



Grieving the Loss of an Animal



While we have traditionally thought of grieving as a linear process, it may make more sense to view it as a series of tasks to complete to help you cope with the loss.



Accepting the reality of the loss.

It's common after your animal's death to minimize the loss, or for others to minimize it ("It's just a dog!"). But accepting that your animal or is gone, and accepting that adjusting to a life without them will be difficult, is an important part of grieving.



Sit with the pain.

Grief can involve lots of different emotions-- sadness, anger, guilt. Those emotions are painful and it's normal to want to avoid them by burying them or putting them out of your mind. But grieving means sitting with that pain. It means naming the emotions you are feeling, confronting them, and learning to make sense of them.



Begin learning to adjust.

Losing your animal will likely mean some changes to your both your daily routine as well as your worldview. It may take some time to begin navigating those changes.

Internal adjustments might include changes to your identity (particularly if you suffer herd loss). External adjustments associated with herd loss may also include making insurance claims and taking over new tasks.

Spiritual adjustments are also normative. Some people start to question previously-held beliefs, like "the world is fair."



Find a way to remember your animal.

Some people might think that to "move on" means to forget your animal, but it really means finding a place for them in your thoughts while keeping a place open for other animals or loved ones. It really means to "move forward." Place a memorial stone in your yard or garden. Make a shadow box to keep a photo of your animal, with their collar or a lock of hair. There are even craft shops online that can make a plush likeness of your animal.



Grieving the loss of livestock

- Though people somewhat expect pet owners to grieve their loss, farming and ranching families may also grieve the loss of their animals-- especially when it leads to loss of their farms.
- Loss of the farm often leads to feelings of guilt, shame, and regret. This can be especially true when an illness or predator sweeps through the herd, or if the herd was a part of a generational farm or ranch. Families gain a sense of pride and identity from caring for their herd. It represents heritage and tradition.
- The grieving process for farming and ranching families can be similar to grieving a pet. However, you may be taking on difficult tasks, like selling off property and making insurance claims. It may be especially important to take care of yourself and seek social support during this time.



Because this can lead to a sense of identity loss, concentrating on things that give you a sense of purpose, like spending time with family and loved ones or spending time pursuing a hobby you love, can help you move forward.



Normalize your grief.

When people say “You’re handling this well,” what they often mean is that you aren’t crying, or grieving in a way others can see it. Many people think grief should look a certain way-- quiet, private. But there is no correct way to grieve, and there is nothing wrong with grieving in a way that others can see it.



Take care of yourself.

The same parts of your brain that activate when you experience physical pain are also activated when you experience emotional pain. Thus taking care of your brain-- and your body-- is important. Getting enough sleep, eating well, and getting exercise-- even just a short walk-- can support your grief process.



Find support.

