

Those of us who share our lives with horses or pets know the joy of sharing our lives with these special furry friends. These animals often are a wonderful part of our family and daily lives. However, the loss of such a dear friend can be a tragic, even devastating loss.

Sometimes we don't understand the grief process or feel that we shouldn't have these intense feelings for our pets. We here at AHDF would like to help you understand the process of grieving and let you know that **you are not alone** and that it is completely normal to grieve the loss of an animal friend and family member in the same way you would grieve a human friend or family member.

## **Understanding the Experience**

Grief is normal and in most cases very healthy. When we experience loss, or the anticipation of a loss (such as a diagnosis of a severe disease), it is natural and inevitable that we will grieve that loss. While each individual's experience will vary, most of us share common aspects of grief, including physical, emotional, mental/intellectual and social responses. You may or may not experience any or all of the following "symptoms".

**Physical signs** such as shock or numbness, dry mouth, a "lump in the throat," nausea, tightness in the chest or stomach ache. Another common manifestation of grief is crying – from a quiet emotional release to sobbing and wailing. Many people experience sleep and/or appetite disturbance, may feel dizzy or faint, or have signs of depression or anxiety.

**Mental signs** of grief, including experiencing: denial of the loss, a feeling that it's unreal, confusion, difficulty concentrating, and preoccupation with the loss. It is common to experience hallucinations concerning the loss, including thinking that you see or hear your loved one. It is normal to want to reminisce about your horse and to talk about the circumstances of the loss. You may feel that time is passing very slowly, have a need to rationalize or intellectualize feelings about the loss, or even have thoughts or fantasies about suicide.

**Other emotions** that accompany grief, including: depression, sadness, relief, guilt, anger, blame, loneliness, anxiety, and feelings that may feel inappropriate (nervous smiles, laughter, giddiness; an unusual level of irritability). You may be feeling overwhelmed, resentful, helpless, hopeless, even embarrassed. Some people find themselves doubting themselves, having lowered self-esteem, and feeling victimized.

**Socially**, grieving people may isolate themselves, withdrawing from social situations or feel alienated from others. It is common to reject others, feel reluctant to ask for help or to take people up on offers of help. At the other end of the spectrum, some people rely increasingly on someone else and become more dependent than usual. It is common to want a change of situation – from using a different boarding facility to moving to a new town, changing friends or activities, or to become very busy in order to distract oneself from the grief.

There is no set time frame for grieving. For some people, it may last days; for others it may last years. Grieving can occur in waves ("come and go"), healthy grieving gradually lessens in

intensity over time. Special occasions – holidays, birthdays or the anniversary of special occasions – may bring many memories and these may trigger brief increases in grief.

Watch yourself and your loved ones closely for physical signs which may need treatment. Some of the physical symptoms can be treated by your family physician. Grief can lead to diseases which grief can trigger, including stomach ulcers, heart attack, significant depression or anxiety, or disturbances of sleep or appetite which significantly affect life (work, family, etc.). These can be treated by your family doctor. If you have repeated thoughts or fantasies about suicide, or find yourself making any concrete steps toward acting on such thoughts, please seek professional mental help. While depression is a normal part of grief, it is also a treatable disease, and treatment will help you feel better while still allowing you to grieve.

Some things you can do to help yourself in times of grief include:

- Closure. Hold a memorial or funeral for your horse or pet.
- Deep breathing. When we become stressed, we often breathe more rapidly and shallowly than normal. Taking the time to focus on breathing and take long, slow, deep breaths for a few minutes can help us become more calm and think more clearly.
- Grieve. We often feel we “shouldn’t” express our grief, and sometimes there are legitimate reasons to try to control our emotions (e.g. it can be unsafe to drive when very upset), but we must allow our emotions to be expressed. If we try to hold in our emotions and not express them appropriately they can manifest themselves in other ways such as irrational anger/irritability or through physical disease. One useful technique to help with this is to allow ourselves a time to grieve as unashamedly, uncontrollably and as freely as we would like (a private time, such as at home or even during a bath or shower can be a great setting for this). Secondly, by having a set-aside time to grieve as we would like to, we can sometimes defer a moment of grief until later. When a sudden wave of grief hits, we can sometimes tell ourselves “not now, I can do this later, when I can do it freely.” Finally, there will be times when you need to grieve *at that moment*, and that’s perfectly ok – just make sure you are in a safe situation (for example, if driving, pull over and stop).
- Muscle relaxation. When you have a few minutes of quiet time, sit or lay down and practice progressive muscle relaxation. One by one, tense up a group of muscles (e.g. your shoulders) as hard as you can for 10-20 seconds, then relax it completely. Repeat this with different muscle groups throughout your body. With practice this will help reduce your physical stress and relax your mind.
- Perspective. Think about what you value most in life. Think about all the people and animals that love and support you, and all the positive things in your life. Remember that this loss is not the **only** thing in your life, even if it sometimes feels that way.
- Guilt-free, grief-free time. It can be especially difficult after a loss to enjoy some of the activities which used to make you happy. However, your horse (or any loved one you have lost) would not want you to feel bad *all* the time. When you are ready, take some time and make it free of demands and responsibilities. Start with 10-15 minutes of time in which you don’t have to do anything responsible, and in which you can set aside your grief for just a few moments while you cherish the people, pets, and activities you love. Take a walk with a friend or loved one. Groom or ride a horse. Take a hot bath, eat some

of your favorite dessert. Don't worry, you won't forget about your loss with just a few minutes of happiness in your day.

Resources:

There are a number of wonderful books that may help you through your grief. This is a short list of those books.

- Sometimes it Breaks Your Heart by Dr. Richard Orzeck
- Crossing the Rubicon by Julie Kaufman (limited number available through the AHDF for \$10)
- I'll Always Love You by Hans Wilhelm
- Final Act of Caring by Mary and Herb Montgomery

[AVMA Brochure on Equine Euthanasia – How Do I Know It's The Right Time?](#)

[Support telephone hotlines](#)

530-752-4200 or 800-565-1526 — Staffed by University of California Davis veterinary students weekdays, 6:30 pm to 9:30 pm

[I Miss My Pet](#) a workbook to help children deal with the loss of a pet

[Rainbow Bridge Grief Center](#)

Rainbow Bridge Poem

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor. Those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.

They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent. His eager body quivers. Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together....

Author unknown...