react. The ones that are more independent, couldn't care less. My therapy cat Mokey is very sensitive, and reacted with great horror when one of the other cats was injured and bleeding (ears back, very stressed body language, etc.); the other cats couldn't have cared less.

Christine Landers:

A few years back I lost my Papillon and my Shepherd within a few months of each other. These were dogs my Corgi Kelsea had grown up with. She was devastated. Although she continued (in good Corgi fashion!) to eat, that was her only enjoyment. She curled up in a ball the rest of the time and no interest in life. It broke my heart to see.

I bought a new Papillon puppy, a really sweet and wonderful little guy and he adored my Corgi but she wanted nothing to do with him. If he came near, she growled at him. He was so sad, poor puppy, and I was beginning to wonder if this would ever work out.

It went on for almost two months. Then one day I was in the bathroom with my Corgi, drying my hair and the pup was sitting outside the door. All of a sudden he got up and had a strange expression. I looked down and Kelsea had gotten up and was staring intently at him. I thought "Oh NO, is she going to go after him or what?" Then she went into a play bow, he wagged his tail, she took off after him and they played for about a half an hour and became best friends.

They are devoted to this day.

I have to assume she needed her time to grieve before she could continue living life again.

Anonymous:

For about two years after Amber (Golden Retriever) passed away, Scooter (Pem) would run up to every Golden he saw and start checking it out. I always figured he was looking for his buddy, even though Centa (Pem) was already with us before Amber left. Amber was 7 when Scooter arrived as an 8 week old puppy, so he grew up with her.

When Centa died of intestinal cancer, I think Scooter knew it was coming as he spent the last night of her life trying to make me feel better. When Centa didn't come back from the vet's the next day he didn't seem upset at all. He was an only dog for about 8 months before Weezie arrived.

When Scooter passed away, Weezie just decided she was going to be queen of the universe and I had to keep her separated from Jester to keep her from attacking him. Now Jester is gone, Weezie is once again happy to be the queen, though another dog may be coming in a couple of weeks.

So I'd say they're all different...



Photo: Almut Rosenfelder

Dawn Fisher:

When my old dog Kazin passed last month, all my cardis seemed to miss him, but Grace and Peace the most. Peace spent several days checking the house looking for him, going into his crate. Then, when we took it down, she would just lay on that spot all day. But it only lasted for a couple of days, and then it seemed as if they realized he wasn't coming back. They knew he was sick - those two girls took turns lying with him when he wasn't feeling well.

Lynda McKee:

I think whether a pet misses another depends a lot upon the relationship they had and then whether we, in our own grief, even notice their grief.

I know that Cruiser (1992-2008) was very depressed after his mother Cori (1988-2003) was put to sleep. He wasn't himself for several weeks, even though I had two other adult Pembrokes who adored Cruiser. Whether he and Cori missed Beckley (1988-2002), Cori's litter brother, I'll never know because I was so upset by it all. However, the night before I took Beckley in to be put to sleep, Cori slept with him on his blanket. She had never ever done that throughout their lives, so I'm sure she knew something was amiss.

My cat Rascal (1980-1998) comforted me many times after I lost my first Pembroke, and he welcomed with open arms her successor. Cruiser died at home during the day while I was away, so all the dogs knew what happened.

I'm not sure any of them really missed him. I think dogs are accepting of a natural order of passage.

Marian Newland:

Sometimes - especially in 3+ pet households - the remaining pets don't seem to miss the one that has gone on to the bridge, because they still have each other to play with.

Currently, our Molly is gradually getting over missing Abby - she sincerely has missed her older "sister's" presence, and we will probably look for a companion for her after the first of the year.



Photo: Meta Feenstra

The funniest, though, was our Lucy - her sister Daisy was deaf and could not hear the dinner preparations - so Lucy took it upon herself to round her up with a special frequency yip that alerted Daisy to what was going on. When Daisy died, Lucy would still go through the house at dinner time looking for her for several weeks. We thought this was so sweet - a quality Lucy wasn't especially known for - until we realized that she had an ulterior motive. Daisy's bowl was always served first and then Lucy's - she just didn't want her dinner held up for any reason! You can count on your corgi to solve any problems!

