

Experiencing Grief Before the Actual Loss

Anticipatory grief, also known as pre-loss bereavement, happens when you know you will lose your pet, but it has not yet occurred. You may have some time to prepare such as days, weeks, or even months. Anticipatory grief can include a period of hopefulness when the diagnosis is being effectively managed. This form of grief is not often talked about but commonly experienced.

Keep in mind that letting go doesn't mean you have to stop loving your companion animal; even after they die. During this stage, some people begin to find a safe place in their hearts to hold memories and also focus on creating new memories in the time their pet has left. Others make a bucket list and do things that they have always wanted to do with their pet, as well as activities their pet loves to do more often.

The emotions that accompany anticipatory grief are similar to those which occur after a loss but can be even more like a roller coaster at times. Some days may be challenging; other days, you may not experience grief at all. Here are some common signs of anticipatory grief:

- ♥ Sadness & tearfulness
- ♥ Fear
- ♥ Irritability
- ♥ Loneliness
- ♥ A desire to talk about what is happening
- ♥ Anxiety
- ♥ Guilt
- ♥ Intense concern for your pet

Tips for Coping with Pre-Loss Bereavement:

Accept that this phenomenon is normal.

Feeling grief before a pet's death is expected. You are allowed to feel this type of suffering. It is a common experience that has been well documented, you are not alone in this.

Remember that anticipatory grief doesn't mean giving up.

There can be a feeling of guilt that comes with acceptance. Focus on what you are doing; such as: supporting, caring, loving, etc. You are shifting your energy to meaningful time together.

Reflect on and appreciate your remaining time together.

Utilize whatever time your pet has left to take care of any unfinished business. If you haven't spent as much time with your pet as you'd like, spend it now. If there are special treats or experiences that your pet particularly enjoys, use this time to provide them to your furry family member.

Be realistic about your pet's condition.

Don't bargain for a miraculous cure; you will only be disappointed. Instead, look for ways to provide comfort.

Communicate

Keeping the lines of communication open with your family and friends can help everyone better understand what you are experiencing. It is essential to express your pain and let yourself grieve. Finding someone you can share these feelings openly with is extremely helpful. Not everyone will understand; lean on those that do.

Be in the moment.

To live in the moment with your pet means being conscious, aware, and in the present with all of your senses. It means not dwelling on the past, nor being anxious or worrying about the future. When we concentrate our attention on the present, we awaken to fully experience our time with our beloved pet.

Acknowledge the losses, past and present.

People may say things that minimize what is happening. Consider journaling or other creative outlets to express emotions around things like acceptance of the impending death, loss of hope, loss of the future imagined, etc. A new loss will often bring up old loss; acknowledge this with new perspectives.

Connect with others who share similar bonds.

Caregiving and anticipatory grief can be a long road. Without proper support, navigating the grief may feel impossible. Ask for assistance from your friends, spiritual leaders, support groups, and professionals. Counseling can be helpful for people who need a place to process complicated emotions in a safe space. [Psychologytoday.com](https://www.psychologytoday.com) or your primary care physician is an excellent resource for finding a counselor.

Relief is normal.

Feelings of relief after an anticipated death is a normal response after an overwhelming time in your life.

Information adapted from: Rando, TA, ed (2000)