

By Dawn Weinberger

## 'Dogs grieve for the same reason people do'

Their depression is usually sudden and short-lived rather than chronic

■ When a family experiences a death, almost every member of the household mourns, including the dog. "Dogs grieve for the same reason people do — they're sad over the absence of a loved one," says Nicholas Dodman, BVMS, MRCVS, director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

Because dogs can't verbally express their feelings, owners must watch for signs of grief and take action if it lingers. First, it's important to understand the situations that invoke mourning in dogs. The loss of a person to whom the dog was closely bonded, of course, has major impact. This can be the result of death, divorce or even a long trip away from home. When a family pet dies, the loss is usually most poignant if it's another dog to which the dog was bonded, but some dogs grieve when a cat or member of another species dies, Dr. Dodman says.

Behavior changes are normal. If your dog usually greets you enthusiastically when you walk in the door, don't be surprised if excitement about your arrival wanes. Is he always eager for walks to the park? A grieving dog might not budge when you bring out his leash, especially if he'd been used to walking with the recently deceased best friend. In short, if your dog is grieving, he will probably exhibit heavy-heartedness and a lack of interest in normal daily activities.

In extreme cases, the grieving dog might suffer sleep disturbances, engage in compulsive behavior, such as

**Two experts weigh in on dogs and grief:** Dr. Nicholas Dodman on this page and Dr. Moon-Fanelli on the facing page.

obsessively licking his paws, or even stop eating. If the behavior is out-of-character, understand that it is probably temporary. Depression in dogs is usually sudden and short-lived rather than chronic. "It is normal for dogs to feel sad, sometimes very sad, over the loss of a loved one," Dr. Dodman says, adding, however, that the sadness — and accompanying behavior — usually subside fairly quickly.

### Snapping out of it

In fact, he says many dogs snap out of their depression in what seems like an instant. He remembers a situation in which a couple separated, and the dog's depressed behavior so concerned the wife — who retained canine custody — that she took him to the Animal Behavior Clinic for a consultation. Dr. Dodman considered prescribing antidepressants, but before he had an opportunity, the dog's depression lifted, he says. "The husband returned, and the behavior stopped."

Not all situations are so neatly resolved. Sometimes it takes one of these tactics to ease a dog's grief:

■ Try gradually changing his food if he's not eating for more than a day or two. Mix old food with the new to avoid GI upset.



**Dr. Nicholas Dodman**

■ Offer a new toy, and spend more time with him playing.

■ Involve him in social situations like doggie daycare or training.

When a dog grieves over another dog, the best medicine might be as straightforward as getting a new dog. "We spent quite a bit of time working with one dog, altering its interaction with the owners, engaging it in play, making its environment more interesting," Dr. Dodman says. "Finally, I told the owners to try getting a new puppy. The new puppy came along; the grieving dog had a new buddy to play with and was fine."

Sometimes a dog's grief is so severe or long lasting that it becomes obvious that the owner needs to take additional steps, Dr. Dodman says. Then it's time to take the dog to the veterinarian to determine if an underlying medical problem is exacerbating the grief. The veterinarian can also determine whether antidepressants are in order.

Occasionally, owners don't realize their dog is suffering from depression until they take him the veterinarian for another reason. Then in the course of questioning, they'll discover the dog is struggling to cope with a loss. The encouraging news: In most cases, a dog's grief will subside before it becomes a cause for serious concern. If not, a veterinarian can certainly help the dog bounce back to his old self in no time. ■

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