Laura J. Herrmann:

When Katie died at home last summer, I think that Kodak was with her in the backyard during the night as she began to pass. I got up that morning and found her still with us, and was able to be with her as she died. Kodak was there, and it was obvious he knew something was really wrong. We spent time with her after she passed, and then took her to the vet. I brought Kodak with me so that he was part of what was happening and there was no weird "Katie went with Mom in the truck and never came home" stuff going on, even though I think he knew what had happened.

When we came back home, he would sniff at all of her favorite places – by the fire pit, under the lilacs, etc. It was really sad to see and I felt so bad for him. I gave him lots of love and attention.

Then, it was really strange - after the first rain after Katie passed to the Bridge, he quit sniffing all of her spots. It was like the rain had washed away her scent and he was no longer interested in her favorite spots. He kind of perked up after that, and seemed to be doing well. I wasn't ready to get another dog, and told Kodak that we would get another dog when we were ready as a family, and for now he should enjoy being the "only dog" having Mom all to himself.

About 6 months later I found Abby at the shelter a friend of mine and I volunteer for. It has been good for all of us.

Cindy Davies:

My Kirby misses Ace (his wing corgi) a lot. They were great buddies. Kirby doesn't like any of the other dogs the way he liked Ace. Kirby always herded Ace out to plow the yard when

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we had a bit of snow. Ace was quite low and wide and did just what Kirby wanted in the way of snow removal. None of the current taller dogs do as well.

A dear friend of mine has a hysterical story... It's very sad but hysterical. Her heart dog Dazzle (SpringerSpaniel) frequently took a morning nap in Argyle's (Spinone Italiano) crate. One morning when my friend called the dogs for breakfast, Daz didn't come. As Deb looked in the crate the horrible truth struck her that Daz had crossed the bridge while sleeping in the back of Argy's crate. Debbie is crying and crawling into Argy's crate to check on Daz and Argy is trying to shove his way in to the crate so he can be served his breakfast. The other dogs are telling Debbie that if Daz isn't going to eat her breakfast they'd be glad to take care of it for her. Debbie manages to tell this story with tears rolling down her face while laughing so hard...

She claims the other dogs missed Daz, but were more upset by the delay in their breakfast.

Libby Kraus:

Years ago we had an Irish Setter, then added a Shar Pei. Doodle dog the Shar Pei had always had Missy the Irish in the house. As she got older he would walk over to her bowl and take whatever human food we put on top of her dog food. When I took Missy to the vet's to meet her maker I thought Doodle might notice she didn't return with me. But no he didn't. So then I thought for sure at dinner time he would miss her because he always stole her human food off her dish. But no again, he didn't even walk the 6 feet over to her dish to look!

I have never had a dog miss one that was gone. I lost two this year, no one blinked an eye or even looked for the missing dog. I do think it upset the hierarchy in the house though - and the Cardigan, who went just a few months ago, was out of sorts when her friend the labrador went a few months before that. The Pem boys, those hard hearted fellows, practically cheered when the Cardigan left us. She didn't like them and they in turn didn't care for her.

Sue R. Sudekum:

Like humans, it depends on how well known/loved the departed might have been, I think.

When my rescue Pemmy, Monty, died from lymphoma after living with us for a year and a half, my two surviving dogs were very sedate and quiet, lost their spunk and joy of life, and would just shuffle around the back field with me. They might have just been picking up on my emotions, as I loved that dog and I was majorly saddened as well.

When we added the new puppy, Ebenezer, a month later, everything was back to chaos.

But when Smiley Riley, my second rescue, died this past spring, he had only been with us for less than 6 months and hadn't bonded with my other dogs, so when he passed, the others were like "yeah? so what? What's for dinner, ma". I'll admit I didn't get real attached to Smiley since I knew he was a lost cause from day one, and he didn't bond with anyone in my household, so when he died, it was more of a relief and happiness that he'd gone on to peace and to be with his previous owner.

