



## BrightHaven's Approach to Grief

The death of a treasured animal companion is one of the most difficult things we as animal lovers ever face. In our experience, this loss may be more difficult than that of a human family member due to the comforting constant companionship and unconditional love that animals bring into our lives.

### What Animals Have Taught Us About Grief

The typical human pattern of death followed by the grieving process is one we have learned to reverse at BrightHaven, as animals have shown us their way. By learning to face our own fear, we've come to understand the grieving process a little better and to realize that the pain of grief comes not only from the overwhelming knowledge that we will never again see our animal friend in physical form in this lifetime, but also from our huge and quite natural fear surrounding death.

We have learned that grieving is best actually addressed now, before transition, as we face it together. While we are saying our goodbyes, we are also recalling shared experiences and fond memories. We tell them how much we love them and how we will miss their physical presence. We cry together. We laugh together and we share everything.



*Beauregard comforting Patti*

This period of anticipation offers us many beautiful gifts that also lead us along the path of spiritual growth as we learn to place more value on the present moment, to surrender to what is happening and to savor the love and compassion in our hearts. There is nothing more sacred than to care for a beloved friend during his or her final time with us on earth. Sharing those precious final moments of life in love, celebration and memories instead of fear and pain creates a bond that will never be forgotten. As we experience completion of the circle of life, we understand that we will always be together in spirit.

After the passing, the animal nurses who so open-heartedly gave their time, caring and sometimes even their food to the dying one often readily returned to their lives. We realized that grief generally no longer existed for them after death had taken place; only the honoring of their beloved friend's physical body and the joyful celebration of their life remained. We have also noted that, although we

have felt acceptance prior to death and passed through the event more easily than perhaps most, it is still possible to experience sudden returns of sadness and grief that can be helped greatly by taking some quiet time to dwell on happy memories.

Grief accompanies us on a spiritual journey of the heart and soul as it invites us to consider why we live and die and begs us to question what brings meaning and purpose to our lives. It also challenges us to consider life after death, which may lead to a reconnection with, or maybe even a renewal of, our personal faith or philosophy.

### **Additional key points:**

- We have literally hundreds of photographs like the one at the right of animals caring for animals at all stages of the dying process, and an important point to mention is that we never saw the attending animals show any sign of fear of death, either before, during or after it occurred. They simply remained calm, supportive and loving.
- Self-care is an important part of the grieving process. Be very patient and gentle with yourself. Grieving takes a lot of energy and can be very exhausting! Know that you're doing/you did your very best and with love. That's all anyone can do.
- It may help to take some deep breaths or repeat a comforting affirmation to yourself or aloud. Two of our favorites are "this too shall pass" and "all is well."
- Grief is unique to each and every person and the particular loss that person is facing. There's no right way to grieve and certainly no timetable. Each individual grieves in their own way and in their own time. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise!
- Grief is a constant thread throughout life – in every day and in every way – as each of us experiences many beginnings and endings, which are a natural part of our existence. *Any* type of change can trigger feelings of grief as we go through the process of letting go of what was, and a former way of being and doing, and we begin to understand and accept a new reality.
- Grief, like all emotions, is energy in motion that needs to be felt and then released, thus opening our hearts to deeper love and experience of life. This awareness can help one cope with the emotional roller coaster ride and especially the feeling of dread that grief may bring. It's very helpful to remember that fear is a feeling, and there is nothing to fear from feelings.
- It's helpful to release feelings of guilt as much as possible. Feeling angry at a loved one for dying or embracing a sense of relief after their death, particularly if their dying process seemed difficult, are perfectly normal responses, yet very (and unnecessarily) guilt-inducing!



*Lucy looking after Charlie-Girl*

- Grief accompanies us on a spiritual journey of the heart and soul as it invites us to consider why we live and die and begs us to question what brings meaning and purpose to our lives. It also challenges us to consider life after death, which may lead to a reconnection with, or maybe even a renewal of, our personal faith or philosophy. Being in touch with one's spiritual beliefs can be very comforting throughout the grief process.
- Speaking with a trained professional may help you to verbalize and work through your feelings. Many options are available for spiritual and grief counseling and it's a good idea to seek them out in your area at your earliest opportunity, to find a person who resonates best with your own beliefs and understanding of the circle of life.
- Honoring the departed is important, not only for your loved one but also for your own grieving process. There are many after-death rites and rituals performed all around the world depending on one's culture and belief system. To learn about BrightHaven's three-day process, please visit <https://www.brighthaven.org/animal-hospice/after-the-passing/>.
- Like the dying and death processes, grief is nothing to fear; it's full of its own wisdom, joys and personal and spiritual growth. Experiencing grief and loss can be a tremendous catalyst towards more authentic living.
- For more of our thoughts on grief, please visit <https://www.brighthaven.org/animal-hospice/the-grieving-process/>.

