

Finding Comfort When Your Pet Dies

What would your pet want you to do when he or she passes? How do you begin to mend the hole in your heart? Like many of us, dog mom Carol Bryant has lived through it and come out the other side with much to share about how to live in the moment and find needed comfort and support.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today I'm talking with journalist, blog owner, and dog mom Carol Bryant
- Carol lost her Cocker Spaniel, Dexter, not long ago and suddenly, so the reality of pet loss and grief and how to navigate through the shock and pain are still very much a part of her life everyday
- Our discussion today is wide-ranging, and touches on topics such as how, if we let them, dogs teach us to live in the moment; how to memorialize a past pet in ways that are comforting and therapeutic; and the importance of seeking support and professional help if necessary

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My guest today is journalist, blogger, and dog mom Carol Bryant, whose website Fidos of Reality is all about healthy living for Cocker Spaniels and their canine friends. Our conversation is about how we can honor the memory of pets who've passed on.

Whether you've recently lost an animal companion or are trying to prepare yourself for when that day arrives, I think you'll find value in the topics we cover, and the suggestions and information Carol offers.

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, including all the many creative and comforting ways Carol has found to memorialize pets who have passed on.

Dogs Teach Us to Stay Present and Live in the Moment

"When you go into a relationship with a dog, chances are, you're likely going to outlive them," says Carol. "Like many pet parents, I suffer from anticipatory grief, but what my dogs have taught me, and it may sound cliché, is the importance of staying present and living in the moment."

So, I live with no regrets. I've done the dog birthday parties and I've given my dog birthday presents, and we've done cross country road trips together. It's my way of saying, 'Hey, anticipatory grief, you don't get to win. I'm going to live large. And my dog's coming along for the ride.'"

Sadly, Carol lost Dexter, her beloved Cocker Spaniel recently from hemangiosarcoma, a terrible form of cancer that she didn't even know he had.

"We thought he was going in for a pulled muscle in his back," Carol explains. "But as you know, hemangiosarcoma is that evil train that no one sees coming. Someone said something so moving to me.

They said, 'You were the last face he saw before he closed his eyes. And wherever you feel your dog moves on to, whether that's nowhere or heaven or the Rainbow Bridge, someday when you go, he's going to be the first thing you see when you open your eyes.' And that's what I cling to, is that I'll see him again one day and, in the meantime, he would want me happy.

But back to the topic of anticipatory grief, my spouse likes to say, 'Change the channel when those thoughts come into your head.' Change the channel and enjoy your dog because while it's true that someday he won't be here, that shouldn't be your focus. Your dog wants you to be happy. Trust me, your dog wants you living in the moment."

Memorializing a Lost Pet Can Be Therapeutic

Carol's focus since Dexter's death has been finding ways to memorialize him.

"As a writer and a blogger, I find it very cathartic to help others going through the same thing," she says. "I've been reaching out to people who are also in grief and telling them some of the things I've been doing. And until another dog comes into my life, I've been helping other dogs find new homes."

Since Dexter died right before Christmas, Carol had a tree ornament made with his hair in it that she keeps out where she can see it year-round. She also found a person on Etsy who makes rings, and she can include a snip of your pet's hair in a resin ring along with dried flowers so that when you wear it, you can feel as though your dog is nearby.

"Things like that, those tangibles, give me comfort," says Carol. "I also wrote an obituary for him. I had ordered my Christmas cards and they were ready to go out when we lost him. Of course, it's Dexter in a silly Santa hat on the card. And I thought, what do I do? Are they going to think I'm crazy if I send it out? Is she off the deep end?"

But, since I kind of left what people think about me at the door years ago, I sent the Christmas cards out, but I included his obituary with it, with all his accomplishments.

He wasn't just my dog. He earned his Canine Good Citizen certification, he had trick dog titles, he traveled around the country, and he was an ambassador for Cocker Spaniels. I had hoped to inspire someone, and it turns out I did, because someone later told me that because of Dexter's obituary, they went out and adopted a dog. So, he's not really gone.

If you can keep your dog alive by memorializing them in your everyday life and through your actions, then they're never gone."

Giving and Getting Support

When faced with someone who has just lost a pet (or a human, for that matter), many people don't know how to respond or what to say to their friend or family member who is in profound pain. Often, they sort of tiptoe around the elephant in the room and don't mention the loss.

However, in my experience, it's much easier all the way around when those who are grieving simply admit they're grieving, and the people who are close to them acknowledge their pain, check in with them regularly, and let them know they're thinking about them.

"For those who go online, there are hashtags you can follow to find communities of people who are suffering along with you," adds Carol. "It might be something like #petloss or #petgrieving. I'm finding a lot of people suffer in silence, but I found some of the greatest friends and the most supportive people, just because we shared this common bond of loss.

I went to an online support group also. The hospital where Dexter died offered online support groups with a counselor where we were able to talk about our pets. And now I have friends from that, too."

Another thing Carol did was ask her friends, family, and neighbors to email or snail mail a special memory or anecdote about Dexter to her.

"Put them all in a jar," she suggests. "When you're feeling down, you can pull one out, and you have this memory that someone else experienced about your pet. You can also make a collage of them."

Carol has also seen pictures that others took of Dexter at various events that she had no idea existed.

"All these random acts of kindness have restored my faith in humanity," she says. "Pet people are awesome when they come together. You might not think something so small as to say, 'I'm so sorry for your loss of your cat. I used to love the pictures of him you put up on Instagram' could be so impactful, but they are."

One of the places pet parents can go to find comfort and support is Carol's blog, **[Fidose of Reality](#)**, and type in "grief" or "pet loss" in the search bar.

"There are quite a few articles there, and the information is just raw and real and actionable," says Carol. "I didn't know where to put the grief, so I wrote about it. I'm sure you've heard this: 'grief is love with no place to go'. And so, I'll give it to another pet, and I'll still help animals, but I live to write."

Carol also saw a therapist after losing Dexter.

"I poured my heart out and I said, 'Please help. I can't even see the light. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now, because I work from my home office and my dog was always with me.' She said, 'There's no fast forward button on grief, Carol. You're going to have to walk through the fire. I can't make you better.' And she's right. There's no timeline on grief.

But during those most wicked, horrible, gut-wrenching times, I clung to his blanket. I talked to people. Sometimes I didn't want to talk to anyone, but I always tell people that if you feel you can't survive or live without your pet, definitely look for some intervention. You need to get help because your pet would not want this for you."

I think it's important for all of us to remember that it's a blessing to have the honor of caring for an animal, and we should be thankful for the opportunity. It's truly a gift.

"All of us who've loved and lost a pet know that while his or her body is no longer here, no one can take that love away," says Carol. "Love never ends."