Diana Moos:

I think Bonnie was the one who missed her friends the most. After Maggie died, Bonnie ran off at a boat ramp because she thought the corgi on another dock was Maggie. When I mentioned it to my vet friend, she told me to get another corgi. So Holly came to live with us and the two bonded deeply.

Then after Holly unexpectedly bridged due to complications from her back injury, Bonnie looked everywhere for her. We walk loose in a field and she ran home to find Holly to walk with her. She grieved for at least a month even though Holly's mother Sweet Sara had come to live with us while Holly was still alive. But Sara wasn't Holly in Bonnie's mind. She still searched for Holly.

Sweet Sara on the other hand never seemed to notice even though Holly was her daughter, nor did she miss Bonnie after she died. It rather seemed like she was thrilled to finally be an only!!!



Melinda Lane:

Perhaps it depends on the dog and the situation. When we had to put the dog that I'd had for years to sleep, it really upset our PWC (MacGregor) who had looked at her as a "mom" figure and pack leader. He was very distraught and didn't want to leave any of us.

Currently, my two CWC's have a horrible time if separated, they'll pace and get very upset if they are apart from each other.

MacGregor (who is my sister's dog now) didn't used to care too much if my dogs were around or not, he simply wasn't as attached to them as he had been to Peaches. However, since my sister's husband passed away, Mac has been more clingy with everyone, including my dogs. He barked and cried when I took them out the other day without him.

Ginny Benson:

Some time ago, about 2001, we lost our 14 year old mutt doggie, Mishka, to complications of age. That left my husband and I with one big, old mutt doggie named Buddy. Buddy was a dog that was left with us to puppy-sit some years earlier, but had never left. When Mishka went to the bridge, we decided that losing them was too difficult and we would not be getting another.

However, whenever we mentioned Mishka's name, Buddy went in search of her. He would perk up and just go looking all over the house or yard. After a bit, he would return, obviously sad that he did not find Mishka. We learned not to mention her name in front of Buddy!

Months went by and we all tried to put aside the loss of Mishka. One evening, we were watching Michael Douglas' movie, "Don't Say a Word," and guess what name the character's doll had? Mishka! Buddy heard "Mishka" from the TV and his search started again. It was really quite heartbreaking.

That night we decided that it wasn't fair to any of us and we decided to adopt another dog. And that is how we became interested in Corgis and ultimately adopted Yoli and then later, Phoebe too.

So, yes, I believe they grieve and they remember for a long time too. Buddy has since gone on to rainbow bridge, but I'm very grateful to him!!!

Jane Olbricht:

My Darby almost died from grief when his sister Molly died two years ago. He looked and looked for her and cried at her regular resting places. He got an infection that wouldn't clear up and we thought that he would die. I ended up taking him to work with me (I travel on my job) because I couldn't leave him alone he was so sad. Darby also mourned our little kitty, Little Sister, that passed away from old age a couple of years before Molly died. He still looks for Sister in her little "room" .

I still do not say Molly's name around Darby. I don't know if this is typical Corgi behavior. When Molly was a little puppy my German Shepherd Prince died and she seemed to be in mourning even though she had very little time with Prince. Darby was a rescue and desperate for love, maybe that's why he was so attached to Molly and Little Sister.

I doubt he would be able to survive if something happened to me. His behavior changes so much when I'm ill.

After the death of a human

Shelley Camm:

As for the dogs, yes they dog grieve. I still see it in my guys two years after Chris is gone. Chip, especially, who was Chris' dog much more than mine, still runs up to the office, to look for him. Some have now stopped going down there altogether, and some still trot down the hall, tail wagging, look in the office and then come back.

Like people they will all grieve in their own way, and in their own time, and come through it, somehow, with support. I'm sure that our reaction fuels theirs also. I can't bear to be in the office myself, unless I need to print a document, so it is 120 sq ft of dead space in this house now that human and corgis do not enter unless absolutely necessary.

