

Anticipating the Passing of Your Pet

It's not uncommon to feel anxious and depressed when thinking about your pet's impending death. Find out how to pass through anticipatory grief to truly serve your pet.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Loss and Transformational Grief Specialist Nancy Gordon is passionate about helping pet owners navigate the gut-wrenching journey of pet loss and heal the heartbreaking grief that follows
- Nancy credits her dogs, Toaster and Pink, with changing her life; it was personal loss and her relationship with her dogs that compelled her to create her program, "7 Powerful Practices to Manage Your Mind and Heal Your Heart"
- Some of the topics we cover include the normal feelings of anticipatory grief and anxiety during a pet's final chapter, and how to love, nurture, and support your pet under the weight of those often overwhelming emotions

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 21, 2022.

Nancy Gordon, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Certified Life Coach, international best-selling author, consultant and speaker, is a life-changing expert. She is a highly sought out therapist and coach who helps people overcome losses of every kind. Her special passion is helping pet owners navigate the gut-wrenching journey of pet loss and heal the heartbreaking grief that follows.

Below are some of the highlights of our discussion, but I encourage you to watch the full interview above for much more detail and information.

How Nancy's Dogs Toaster and Pink Changed Her Life

One of Nancy's goals today is to help dispel a lot of the fears and avoidant behavior, anxiety and depression that can arise from the loss of a pet.

"As far back as I can remember, I was always the person people came to for advice," she explains. "So, my calling was clear from very early on. I got my master's degree in social work, became licensed, and had a private practice for about 17 years."

The last six of those years were after a car accident — an experience that was so devastating, my life was turned upside down. I got to a point where I couldn't work anymore, so I had to learn the first practice of my seven practices, which is my methodology for helping people. The core of it is about surrendering.

I thought when I closed my practice that I was surrendering, but I eventually discovered that I had just given up my practice. Less than a year later I discovered a rare breed of dog called the Mexican Hairless that goes back to the ancient Aztecs.

They were used as spiritual mystical healing dogs and were highly respected. They were primarily used for their body heat to relieve muscle and joint pain in people. After the car accident I developed fibromyalgia and mild traumatic brain injury, and my go-to 'medication' was a microwave neck wrap that I used 24/7.

Then I was able to meet a Mexican Hairless dog. I had wrist pain, and when I placed my hand under the dog's belly, the pain was relieved. Not gone, of course, but relieved, and I thought, 'I'm going to get one of these toy sized dogs, put her around my neck and call her Toaster. I trained her as a service dog, and she went everywhere with me. She would wrap herself around my neck and her body heat would relieve my pain.'

Nancy's relationship with Toaster was profound and changed her life in many ways. Toaster eventually had puppies, one of which was Pink, who developed a luxating patella (aka a floating kneecap) and lost her leg at the age of one. Nancy went on to write a book about Pink, the dog who "lost her leg and found her courage." Pink's disability journey taught Nancy "how to get off the couch and just do it anyway."

Through her relationships with Toaster and Pink, Nancy developed her methodology of seven practices to manage your mind and heal your heart.

"And that, in a nutshell, is what I do," she says. "It's what I did for myself and my chronic illness, and for pet loss as well. I used the practices that helped me recover and find my resilience from my chronic illness and disability, to navigate all the stages of pet loss, starting with anticipatory grief when I realized I had to face the loss of Toaster."

Anticipatory Grief

Nancy explains that as a longtime psychotherapist, she was very aware that loss is an inevitable part of everyone's story, and it's how you deal with it that makes the difference. As Toaster got older and developed several chronic illnesses, as Nancy explains it, "it became real to me that at some point, and maybe sooner rather than later, she was going to pass."

"And I remember saying to my best friend, 'I don't know how I'm going to live through this. I don't know how I'm going to bear my life without Toaster. She's been with me for so many defining moments in my journey of the last several years.' I thought, 'I don't know how I'm going to be able to do this.' When it got to be about a year before her death, I began doing my own work on the practice of surrendering."

In my own experience with clients, I've found that they're often not aware they're experiencing anticipatory grief or anxiety.

"Anticipatory grief is the first experience you have of loss," Nancy explains, "and it happens before the loss. We anticipate that we're going to lose a pet, and feelings come up around that because we don't want it to happen. The less a person knows about grief, and the less they've healed past grief, the more frightening the realization is that their pet is going to die, whether in two years or a year or a month.

What these people may experience is anxiety, depression, irritability, loss of interest in the usual things. They begin clinging to their animal. They worry, and worst of all, guilt kicks in, and people just don't know how to deal with it."