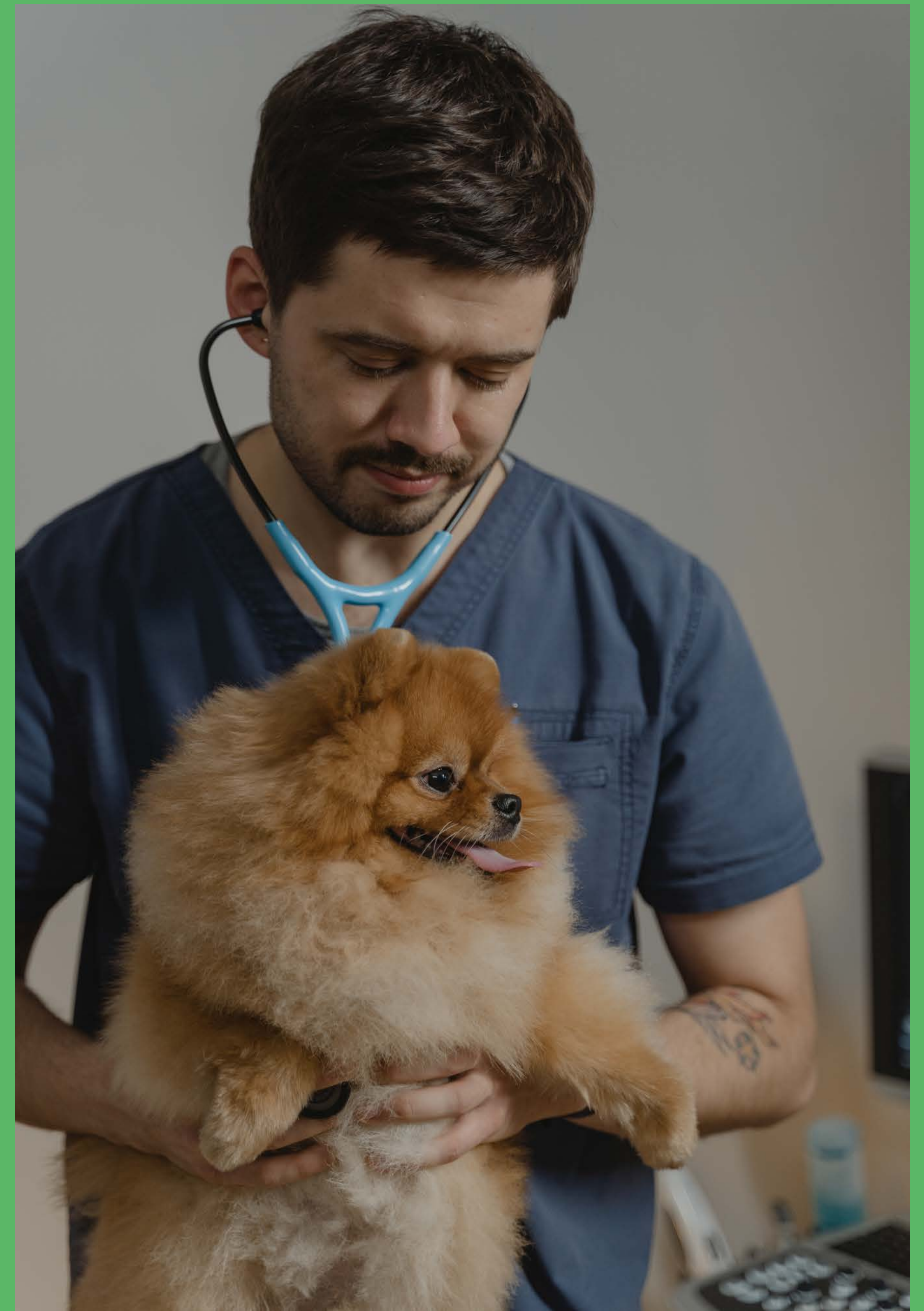
Reach out to friends and loved ones who also have pets, who are more likely to understand what you are going through. Spending time with others who care about you can help you cope, and can help you shift your focus away from your grief when it feels overwhelming.



Those suffering the grief of an animal are sometimes suffering from what scholars call "disenfranchised grief," which is grief that a person may feel they cannot openly acknowledge. Others may not consider the death of an animal as worthy of grief. That does not mean your grief is not real. Some studies suggest that losing a pet or service animal can be even more painful than losing a human loved one.

Grieving the loss of an animal as a veterinarian

- This work often involves the death of an animal you have fought to save. This can lead to feelings of guilt (i.e., "Did I make the right choice?" or "Did I do enough?"), feelings of inadequacy ("A better student/vet could have saved them"), and a sense of helplessness ("I did all I could and it didn't matter"). These feelings are normal, and your work did matter. Providing comfort to a family, or to an animal in their last days or moments, mattered.
- While some believe you should only grieve the loss of your own animal, it is normal to grieve the loss of a patient as well. In a profession with so many compassionate people, you are not the only one with these feelings. Reach out to your coworkers, classmates, and loved ones for support and understanding. Counseling services may also be able to help you sort through these feelings.
- It is okay to show emotion in front of a patient's family. While some consider it unprofessional, most patients consider it simply human, and especially if they are displaying their emotions too. Your emotional response can let them know that their loss matters to you, too.



