

## Saying Goodbye

When you go through the heartache of losing your dog, there is no pain like it. And worse of all, no-one seems to understand how you feel other than those who have been there beforehand.

When we lost our gorgeous GSD, it was like I had lost both my child and my best friend. I'd never had children of my own, and she had been my constant shadow for the last eight years. The love of my life. She had suffered for a long time with degenerative myelopathy unfortunately, which had started to really progress, so in the end we agreed that the kindest thing to do would be to let her go humanely, with dignity and love.

Don't get me wrong, this was no easy decision. If I could, I would have kept her by my side for ever, but we made the decision for her and not ourselves. The day that she left us, we arranged for the vets to come to our house where she was happy, calm and safe, and even though it ripped our hearts from our chests, we held her, and soothed her until she fell asleep in our arms.

We let friends and family know of our sad news, and kind words flooded in, which was wonderful and heartbreaking in equal measure. However, before long it just....stopped. So many people just didn't get it. After all it wasn't like we'd lost an actual child or anything was it? It was just a dog....

Just a dog.

Well for those of you who are yet to understand or experience the pain of losing a beloved pet, studies have been undertaken which prove that the pain is just as bad, if not worse in some cases than losing a human family member. Your dog is a companion, a best friend, a fur baby, a life line, not 'just a dog'.

When you lose your pup, you will go through exactly the same grieving process as you would in losing a human relative...shock, disbelief, numbness, anger, pain, guilt, and overwhelming sadness. You have to allow yourself to feel all those things, and give yourself time to heal properly. Just because you're grieving for a furry four legged friend as opposed to a human, doesn't give any less right to feel pain.

You need to be kind to yourself during this time. If you need to take time off work, then do so. If you need to work to take your mind off of things then do so. We are all different in the way we deal with grief, so do what's right for you.

I had no idea beforehand, but there are people out there who can help with your loss. Pet bereavement counsellors, pet bereavement phone lines, local veterinary surgery bereavement groups, and friends. Those who have been through the pain will listen without prejudice, sometimes even in the middle of the night when it all gets too much.

One of the best things I did was to ring the Blue Cross Bereavement line, which is open every day from 8.30am to 8.30pm. This service is run entirely by volunteers who have been through the experience themselves so are more than ready to help. If I'm honest it actually took me about four attempts to call them. I felt stupid, I didn't know what to say, and I felt like I was wasting their time as it was 'just a dog'.

There, that phrase again.

But that's what they are there for. The lady I spoke to let me cry my eyes out, and listened so patiently while I spoke incoherently about how much I loved my girl and felt like my heart was breaking into pieces.

Her advice was for me to stay busy, but to not put her out of my mind completely. Instead, she suggested that I pick one particular funny and wonderful memory of her, and bring it to my mind when I got sad. Something that would make me laugh out loud at her silly antics. There were plenty of those.

“All that you’ve buried is her old clothes” she told me. “She’s still with you, so make sure you still chat to her like you always would do.”

So that’s exactly what I did. I spoke to her like I used to. Chatted to her when I got home, and wished her goodnight when I went to bed. It was comforting to speak to my dear friend.

One of the hardest decisions to make is what to do immediately after saying goodbye. Many people find a sense of permanence and dignity in laying their dog to rest in a pet cemetery. It’s an oasis of calm where you can visit, take flowers, and rest with your pet for a while in well cared for surroundings.

The other option is cremation, which does give you different ways to remember your pet. You could keep them with you in a decorative urn, choose to bury them, or maybe scatter the ashes in a special place where you enjoyed walking together. You can choose to do it alone, or with friends and family, but a nice touch is to put together a few words which you can read out to commemorate your beautiful friend. Whatever you decide, you will have a place to visit whenever you feel the need to be close by.

Another thing that helped me tremendously was to put together a scrap book. Pick those photos of your pup that make you laugh, that make you cry, or that pinpoint milestones. Especially the silly ones that trigger amazing memories. Stick them all in the pages of a “This is Your Life” book, and alongside them write their stories. Even ask your friends and family for their memories, as generally they will be completely different to your own, and just as wonderful.

#### Tried and Tested Coping Strategies:

If you can’t face either throwing away your dog’s things, or seeing them every day, buy a nice box and put all of their treasured possessions in it. Collars, leads, special toys, even paw prints. It’s a lovely keepsake.

When you feel ready, why not donate your dog’s toys to a rescue centre? He or she would be so happy to know that other less fortunate dogs are benefitting from something of theirs.

Put together a box of tennis balls with a little note to leave at the place where you would go for walks, so that other dogs can play in your pup’s memory.

Get a portrait commissioned of your beautiful baby, and hang it in pride of place, maybe on the wall above where they used to sleep.

Don’t rush into getting another dog straight away, despite well-meaning advice.

Volunteer at your local dog rescue centre. You may not be ready for another dog in your life just yet, but it will do you, and the rescue dogs so much good to be in each other’s company. Your dog would definitely approve.

Whatever you do, just give yourself time. It sounds trite, but it really is a great healer. The pain will always be there, but the intensity of it lessens as your new life experiences find their way to cushion it a little more each day.

And who knows, even though you will never be able to replace your beloved friend, maybe one day another dog will manage to steal your heart again. Your forever friend will always have a place in your heart; and they would want you to remember the good times and to live your life as happily as you can.

*“How lucky are we to have had something that makes saying goodbye so hard” (A. A. Milne)*

For support and information:

Blue Cross

<https://www.bluecross.org.uk/pet-bereavement-and-pet-loss>