

# Finding Joy Again After Experiencing Grief

Erica lost her furry best friend in the most horrific way possible - a tragic accident that involved a friend. Spiraling downward, she realized she had no tools to help her cope with any of it, let alone heal.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Today I'm chatting with Erica Messer, a pet parent who lost her beloved cat Wolfgang in a very traumatic way, and was thrown headfirst into a sea of grief she had no idea how to navigate
- Erica's journey back from the depths of her grief included creating a website, Wolfie's Wish, so that she could share what worked for her with other pet parents mourning the loss of their own animal companions
- Today, Wolfie's Wish provides a wonderful resource for people who've lost a beloved pet and don't know how to cope or where to turn for help

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The Grief Awareness Week I featured last year in March drew an overwhelming response, and I realized at the time there are a lot more people out there grieving the loss of a pet than are talking about it. These pet parents are suffering and looking for more resources, and a deeper, ongoing conversation to help them move through their grief.

Toward that end, my guest today is Erica Messer, creator of Wolfie's Wish, a site dedicated to support for pet loss grief. 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.

## Wolfie Was Lost to a Tragic Accident

First, I asked Erica to explain what happened in her own life that inspired her to want to help others deal with the loss of their animals.

*"I've been a musician my entire life," Erica replied, "and during the pandemic that came to a grinding halt, and I needed a companion. So, I adopted Wolfgang, who we called Wolfie, and I was with him 24/7. I mean, I was practicing at home, and I started painting, but I just had all this time on my hands. So, he became my number one best friend in the whole world.*

*"He was a little rescue cat with eye herpes, and nobody wanted him. We bonded right away. But he passed from a tragic accident, and I go back and forth on whether to tell people how he passed because I don't want to traumatize anyone else. But it was bad. It was an accident due to a friend. And so there was shock, and grief, and trauma, and blame. The universe was like, 'Here, handle this.'*

*"I really didn't have any tools at all to cope with any of it. I was also living in Munich, Germany, and didn't know a lot of people. It was horrible situation. We all face horrible situations in our lives and wonder how we'll get through them. How do I live with this for the rest of my life and not be scarred? How is this going to change me? I realized I needed some help.*

*I figured there had to be books out there, or other tools. I started looking and became really frustrated with what I found. I'd find a book that looked great, but I knew I wouldn't be able in my current state to even concentrate long enough to read the whole thing.*

*"I was spiraling downward and ended up just sitting quietly and asking, 'What do I need to do to heal? What is it I need to do?' I looked inward. Gradually, I noticed some little nudges and ideas. One of the very first ones was to write a love letter to Wolfgang, telling him all the things I loved about him. All the things I didn't want to forget about him. All the fun things we did, how special he was, and so on. I started sharing these with my mom, who was helping me through my grief.*

*I was calling her every day, and she said, 'Sounds like you should write these down and make that deck of affirmation cards you couldn't find when you needed them.'*

*"I eventually gave in, and we made the first deck, and then another one. We realized the cards were applicable to many people, not just me. It began building from there, and it's been a great experience to be able to help others while I was helping myself. That's been the biggest blessing of all."*

## **Wolfie's Wish Grieving Cards**

The way in which Erica lost Wolfie, to a tragic accident, is a very different sort of trauma to process — different from losing a pet to old age, for instance, or even an incurable disease. There's no way to prepare. It's like being hit by a Mack truck. It means being introduced to the grief process in the most traumatic way imaginable. I asked her how the affirmation cards she created fit into her process.

*"There are 30 cards designed to be read once a day with a simple tool, or practice, or suggestion," explains Erica. "Writing a love letter is one of the suggestions on the cards. The cards are about self-care and gratitude and releasing guilt. I flew home to be with my mom and showed her the cards I had made. Then I began showing them to other people, and that's how we distilled it all down to a 30-card deck.*

*"The practices and suggestions are still applicable to my life today, and not just about pet loss. They're really just building blocks to get you on your path to healing. That's how I like to think of them. And I need to point out that I'm not a health professional. I'm not a pet loss counselor and I want everyone to know that. I'm just me and I'm sharing what worked for me."*

The cards were called Comfort Cards initially, but Erica realized the name was too generic. She asked her mom what they should be called, and she came up with Wolfie's Wish. Her mom said, "Wolfie's wish is that everyone finds joy again and walks through their grief in healthy ways." So, they became known as Wolfie's Wish Grieving Cards.