Steph:

Dogs grieve. I went through this last year because of my husband's death. His Dexter is just now becoming easier to be with. He has clung and barked and growled at other dogs and races to the door if it is a man to sniff and check it is not his man. It takes them a long time. I don't think they understand what has happened. Just that their love is gone.

Melinda Lane:

I've been living with my sister and her husband. My brother-in-law has been very ill and passed away this morning. He's been in the hospital for the past week. The corgis are all acting differently and Emily and I want to be sure they're ok and don't get sick or anything. MacGregor was their dog, he's an 8 year old PWC. He's been incredibly bossy since Michael went to the hospital. He was Michael's best buddy, he would get up on the bed with him so Michael could pet him and MacGregor would give him corgi kisses. MacGregor has been barking a lot more than normal. He's not a barker. He will bark to let you know someone's at the door, but that's it, normally. He's also been extra sweet, getting up and cuddling Emily. Sweet and bossy...

Harley is my dog, but he was Michael's buddy too, the only corgi tall enough to reach the bed being an extra large Cardi, he would go to the bedroom and visit Michael several times a day, putting his head up on the bed next to him. He's 13 and he's normally social, but he's never been glued to me - he will follow me around the house, but not all the time - now he's following me everywhere, even sitting by my chair at the desk, he's never done that. He's also droopy, he's the always happy clown of the corgi crew and he's just been moping around, dragging and looking depressed.

Duffy is also 13 and a CWC. He's never been a social butterfly, but he would go and say 'hi' to Michael, but since the day Michael went to the hospital he has not left the back of the house, he sticks to my room (the den), and the kitchen. He is not back to destroying his

stuffed toys, but he was digging a hole in the yard today and it was a different dig. Usually he digs and undigs his hole in the back with his tail wagging in glee, this dig was like he was mad at something, and he didn't put the dirt back like he usually does. We just don't know how the dogs handle loss and want to be sure that they stay healthy. They are all getting and giving hugs and cuddles.



Photo: Meta Feenstra

Maggi Payne:

My husband died suddenly in the spring of 2008. At the time, we had two PWCs - Annie Rose, who was nearly 14; and Buddy, a rescue, who was 6 or 7. Annie Rose, who was my husband's heart dog, died just four days after his memorial service.

Buddy was devastated and confused. He has become much less confident and much more dependent on me and is always glued to my side. He has also developed health issues. We spend a great deal of time together, enjoying each other's company.

I truly believe that dogs grieve in a variety of ways and need our love and assurance that, although life is now different, we will, in the end, be okay.

* * * *

And here is one more remarkable and very touching story about a grieving dog:

"More than 20 years ago my husband died at 46 after a four-year battle with cancer. During my husband's illness, Friday, our Golden Retriever, lay beside his bed, provided support when my husband walked, and never left his side. He obviously knew something was wrong and was devoted to his master.

Before my husband was ill, he was a senior sports-and-news cameraman for a major TV station. Owing to the nature of his assignments, my husband's work hours were unpredictable. Regardless of the hour, Friday always knew when my husband was headed home and ran to the front door, wagging his tail and sitting patiently until my husband's car pulled into the driveway.

After my husband's death (in the hospital), Friday sat at the front door all day, every day, whining and waiting for my husband's return. He stopped eating and wouldn't leave the front hallway. He refused to play with our children whom he loved because "guard duty" was his only purpose. He left his post only when he needed to be walked. My heart was breaking for this dog.

After one week of watching Friday's vigil, I decided to help him understand what happened. Hesitantly, Friday left his post and got into the car with me. His car behavior was unusual: He paced from window to window, looking everywhere for my husband. I drove to the cemetery, and we walked together toward my husband's gravesite. As we got closer, Friday pulled away from me and ran directly to my husband's grave. He lay down on the grave, closed his eyes, and just stayed there, quietly. I didn't try to talk to Friday or to disturb him - he needed to grieve, too. After an hour, Friday got up and walked over to me, using his mouth to hand me his leash. He was ready to go home.

