## **Joyful Musings**

By Joy Birnbach Dunstan, MA, LPC, MAC

## What's the Big Deal? It's Just a Dog...



Sadly, there's frequently a lack of real understanding from family or friends when it comes to losing a pet. "What's the big deal?" they say, and then suggest you go to the shelter and get a new one like you might replace your broken toaster.

But for most of us pet owners, losing a pet is like losing a human loved one. We love our pets like our children and losing them can be devastating. For some people, their pet is their only family, and perhaps even their best friend. If you've lost a pet, don't let anyone tell you that you're being crazy or overly sentimental to grieve. A grief response is completely natural and

normal at a time like this. And feelings can be intensified if your pet has died an untimely or cruel death like the recent spate of killings that occurred in our village.

Sometimes, it is the very differences between humans and animals that make us feel so close to our pets. Our pets don't talk and so they can't pass judgment or argue with us (although my dogs certainly express some strong opinions!). For many, pets provide a source of unconditional love, affection and companionship.

The qualities of a beloved pet are hard to match in human form. There's some truth in the old joke, "What's the difference between a new spouse and a new dog?" After a year, the dog will still be excited to see you.

Losing a beloved pet is difficult enough, but the agony is even greater when we are faced with the dilemma of whether to euthanize a sick or aged pet. With animals we have the ability, even the responsibility, to end their life if they are living in pain and suffering. I've had many pets over the years, and there is no harder question to face than whether it is the right time to help them go.

In making that decision, your veterinarian is the best judge of your pet's physical condition, but you are the best judge of the quality of your pet's daily life. With the dogs I've had, I found that their eyes told me all I needed to know. Even if your pet is needing some extra care or special treatment, if there is still a sparkle in the eyes and an enjoyment of life, it may not be time.

However, if your pet is in constant pain, undergoing difficult and stressful treatments that aren't helping very much, unresponsive to affection, unaware of its surroundings, and uninterested in life, it can be a caring and loving decision to end your beloved companion's suffering. Nothing can make this decision an easy one, but it is truly the final act of love you can make for your pet.

If you have lost your pet, you may wonder about getting a new one.

Generally, it's not a good idea to do that right away. If your emotions are still in turmoil, you may

resent a new pet for trying to "take the place" of the other one. You may think you could never let yourself bond to a new pet or feel like loving a new pet is "disloyal" to the previous one. A person needs time to work through grief and loss before attempting to build a relationship with a new pet.

When you are ready to find a new animal friend, avoid getting a "lookalike" pet, which makes comparisons all the more likely. Don't give a new pet the same name as the old one. Don't expect your new pet to be "just like" the one you lost, but allow it to show you its own personality. With a little luck and a lot of love, you'll soon have a new best friend to share many rewarding years with.

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