

**Stoney Creek Veterinary Hospital  
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**When It's Time to Say Good-bye...  
How Families Cope with the Death of a Cherished Pet**

They are called “babies”, “four-legged kids” even “fur-children” and are often given human names. We care for our pets as treasured members of the family. But, when the end of life approaches, what options are available to remember our friends? How can we say good-bye?

For many pet owners, the end of their pet's life can be a heart-wrenching and especially emotional time. When faced with the decision for euthanasia, even normally hard-hearted individuals can break down. Euthanasia means “easy death” and can really be a blessing for those pets whose quality of life has greatly deteriorated. But still, ending the life of your best friend is difficult. Your veterinarian will help you to understand the process and how to recognize when your pet is suffering. Some pet owners report that “unspoken signs” will pass between them and their pets, signaling that it's ok to let go.

It doesn't matter if the death comes abruptly through trauma or gently through a planned overdose of anesthetic at the veterinarian's office; the pet's family is suddenly left with an empty feeling. Many have only treasured memories and a few photographs of their beloved pet. As pets share unconditional love with us, some owners wonder how they can return that love even after their pet is gone.

Mention planning a funeral for your pet and many people might snicker at you. But, memorial services, pet burials, and even pet-loss support hotlines are becoming increasingly more common across North America. According to the Atlanta Journal Constitution, more than 600 pet cemeteries and crematories now offer funeral services for pets. Coleen Ellis, owner of Pet Angel Memorial Center in Carmel, Indiana has seen her business expand as more pet owners want to find a way to memorialize their pet. Ellis says that often a pet's death becomes an educational experience. “Pet owners are often unaware of options that are available for them”, she says “Owners often come into our chapel and are amazed at all the different ideas that are offered for helping them to celebrate the life of their pet.” As examples, Ellis cites the availability of “family urns” for pet owners with multiple pets, unique decorative urns or even ornamental keepsakes.

For many pet owners, the “after-life” options for their pet have been limited. Pet burials at home can violate local ordinances and despite the presence of pet cemeteries, less than 10% of pets will be buried there. Most pets end up being cremated with the owner choosing whether or not to keep the ashes. Owners often say good-bye to their pet in a clinical setting and, according to Ellis, many families don't have opportunities to come together, as they would if a human family member died.

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At Ellis' Pet Angel Memorial Center, pet families can choose from simple Remembrance Packages to complete Celebration of Life Packages that will include invitations to a planned memorial service, a casket and burial. Although still not extremely common, Ellis says that memorial services and visitation times are becoming more frequent. In fact, when "Bo", a local police dog, died, more than 500 people showed up at the chapel for the memorial. Ellis has held services for dogs, cats, pocket pets, reptiles, and even for goldfish.

There is no doubt that our pets touch our lives deeply through their unconditional love. For many, the loss of that love is also the loss of an era of time. As pets live longer, many owners are faced with the death of a companion who has seen them through college, a new career, and maybe even a marriage or two. That loss can be overwhelming for some.

Pet loss support hot lines have been set up at many of the veterinary schools and even some of the larger veterinary hospitals. Veterinarians and their staffs can attend training on recognizing extreme grief in their clients and helping clients validate that grief. To many, admitting to that level of sorrow is difficult as people fear the ridicule and scorn of friends and family. But, according to [www.pet-loss.net](http://www.pet-loss.net), people should not feel ashamed or embarrassed by these feelings. Grief counseling is often recommended for many pet owners.

Just as our pets now receive "human-quality" medical care, many dogs, cats, and other pets are being remembered in ways similar to human funerals. Ask your family veterinarian or their staff about resources in your area to help when your pet passes away. And remember that grief is a normal occurrence. If you are having difficulty after the death of a pet, seek professional assistance.