## Sudden loss

Occasionally we experienced the sudden and unexpected death of one of our beloved animal family. We found its emotional impact to be very similar for us as that of anticipated loss, but with the addition of shock, overwhelm or vulnerability. And as with all types of grief, the response is unique to each individual.

Here are a few resources that may be helpful. Although this information focuses on the sudden death of a human, much of it also pertains to the unanticipated loss of an animal:

- [Coping with Grief After a Sudden or Unexpected Death](#) – Johns Hopkins University Medicine, Maryland
- [How to Process an Unexpected Death](#) – Syracuse University, New York
- [Coping with Grief After a Sudden Death](#) – University of Rochester, New York

## Other helpful information:

- [Consultations](#) – Do you have questions about BrightHaven’s approach to grief or how our holistic healing or animal hospice care methods can help your animal? Book a consultation with BrightHaven President and Founder Gail Pope by sending an email to [consultations@brighthaven.org](mailto:consultations@brighthaven.org).

- **Blog post:**

[Lessons from Our Animals: What Are 3 Uplifting Opportunities of Grief?](#) The word “opportunity” may not come to mind when you’re emotionally reeling from the loss of a loved one.

But as with most of the events we face in life – even the painful, heartbreaking ones – grieving holds many possibilities to deepen our capacity to grow and to love. Life-changing lessons are often found in unexpected places...

- **Books:**

- [Follow Your Heart: Navigating a Terminal Diagnosis](#) – Helps you walk this often-challenging path with a deeper sense of peace, confidence and clarity. Chapter 5: “Understanding Pre- and Post-Death Grief.” This chapter shares many different aspects of BrightHaven’s experience with the grief journey (Author: Gail Pope, BrightHaven President and Founder)
- [Walking with My Dog Through \(End of\) Life](#) – An intimate look at a profound life passage, from terminal diagnosis through hospice care and natural death. Throughout the book the author shares her personal experiences with grief, including feelings of guilt and regret. (Author: Carol Howe Hulse, BrightHaven Education Program Manager)
- [GRATEFUL for Animals: Spiritual Comfort & Wisdom in Life’s Last Chapter](#) – Honors the human-animal bond as the authors gently explore the many ways animals are indeed wise and wonderful guides and companions on the spiritual journey. Chapter: “Generous Grief.” Generous may not be the first word you think of regarding grief! However, we’ve learned that grief is indeed giving as it can provide us with many lessons about authenticity, spiritual and personal growth, love, acceptance, self-care and much more. And the “Fearless Forgiveness” chapter contains a section on forgiveness and grief. (Authors: Gail Pope, BrightHaven President and Founder; Carol Howe Hulse, BrightHaven Education Program Manager)



*Gail & Ollie sharing special moments*

- **Online learning:**

- [BrightHaven Guide to Holistic Animal Hospice: Navigating a Terminal Diagnosis](#) – One of the most difficult things for any animal lover or pet parent to hear is being told by the vet that your animal’s illness is terminal. This course, presented by BrightHaven President and Founder Gail Pope and Education Program Manager Carol Hulse, helps you to navigate this path with a deeper sense of peace, confidence and clarity. It includes a variety of tools to help you to plan and implement the best way forward for your unique situation. This course also contains an In-depth discussion of grief and includes self-care tips and suggestions for honoring the departed.
- [BrightHaven Guide to Animal Hospice: The Animal Dying Experience](#) – In this two-part course, BrightHaven Founders Gail and Richard Pope, who have been present at more than 600 animal deaths, will take you through the final stages of the animal dying experience and how this very special time of life is approached and honored at BrightHaven. They also offer some practical things that can be done by the caregiver for hospice support, which is focused on the animal’s comfort and wellbeing. You will discover that the dying process and death are nothing to fear, which is one more important life lesson from the animals. This course contains helpful information on the BrightHaven approach to grief and our three-day process following death.

**“Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with their heart and soul, there is no such thing as separation.” —Rumi**

Knowledge reduces fear and increases confidence, and conscious decision-making may minimize future regrets. We invite you to explore our [caregiver resources](#) (including [animal hospice education](#) and [holistic healthcare education](#)), [online learning](#) and [publications](#) to learn more. You may also wish to [book a consultation](#) with BrightHaven President and Founder Gail Pope.

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## About BrightHaven

Founded in 1990 by Gail and Richard Pope, BrightHaven is a renowned animal rescue, hospice and holistic education center. Our primary focus: senior, disabled and chronically ill animals, a vulnerable population that has an overwhelming need to find love and care in our society. BrightHaven is a pioneer and leader in the ever-expanding field of animal hospice and palliative care, and our experience with hospice-supported natural dying is distinct and well known. We are privileged to have provided hospice care for and shared the dying experience with over 600 animals who taught us so much. At BrightHaven, it is all about living well through the last breath!