



Grieving: When Your Dog Mourns the Loss of Another Dog

Canine Behavior Series

Helping your dog adjust to this loss will help you at the same time. Realize that without the other canine pack member, your dog's position in life has now changed. You may now have a former leader dog without a follower. Or you may have a former follower dog without a canine leader. You will need to help your dog find the way to a healthy new position in the social order. Life can change drastically for a dog who loses the companionship of another dog. We don't know how much dogs understand about death, but many dog lovers have experienced a dog who became lethargic, upset, or even ill after a dog companion dies. It can be heart breaking, just when you are also grieving the loss yourself.

If you've previously done positive training with your dog, you're in a great position to help the dog now. In fact, you may not even have a problem now. Positive training to a reliable level of response usually creates a strong bond between handler and dog. It also creates clear communication between the two of you. The bond and the communication make it completely natural for the dog to look to you for leadership. In this situation, some dogs' personalities will actually blossom after the loss of another dog.

Why would this happen? We don't always realize how much stress a relationship with another dog is placing on one or both of the dogs. When one of them is gone, either through rehoming or death, the other one may do much better.

How to Make Things Better

If you've not done positive training with the grieving dog previously, this is the time to start. Get some help, either from a class that uses positive methods or from a private trainer, to learn the training skills yourself. Dog training is a skill, and it's a lot of fun to learn, especially if you use positive methods. Punitive methods can backfire, and certainly would not be appropriate for a grieving dog. It's a good idea to go observe any class before you decide it's a positive atmosphere for you and your dog.

If the grieving dog is not in good physical condition, private instruction will probably be a better idea than a class, because the training can be customized to the dog's limitations. It's amazing how much you can use training to help you take care of a dog. Dogs can keep learning for their entire lives. Those who do are happier and easier to help, just when they need it the most.

Take the grieving dog on more outings, if the dog enjoys outings. Maybe it's just a walk to the mailbox. It could be a ride along in the car to a drive-through window at the bank or fast food place. Maybe it's a stroll in a pleasant park, or down the block to chat with neighbors. Outings deepen the dog's bond to you, and make the dog's life more interesting.

Create rituals the dog can look forward to each day. Spend 15 minutes grooming the dog or, if the dog has short hair, giving it a rubdown. Using your positive training, teach the dog a little trick or-even better-a little task the dog can do for you in your daily routine. The genuine pleasure you will take in the dog's help will come through clearly to the dog. Play games together, such as hide and seek.

Feed some of the dog's daily calories through some kind of active process. You could put the food into a food-dispensing toy. You could hide pieces of the food around the house or yard. Or you could use food during training for tricks or other skills.

Adding Another Dog

If it's not the right time for you to get another dog, don't get one. Your dog can almost certainly adjust to being without a canine companion in the home, and might even be happier. You could provide canine companionship for your dog by finding someone else with a dog who would enjoy meeting your dog for play dates. But truly, many dogs live perfectly happy lives with humans as their only pack mates.

If you do get another dog, try to work out any behavior problems with this dog first. That way the dog you have helps in training the new one, rather than being a bad influence! Select a dog with the best chance of getting along peacefully with the dog you already have. Even if this dog previously lived with another dog of the same sex, consider a dog of opposite sex this time. That one choice greatly reduces the risk of fighting.

The same things you do to help a dog through grief will be the things you do to help the dog adapt to the addition of a new dog. Each dog needs individual outings, away from home and away from the other dog. Each dog needs individual grooming time each day from you. Each needs training, one-on-one with you. Only when you have individual response control with each dog as an individual will you be able to handle them as a pack!

If you need to use a crate with a dog, it needs to be a crate for one dog, rather than crating two in the same crate. The dogs need to be kept away from each other when eating and when enjoying highly desirable toys. It's important to consider all this in the decision to add another dog, because again, you're looking at huge changes in the life of the grieving dog. Managing the situation well will be better not only for the dog, but also for you.

Healing for the Whole Family

Strengthening your relationship with your dog and helping the dog make a transition to a new stage in life and perhaps even a whole new personality is healthy for you, too. It takes time to work through grief. What you do to help your dog adjust to the life changes of losing a canine companion can be wonderfully healing for you.

Different family members will deal with the loss in different ways and may need different lengths of time to feel better. Before getting another dog (if indeed getting another dog is in the plan), it's best if everyone has first had the time they need to be emotionally ready. Some people want another dog right away, but most seem to need time to mourn the loss first. For all family members, helping the dog you already have is the perfect way to use this time.

When you have done the work of grieving, and helped your dog deal with grief and life adjustments, you can come out of even a very hard loss, ready to truly open your heart and love again.

Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book [Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others](#). Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.

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