*"We actually won an award at SuperZoo last year for best new product in the gift category," says Erica. "That was great to see, and we were like, 'Okay, we'll keep going!' The cards are a great gift for someone who's lost a pet. Flowers are nice, but they die in a week. Candles are great. One of my friends has a candle memorial company.*

*Really, the most important thing when supporting friends and family is just to say, 'How can I show up for you? How can I support you? What can I do for you? What does that look like?' rather than trying to guess what they need or unconsciously saying something that might actually be hurtful to them."*

## **Giving and Receiving Grief Support**

*"When I lost Wolfie," Erica continues, "I don't think my husband or my mom really knew what to say. My mom is a serial cat owner. Her cats are all buried in her yard, and she knows that pain. I think the most natural thing we can do is to just be with a person, and say, 'I understand.' I didn't really know what to expect in the way of support, and so that's what I want to share with people.*

*For example, if my best friend's dog is being euthanized today, I ask, 'What can I help you with? Do you want me to check in on you? Do you want me to leave you alone?' Everyone grieves differently. My mom would just be with me on the phone, through the crying, through the questioning, all of that. She could bear that burden and not everyone can.*

*"That's why I think grief groups or a pet loss counselor who understands that pain and can also help you get through it is really important. Because as a society we're not supposed to talk about grief. Our greeting exchange is, 'Hi, how are you? I'm fine, thank you,' and then you move on. Most people are really uncomfortable when you're not okay.*

*So, finding people you can be real and authentic with, who understand your pain is super important. Maybe those people are already around you and maybe they're not. But there are Facebook groups, and free grief groups, which I list on my website. There's a new one called Pet Cloud, which I love."*

I'm personally blessed to have an incredible social circle of support, but I know that many of my clients don't. They're alone. Their lifeline was the animal who just died. Those clients keep me up at night.

Pet parents with jobs outside the home must show up at work and pretend everything's fine to avoid being judged by people who don't understand the pain of pet loss. My recommendation as both a pet guardian and veterinarian is that if you feel you're being paralyzed by your grief, you should absolutely consider reaching out to a grief counselor either in person or online, or a pet loss grief group.

## Getting Past the Fear of Asking for Help

For those who don't feel comfortable talking about their loss, Erica suggests visiting a Facebook **Rainbow Bridge** support group page with thousands of members (there are several, just do a search on FB for Rainbow Bridge pet loss support group). You can go to one of those pages, post about your personal loss, and you'll immediately receive a flood of support and understanding.

*"That's a great starting point for people who maybe aren't comfortable talking," says Erica. "I have a YouTube channel where I interview pet counselors so that viewers can see what they're like to talk to, what they specialize in, what their beliefs are, and kind of break down that barrier."*

*"I knew I wanted one-on-one support, but it was scary and at the time, I didn't even know pet loss counselors existed. I found a counselor, and she was amazing. She told me the simplest thing — she told me to breathe. I would get choked up during our sessions and she would say, 'Just breathe.' That's one of the cards now, 'Just breathe,' and on the back it explains why it's helpful."*

*"I call them 'cry storms,' those waves of grief that come up out of nowhere and overwhelm you. You're at work, you're in your car, you're in line at the post office. I was on a flight back home to Germany. I went to the bathroom and on my way back to my seat, wham, a cry storm. The man sitting next to me asked if I was okay, and I said, 'Well, no. My cat just died.' And he was so kind. He said he'd never had a pet and he was curious and wanted to be helpful, and it was just so nice to have someone to talk to."*

*"I really do think that being honest about what's going on is so important because at least people then understand why you left the door open, or left the car on, or left your wallet on the counter. Our brains and bodies are trying to process what has happened to us. So, support is very, very important in some form."*

Erica's grieving cards might be quite helpful as a stepping off point for people who aren't sure about or haven't yet decided to talk to a support group or pet loss counselor about such an intimately painful thing. The cards can serve as a sort of roadmap of things you can do and steps you can take while you give the subject more thought.

It's also important to check in with yourself, to figure out what's best for you. What do I need right now? Is it water? Do I need to go to work? How can I best care for myself right now?

When Erica lost Wolfie, she was very concerned about entering a downward spiral that could sink her. She knew from experience that practicing gratitude was very helpful for her, and that simple acts of gratitude had the power to bring her back from the depths of despair. She also learned about compound grief from her research, and the fact that the death of a pet can open a Pandora's box of other hidden grief that people aren't equipped to deal with.

*"I don't have personal experience with compound grief," Erica explains, "but I think those people need to seek a counselor or support group that deals with hidden grief that suddenly rises to the surface, triggered by the death of a pet. They need help to peel back those layers so they can process what lays beneath them."*

## You Can Do It. You Can Get Through It

To learn more about Erica, the best place to start is [\*\*Wolfie's Wish\*\*](#), where you can find links to her [\*\*YouTube\*\*](#) channel, [\*\*Facebook\*\*](#) support group, [\*\*Instagram\*\*](#) page and other resources.

*"There's a page for our shop on the site, where you can see the different card decks my mom and I created," Erica explains. "I also have a children's book about pet loss. Since I'm a musician, music was obviously a very important tool for me to work through my grief. So, I've created a playlist of healing harp music and I'm currently working toward certification as a clinical musician to help people and animals."*

I asked Erica what one thing she would share with the world, if she could, about pet loss and grief.

*"You can do it," she replies. "No, it's not easy, but you can do it. You can get through it. If I'm sitting here smiling today as a bipolar person that is treated for that and other things, you can do it too. But I have to say, it takes work. There isn't an easy fix. I had to be willing to face my grief and I was willing to get through it. I wanted to be happy again. It can take a long time and hard work, but you can do it. There's support available and I'm here for you. I'm rooting for you."*

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