On the way back home, Friday laid down quietly in the backseat. After we arrived home, he kept kissing my hands as if to say "thank you" and never again sat by the front door waiting for my husband to return home. He now understood. Although obviously sad, his behavior returned to normal around the children and he began eating again. In time, he healed as we did."

L.B.J., Lake Worth, FL – Found on the internet.

Saying Goodbye

Anonymous:

When the late great big blue dog Scooter died (suddenly, at home at 12 years old), we let Chester and Toby in to see him and that seemed to satisfy them. While they were both rather subdued for some days, I honestly don't know whether they were feeling their own grief or just responding to mine.

When Chester died last October, the situation was rather different, as Chester was almost 16 and 1/2 and failed after a long slow decline. We did take him to our trusted vet for the last act, but Toby had been right there by his side supporting him, and he didn't seem too surprised when we came home without Chester. He moped around very distinctly for several days, but then we took him away for the weekend to our friends' chilli cook-off. There he was his usual social-butterfly-life-of-the-party self, and he came home in a much better frame of mind. I know this was him rather than me, as I was still feeling the loss very strongly and did for several weeks.

Ginnie Benson:

Our last one to need help to the bridge was my mother's 21-year-old Chihuahua. He had lived with us for some years and we opted to have the vet come to our home. We had "our girls" behind a kiddie gate so that they could be there, but not be in the way. After, we let them come out to sniff. Each one came up to him, gave a sniff and then quietly walked away. It was much like a viewing at a funeral. I think it helped them to understand.

In future, if possible, I think the home procedure is easiest for all. We've never had them go looking for him and I don't think they felt a great loss.

Leslie Gene Reed:

Early in our marriage (and long before the corgis), my husband and I had a 45 lbs husky x shepherd girl and a 15 lbs wire terrier mix girl. We joked that Decker was the sun and Scooter orbited her. When Decker was 9, she became sick with what was a terminal illness. We were very worried about how Scooter, who had never been an "only" dog, and who really did think Decker was her sun, would fare once Decker passed. To see Scooter searching for her best friend would've broken our hearts even more than they were already breaking.

I did a lot of research in the few weeks we had and although I can't remember the book or the author now, her recommendation was to allow other dogs in the household to view the body to understand the deceased dog wasn't "lost", but had actually died.

In the end, Decker had to be euthanized. We didn't want to bring Scooter along because we

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didn't want her to have bad associations with our vet's office, so we did one of the hardest things we have ever done. We brought Decker's body home, carried her in and laid her on the kitchen floor. We both sat on the floor with her, crying. Scooter did the most amazing thing. She walked up to her friend, sniffed ALL around her body for what seemed like a very long time although I'm sure it was just a few minutes, then she backed off a few yards away, sat down, and cocked her head with an expression that said, "I get it. I understand." While she was sad and lonely for a time, Scooter never searched for Decker after that day. Since that time, we have, if possible, given all our dogs the opportunity to "view the body". Some were interested, some were not, but I feel we've given them the possibility of closure if they needed it.

Linda Kerr:

Abbey, our 11 year old Pem was diagnosed with hemangiosarcoma in May 2011 and we thought she would surely be the first of our four Corgis to go. They gave her 30 - 60 days without chemo which we chose not to do. She is still going strong 9 months later on some holistic meds and regular meds and will be 12 next month.



Sofie

She and Sofie, our sweet fluffy, were so close and only a year apart in age. Sofie started feeling bad in December 2011 and was diagnosed with nasal carcinoma on January 4th. It was a very aggressive cancer that filled her nasal cavity, and was pushing into her brain and eye. So the end came for her on January 20 this year.

We decided to take Abbey with us when we had no choice but to help Sofie to the Rainbow Bridge and Abbey got to tell Sofie goodbye both before and after the procedure. The most touching part was when Abbey reached over and licked Sofie's nose just as she passed. I believe it was a good thing to take Abbey with us so she could see that Sofie was gone.

I know a few breeders that actually leave the dog for the others to say goodbye to all night long.

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