However, if you are emotional to the extent that the family feels the need to comfort you, that may be a signal that you have some unresolved grief.



Talk about your feelings

Talking to loved ones about your feelings can help you work through what you are feeling, and you may feel more comfortable doing so with someone who can understand your feelings. Counseling services can provide support. There are also pet loss support groups online that can be helpful.

Just being listened to can help you feel supported and less alone. And it works both ways. If you open up, it might encourage others to do the same.

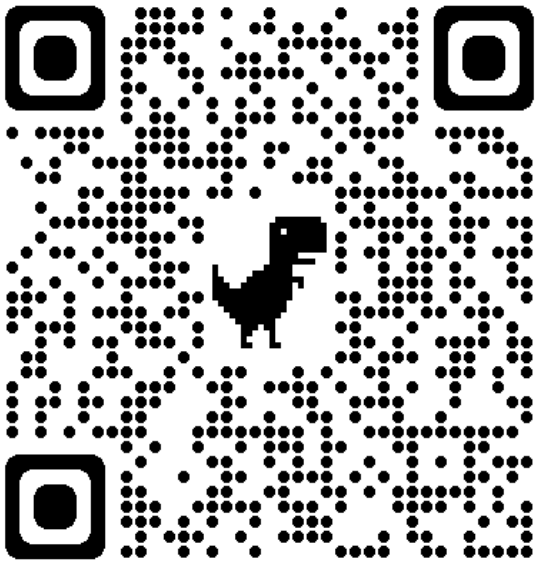


Accept your emotions

You might feel angry the animal is gone, guilt at deciding to euthanize them, or anger at the situation that resulted in their death. You may feel extremely sad due to the loss, or ashamed because you do not feel like you did enough to save them. These feelings are normative.

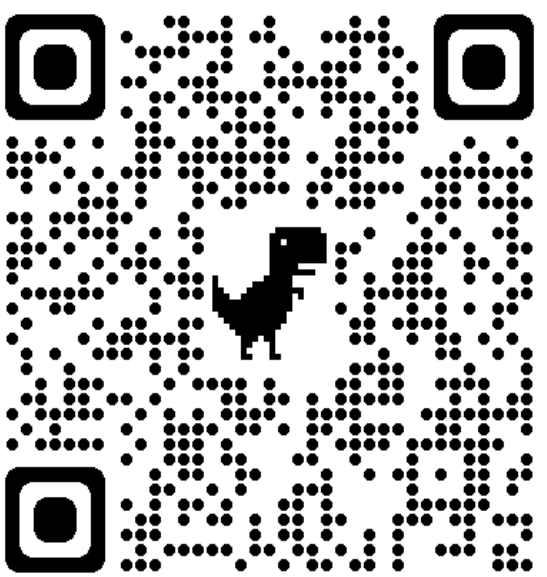
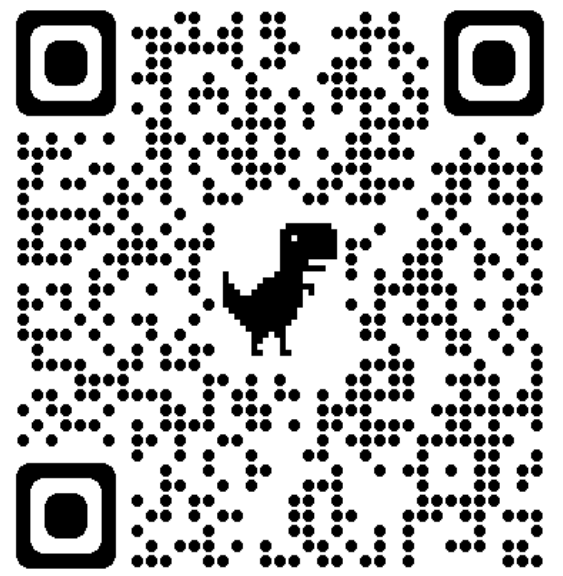
Emotions are not logical, and cannot be right or wrong. It is possible to feel all of these emotions, and to go back and forth between them as well. Practice coping statements, like "I will survive and this feeling will fade even though this feels painful right now" and "It is possible for me to feel this way now, and still end up happy."

