

Ehrlichiosis: Coping with losing your pet

Your dog may be affected by ehrlichiosis.

Ehrlichiosis is a tick-borne disease of dogs that is spreading rapidly in northern Australia after its first detection in 2020. Stringent use of tick repellent products reduces the chance of your dog becoming infected and treatment is available. However, many dogs will become infected, suffer with, or die from ehrlichiosis – maybe because their owners, for a variety of reasons, are unable to access veterinary care for their dog, or because the disease did not respond well to treatment.

Veterinary professionals wish that every dog could be protected from this disease, but this is not the reality of life in the north of Australia. Sadly, your dog may be one of the dogs affected by ehrlichiosis.

Witnessing the suffering or death of your furry companion and friend is extremely difficult. You may experience a range of emotions, at different times, or all at the same time. You may feel the pain at seeing their suffering, sadness at their loss, guilt at being unable to protect your pet, or anger if your dog cannot be treated or saved.

These emotions can build up over time and affect the way we think, feel and act. We may withdraw from our family, friends, colleagues and activities,

feeling that we don't have the energy or motivation to engage with them. We may become irritable and reactive to things that would not normally be problematic.

Processing our emotions helps to prevent their build-up and the impact they have on our physical and mental health. One or more of the following suggestions could help.

Acknowledge and normalise your emotions.

- You may say to yourself, "I feel distressed when I think about what this disease did to Buster". Be as specific as you can when you name what you are feeling – you have to name it to tame it.
- Knowing that you are not alone helps. You may say to yourself, "It is normal to feel distressed when you lose a pet. Buster was part of my family". Reminding yourself that your emotion is normal helps your brain make sense of what you are feeling.

Express your emotions safely, for example, by crying.

- Crying has many benefits that you can read about here - 8 benefits of crying: Why do we cry, and when to seek support (medicalnewstoday.com)



Talk about how you are feeling with a safe person.

- A safe person will listen without judgement or interruption and understands what your pet meant to you. This may be your friend, family member or the team at your veterinary clinic.

Write about how you are feeling.

- This can structure and order your thoughts and prevent them from churning around in your mind.

Grieving rituals can help.

- You might like to bury your pet's body or ashes and conduct an informal ceremony at the same time.
- You might like to plant a tree in a place that was special to you both. You could frame a photo of them in their heyday or maybe it is something else.

Be more deliberate in looking after yourself.

- Eating healthily, maintaining exercise and sleep, spending time with important people and doing things you enjoy.
- It is very easy to stop doing the things that we know are good for us when we are unhappy.

Remember the good times.

As time goes on, you may start reminiscing about the good times you had with your pet and reflecting on the positives they brought to your life.

There is a wide range of normal in our grief responses. Typically, we move between times when we feel and experience the grief (for example we may drive past a favourite walking spot and this may trigger our emotions) and times when we avoid or suppress our feelings

and can function fairly normally. Over time, we usually can function more of the time and with less intrusive thoughts of our pet.

Please consult a professional if your moods and emotions are having a large impact on your life or are persisting with little improvement. This may be your GP, counsellor, psychologist or you may contact Beyond Blue or Lifeline.

Grieving a lost pet and integrating their loss into your on-going life story can be a complex and lengthy process. Please be kind to yourself. Your animal companion was important to you and with time it does get easier.

