

Storytelling: Honoring the Human-Animal Connection

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Storytelling & Journaling:

Storytelling is a way to make sense of life and the way we process what happens around and to us. Telling your own story, through journaling, can be a powerful tool for releasing emotions and relieving anxious thoughts. During trying or traumatic times, it can be an outlet for things we may not feel capable or desirous of sharing with others. It can also be a way to record life events. Journaling can be a way to pull us into the present and help us evaluate what we are currently experiencing. Journal review can help us by showing us how far we have come. Finally, it can be a way to tap into your abilities to heal yourself and move through grief and loss.

The Human-Animal Connection:

1. Physical – provide us comfort & companionship, healthy touch with another being
2. Emotional – someone to “listen” to us & give us unconditional love, give us someone to care for & an opportunity to show compassion
3. Spiritual – a connection to something bigger than ourselves, interaction with a pure soul, help us be fully present

Why It Can Be Difficult to Care For a Terminally Ill Animal and Grieve Their Death:

1. Others may not value your relationship with your animal companion as much as you do.
2. Care costs can be extreme as many do not have enough or any insurance for animal care. These costs can affect decisions around care type and length of care.
3. There is no clear way to know what your animal companion may be feeling.
4. Care can be exhausting and involve late night, early mornings, bodily fluid messes, and giving medications (including injections, etc.).

Acknowledging the Five Stages of Grief & Understanding Their Purpose:

These can be experienced in any order and you may move in and out of each of them. It can occur while you are caring for a terminally ill animal and after their death. The stages may last minutes or months. They are simply responses to feelings and you may feel all or some of them or other feelings entirely (such as anxiety).

1. Denial – helps us survive the loss, allows us to pace our grief so we don't become overwhelmed, & gives us time to process
2. Anger – necessary to create a bridge to other emotions & can give us temporary strength
3. Bargaining – a way to avoid the pain & keeps us in the past
4. Depression – what we start to feel when we move into the present; normal & appropriate response
5. Acceptance – we may never feel “okay” again, but we can accept the new norm we have to live with. Instead of denying our feelings, we begin to listen to our needs; we move, we change, we grow, we evolve. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given grief its time.
6. And Gratitude – Moving into a space of appreciating what we had. Remembering the good times and joy. Focusing on how lucky we are to feel such loss because we had so much love.

Misconceptions Around Journaling:

1. I need a fancy journal.
2. I need a lot of time.
3. It can only be done in the morning.
4. It needs to be good enough for others to read.
5. It has to be about something meaningful.
6. I have to keep whatever I write.
7. My grammar needs to be perfect.
8. It has to be handwritten, not typed.

Helpful Suggestions:

1. Start with a quiet mind.
2. Date your entry.
3. Don't think, just write.
4. Don't think of it as a chore. Think of it as a gift to yourself.
5. Keep it private.
6. Be completely truthful.
7. Write in your own voice.
8. It's okay to be repetitive.
9. Use a nice flowing pen.
10. Keep your journal handy.
11. Write as fast as you can.
12. It doesn't have to make sense.
13. Keep it if it helps.
14. Be patient – it can take time getting comfortable putting your thoughts on paper!
15. Most importantly - no judgments on what you write!

A Final Note on Compassion Fatigue:

1. Lean on others. My husband and I were lucky to have each other. Middle of the night crying sessions, sitting numbly in a vet's office while they shared the worst news possible, struggling to get our animals to take medications when they didn't have an appetite, frustration while giving subcutaneous fluids...all of these things were done together. But we didn't always have the strength to bolster each other up. So we learned to lean on others. We asked for coffee dates and quiet time at friend's houses. We asked for help when work or school schedules kept us from medicating at the right times. And we learned to be open about the emotions we were experiencing, especially when we didn't feel like spending time with loved ones or when we were too sad to keep up a cheerful facade. We found our loved ones and coworkers were typically filled with compassion and unending support. There were those who didn't understand why we would provide this type of care for an animal, so we learned to limit our conversations on this topic with them.
2. Find time for yourself. It's easy to become consumed with the care of your loved one. I would feel guilty if I spent free time away from the house because I wanted all the time I could get with my sick babies. But this started to make me feel a little crazy – spending all your time with a dying creature can be very taxing. So taking a walk alone (no matter how much your pet may enjoy walks), enjoying time at a coffee shop, or going out on a date becomes vital to staying connected to yourself. We also found ways to spend time with our animals that was beneficial to us and them, instead of only spending time caring for them. A good sunning in the backyard with your

animal does both of you a lot of good!

3. Find ways to replace the sacrifices you are making. For us, the financial sacrifices became a strain. Little treats we were used to (eating out, drinking alcohol, etc.) had to be given up to afford the vet visits and medications. So we made the time to make delicious meals at home. We took long walks together or watched movies at home instead of going out. We limited any unnecessary expenditures, but made a game out of finding good deals on items we needed.
4. Don't feel guilty when you don't do something "right". This was the most difficult aspect for me. There were moments when the frustration overrode the calm, especially when it came to getting Cosette dog to take her medications. Or when Gypsy cat urinated on our bed during a UTI and soaked the mattress so bad we had to purchase a new one. Or when Smidgen dog's natural sassiness led to a nip when she was done being petted and wanted to sleep. Or when Henri dog's dementia kept us up all night. Sometimes we swore. Sometimes we wished things were easier. Sometimes we got angry that creatures we loved were suffering. Sometimes (and this is the worst), we just wished it was all over, that they would pass on their own, so we wouldn't have to "decide". When we did decide, I couldn't stop thinking about every moment and whether we had made the "right" decision (we had – their endings were clearly there). Talking it out with others who experienced the same thing helped us realize our feelings were normal and healthy. I also journaled about my experiences and feelings, talked out loud to myself while in the car, and talked to my animals about how I was feeling.
5. Give yourself time to grieve. We felt like we were grieving during the entire course of our animal companion's illnesses. Which was the most draining part. After their passing, I could hardly comprehend it. It took me months to get to the point where I could talk about it and even that is still frequently accompanied by tears. I kept busy and when thoughts would come up, I'd push them down. I finally gave myself an evening to relive every second of their passing. It was awful and painful, but I felt better afterwards. This may not be therapeutic for everyone, but I found it helped me move on to the next part of the process (mainly acceptance).
6. Connect to your other animal members. Thank goodness for our Snow cat! Having him to focus on has helped us to heal from the loss of our other animals. If we didn't have him, we definitely would have spent time with other animals we know or done some volunteering with animal rescues. We also recently adopted another dog (almost a year to the day after we lost our 4th pet, Henri dog). I never thought I could love a dog again as much as I did the three I lost, but I was wrong and I've never been more grateful to be wrong.
7. Seek counseling. While this didn't become necessary for us because of our support system, this can be an important aspect to dealing with compassion fatigue. The advice and support of a trained professional could be invaluable in dealing with the stress and many emotions you may experience. (While we didn't need it during our time of caring for our ailing pets, I did seek counseling after our 4th pet in 3 years passed away. The grief just got to be too much.)
8. Remember that all feelings are valid. You may have different experiences and feelings than we had. You may process emotions differently and have other ways of dealing with stress and fatigue. Whatever you need to do to get through the days is okay. Be as gentle and loving with yourself as you are with your animal family members.