Resources



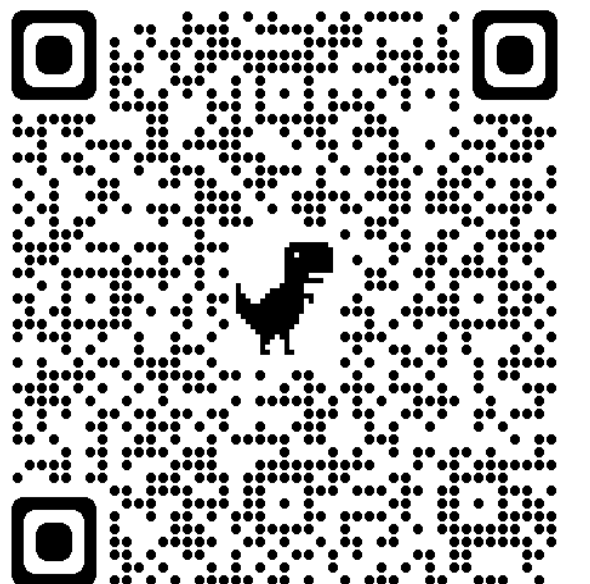
- [John Littlefair Podcast: A Conversation with Dr. Katie Lawlor, Pet Loss Psychologist](#)- A validating conversation on the loss of a beloved pet, and what grieving can look like. May be helpful to share with others to help explain your own grief.

- [Coping with Dog Loss](#)- A virtual panel discussion with a grief coach on coping with the loss of your beloved pet, including coping with emotions like sadness, loneliness, and anger



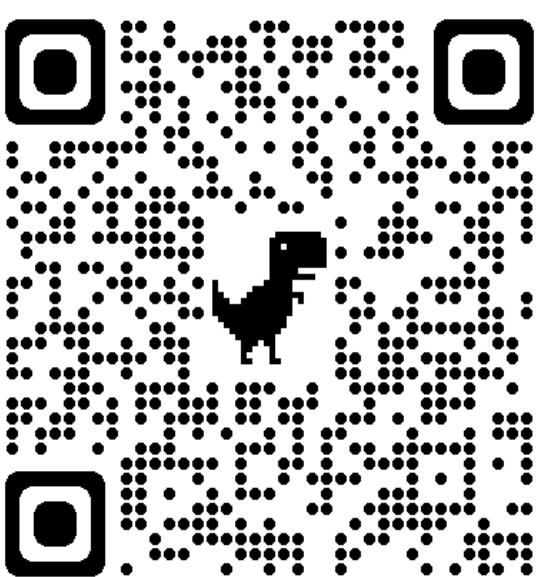
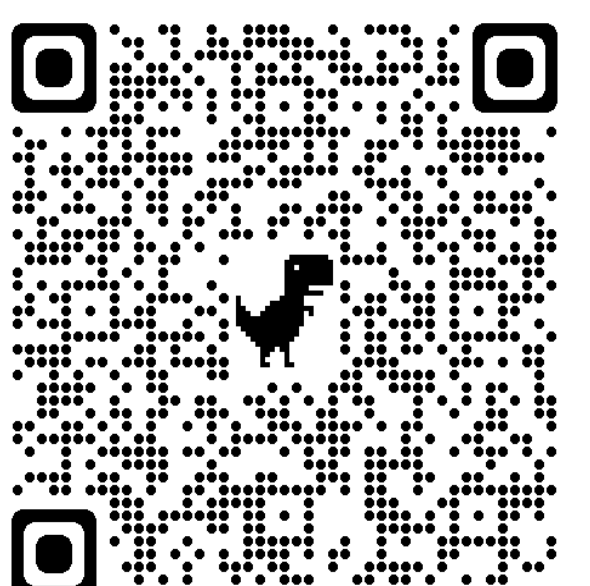
- [TedX Talk- Our Pets: Rethinking the Way We Say Goodbye](#). This talk is primarily meant for veterinary care providers, but provides some helpful talking points for focusing on end-of-life care for pet owners.