Because of my profession as a veterinarian and the things I see and experience every day with sick, injured and dying animals, I've sought counseling to deal with the loss of my own pets. I realized my anticipatory grief and anxiety — about pets who were still healthy and thriving — was robbing me of day-to-day joy and time with them because of my background stress response.

I couldn't appreciate being fully present with them. I can now, but I couldn't for many years because I didn't know how to manage the knowledge that the relationship would end in their deaths.

"You've just touched on one of the biggest benefits of navigating anticipatory grief," says Nancy. "We learn to hold, both emotionally and psychologically, the fact that our pet is dying, but is still here. How do we stay present? Because if we can learn to stay present, that's where the healing begins — and not only the healing of grief, but the preservation of our connection with our pets.

You stay present and connected. Animals never disconnect; they're always present. It's one of the biggest lessons they teach us. In my experience, anticipatory grief is almost inevitable, and we can learn how to go through it and come out the other side whole. It's what I call transformative grief.

The blessing of anticipatory grief is that we have the opportunity, while our animals are still here, to interact with them, and help and care for them, which prevents feelings of guilt. We're being of service to our pet, instead of them being of service to us."

Nancy explains that grief isn't something most of us learn how to get through. Instead, we learn how to avoid it, to "pick ourselves up by the bootstraps" and stop crying.

"Unhealed grief puts a lock on your heart," says Nancy. "It's so important for people to realize that the key to unlocking your heart is to face the guilt and grief. Now, facing it is often very, very hard for people. Grief is meant to be shared. It's meant to be expressed in positive, healing ways rather than stuffing it."

The Importance of Feeling and Expressing Grief

Nancy counsels that an important first step for people dealing with pet loss and grief is to find support from others who understand what it means to lose a beloved animal. We need support from people who truly understand so that we can comfortably share, express, and process our grief.

The second step, once we allow ourselves to start feeling and expressing our grief, is to embrace self-love and self-compassion, and recognize that our feelings are normal. Grief is a natural process in relationship to loss. There's nothing wrong with you; you're not crazy.

"There's a quote I share with clients, especially those who feel their loss is unbearable," says Nancy. "It goes, 'If there is ever a tomorrow when we're not together, there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think, and loved more than you'll ever know.' That's a quote from Winnie the Pooh."

Understanding the journey of pet loss and working through transformational grief leads to hope, healing, growth, and resilience. In growing through our grief, we honor our pets."

If every time you think about how much you love your pet, it's followed by the thought that he or she will be dying soon, you instantaneously minimize good feelings in favor of feeling anxious about losing your animal.

As a proactive veterinarian, I would encourage you to address this as soon as you recognize your pattern. By addressing it, you'll have a richer, more meaningful relationship with your pet without the distraction of an emotion that isn't serving you at that time.

"The last stage of grief is not just acceptance, in my opinion," says Nancy. "It's transforming it. It's finding meaning. It's opening your heart to another pet. When people feel that the loss of a pet is unbearable, they'll never get another one. Unhealed grief puts a lock on your heart, but there's a key to unlock it."

Creating Happy Memories While Grieving

Veterinarians can be a great help in a client's anticipatory grief process through end-of-life and euthanasia discussions.

"Toward the end, Toaster had seizures that turned into undiagnosed fainting spells," Nancy explains. "She was used to going everywhere with me, but she couldn't any longer, and I started thinking about how I would feel if she passed when I wasn't home."

Pink would be there, helpless, and traumatized. It became part of my decision-making process, with my veterinarian's help, to understand what the next few months would look like for Toaster so I could plan for that."

I decided to take both dogs with me to lots of places, and I also took Toaster alone. I ran errands while she rested on my neck. We went to a movie. So, the last three weeks of her life, I was really there for her. If I cried, she comforted me. It was the reciprocal, unconditional love and service between us that made the whole experience bearable. And without guilt."

You need to be able to think straight when you're in the anticipatory grief stage. You need information and time to make rational decisions about what will be in the best interests of both your pet and you."

Many clients call me the day before they're going to lift up™ (euthanize) their pet can still make that time special and healing. Sadly, those calling a day after have missed that opportunity."

When she's reached in time, Nancy can help clients with pets in the final stage of life learn how to balance feelings of anticipatory grief and anxiety with the desire to make their animal companion's last days as wonderful as possible. Most of us aren't born with the ability to create memories and positive moments while we're in pain.

"The gift of anticipatory grief is that it gives you one last opportunity create a healing parting instead of a traumatic one," Nancy explains. "This honors your pet and prevents future guilt and regret."

To learn more about Nancy's work and her program called 7 Powerful Practices to Manage Your Mind and Heal Your Heart, you can visit her website at [**Nancy Gordon Global**](#). You can also visit her [**Linktree**](#), which contains a wealth of additional resources.
