

What losing a pet taught me about loss and grief

Jen Fisher 

Voice for wellbeing + human sustainability | Bestselling Author | TEDx Speaker | Host
#WorkWell | Thrive Editor

Published Sep 26, 2019

A few weeks ago, my husband, Albert, and I had to put our beloved 14-year old dog, Jake, down. It was so hard and incredibly emotional—as I'm sure you can relate if you've been in the same, unfortunate position (which is likely given statistics say that 68 percent of Americans own a pet). I'm experiencing first-hand what I've read from experts: losing a pet can be as hard as losing a loved one.

Why? Because pets become family members, they shape how we live, and we become attached to them in the same way we form attachments to human loved ones.

As I work through my grief, I have found some solace in having open and honest conversations with friends and coworkers about my recent loss. As with many mental health issues, doing so can help break down stigmas and cultivate a supportive environment. Because ultimately, it is normal and human to grieve the loss of anything that matters to us.

So if you—or someone you know—is coping with loss and experiencing grief, here are a few suggestions to help address those emotional challenges in the workplace.

Grief is not a linear process. We would like to believe that we will follow a linear process to work through the stages of grief, and then be done. It would be easier to rationalize our emotions if that were the case. But I know that grief doesn't work that way—and reminding myself that some days it's two steps backwards has really helped me be kind to myself, listen to my body and mind, and allow myself to not push as hard all the time. The same sentiment applies if you have a co-worker working through a

loss: one day they may seem “back to their usual selves” and the next they’re not. That’s to be expected.

Practice forgiveness and empathy. Sadness makes me not as patient as I’d like to be. And that’s ok, but I also have to acknowledge that about myself, and be forgiving. If you find yourself on the receiving end of a short-fused co-worker who is working through hard emotions, try to take it a little less personally and balance objectivity (it’s not you) with empathy (it’s hard to juggle challenging work demands while grieving).

Carve out breaks. The hardest part for me are the mornings. Walking Jake first thing in the morning was an important ritual in my daily life. Now that he’s gone, I am trying to maintain that ritual. I use that walk now to think about him and all the love and lessons he taught me. In essence, I am carving out time in my day to allow myself to just feel. My time to grieve and reflect is in the morning, but others may need to take a break during the workday to release their emotions before returning to their usual routine. Encourage that co-worker or employee to take that pause, and support them when they do.

Creating space to grieve, and supporting each other through the process, is important in any workplace culture that values well-being and what makes us human.