

Healing Broken Hearts

“I’m sorry, I don’t know if I can do this,” says a woman named Linda as she bows her head and begins to sob. The other members of her pet loss support group wait quietly while she calms herself and resumes her story.

“Three days ago I had to euthanize my cat, Ebony,” Linda says. “She was my best friend, my baby. She was always with me, every day, every night, for 14 years.”

Sniffling, she passes a photo of Ebony to the person seated next to her, who gazes at it, then passes it around the circle. “I’m just so angry,” Linda says, her voice cracking. “I’m angry that she’s not here anymore and that I can’t go home to her. I don’t know how I’m going to get through this.”

The comforting voice of Betty Jane Carmack reaches out to her from across the room. “Linda, I’m not at all surprised that you’re feeling this sad,” she says. “As you say, she was your baby and she shared your life for 14 years. It’s only been three days. Losing Ebony is clearly a huge loss for you, and I want to encourage you to take all the time you need to grieve. That’s why we have this group, to help people through this kind of loss.”

Story by Lisa Plummer • Photos by Gary Kalpakoff



Carmack has led this monthly pet loss support group at the San Francisco SPCA for 27 years. The loss of a beloved animal companion can be just as traumatizing as the loss of a human friend or family member. "People in the group often say that they grieved more for their dog than for their parent, sibling or grandparent," Carmack says. "This is not a lesser grief. It is very profound and very real."

As a registered nurse who has worked for 46 years in various medical settings, including psychiatric medical units and hospice, Carmack has often worked with the dying and their families, counseling humans at the end of their lives and comforting those left behind. Working with people grieving over the loss of their pets has merely been an extension of her nursing career.

Carmack's second calling in life as a pet loss counselor started with a dog named Rocky. When her beloved Rocky drowned during a rafting trip, Carmack was devastated. Compounding the loss was terrible guilt and regret that she hadn't been able to keep him safe. Wracked with grief, Carmack searched for professional support but came up empty-handed. It was the early 1980s, and there seemed to be no pet loss resources available at that time, she says. "I would have given anything to have had a [support] group, a book to read, or a counselor who was tuned in to pet loss."

A few years later, after she learned about a social worker named Jamie Quakenbush, author of *When Your Pet Dies: How to Cope with Your Feelings*, and his work with pet loss at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, a light bulb went off in Carmack's head. In 1983, Carmack approached the San Francisco SPCA about forming a pet loss support group, and the rest is history.

"I didn't want Rocky's death to be for nothing," Carmack says. "I wanted to be able to take his death and transform it into something really good. I believe that has happened."

By developing and leading the group, Carmack says she was able to transform her own grief into an empowering force that enabled her to be a supportive presence for others. "Having gone through my own grief process, I can be there for people in a way that I may not be able to be there otherwise. I can be more empathetic, understanding and compassionate."

Carmack has since authored the book *Grieving the Death of a Pet* and has led additional pet loss support groups at other Bay Area humane societies, including the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo and the Oakland SPCA.

Over the years, word of mouth has helped her initial support group grow from two to 20 participants. A typical 90-minute session begins as she lights a candle and makes a special dedication in honor of the pets whose stories will be told that evening. This ritual helps create an environment of reverence and respect.

"Some people talk about the guilt they feel, for what they did do

and wish they hadn't done, or what they didn't do and wish they had done," Carmack says. "But I think people see there's no judgment, that it's a safe place where they can openly speak and express their deepest, innermost thoughts and feelings."

Participation varies. Some individuals come for several months in a row, while others may drop in for one or two sessions. In some cases, former clients have returned years later after another pet has become sick or died, looking for support as they go through another loss. "I appreciate that," Carmack says, "because it makes me feel that people find the group helpful and know this is a place they can keep coming back to."

Dog lover and former client Vicki Tiernan agrees. Although she doesn't consider herself a "group person," Tiernan says she first attended the group at the urging of a close friend after her first dog, Kukla, died in 1989. "Just realizing that other people are thinking the same things as you are was very comforting and reassuring." She returned to Carmack's group when her second dog, Ruby, passed away.

Going through pet loss counseling can help the grieving prepare to adopt again. After losing her dog Lash to a knee surgery gone wrong, former client Marilyn Teeter says Carmack's group was instrumental in helping her let go of intense guilt and regret. "It put me in a healthier place," she says, "so I could make a healthy choice about picking another dog."

Although our society acknowledges the important role that companion animals play in our lives, some view the loss of a pet as less painful than the loss of a person. "Often people say their friends and family are tired of hearing it, to get over it, what's the big deal," Carmack says. For Lisa Vittori, Carmack's group not only helped validate her grief but also helped her cope with death in a healthier way as she lost additional pets. "Part of the exhaustion of my first dog dying was the sense in the culture of 'It's just a dog,'" Vittori says. "Betty was the first person who articulated the validity of that [human/animal] relationship."

Carmack says that as long as she's physically able to, she will continue leading the pet loss support group. In giving to her community, she says she has received so much in return.

"I've met the most caring people, who show me over and over again their dedication and commitment to their animals," Carmack says. "You hear about so many sad things in our world today, but when you come to this group you see and hear demonstrations of love, commitment and faithfulness, and it really is inspiring. Not only do I feel [the group] is my gift to the community, it is such a gift to my life." 🐾

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These organizations can connect you with pet loss support resources, including online chat rooms, individual counselors and support groups in your area:

Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement
www.aplb.org

Delta Society
www.deltasociety.org

The Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets
www.pethospice.org

Lightning Strike Pet Loss Support
www.lightning-strike.com

Pet Loss Grief Support Website
www.petloss.com

Pet Loss Support Page
www.pet-loss.net/index.shtml