- [Coping with Restructuring or Sale of the Family Farm](#)- A fact sheet discussing the emotions and practical tasks associated with loss of a family farm.



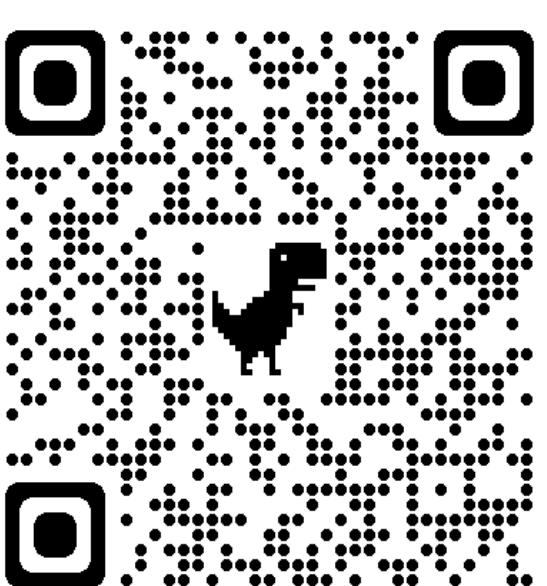
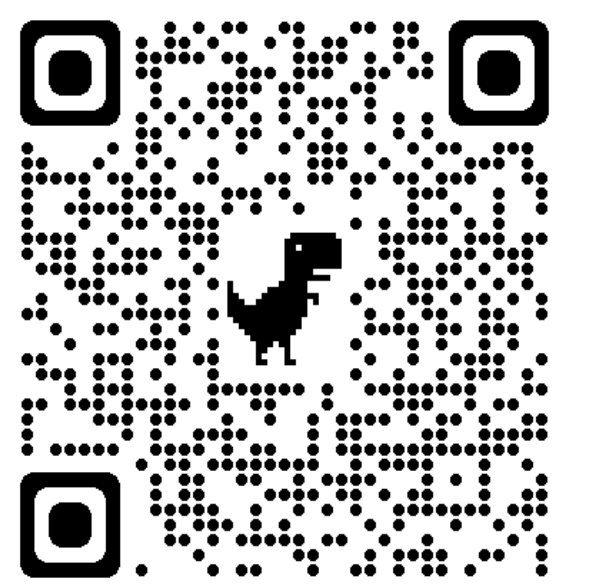
- [Rainbow Bridge Pet Loss Support Forums](#)- Forums for support after the loss of a pet as well as for those whose pets have been diagnosed with terminal cancer (Click on the dropdown menu on the left side, where it says “Categories” to see the different forums).

- [Pushing the Clouds Away: A Pet Loss Journal](#)- A combination of educational sources on grieving a pet and tools to help you process your own loss.



- [We Heart Houds Guide for Surviving Dog Loss](#)- Free tools sent to your email that include a video series, an e-book, a memorial kit, and more

- [Memorializing a Pet](#)- Things you can do to remember your pet, that may help you to find meaning and process the loss



- [A Pet's Death Can Hurt More than Losing a Fellow Human](#)- A Popular Science article on the stigma people might face after losing a pet, and how losing a pet is different from losing a beloved person

