

OVC Pet Trust

Reflecting on Aftercare and Memorialization

A Support Guide



UNIVERSITY OF
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Beloved Beyond Goodbye: Remembering Our Pets

When a beloved pet dies, the love we have for them does not disappear. It remains, even though our hearts may feel empty. That space may quickly fill with grief, longing and the ache of absence.

Part of grieving involves finding ways to carry our animal's memory forward into our lives. One powerful way to do this is through **memorialization**, which refers to the intentional ways we acknowledge and honour a life we've loved and lost.

This guide was created to support you in that process. Whether you feel ready to begin or are simply exploring your options, this guide offers information and ideas to help you memorialize your beloved pet in a way that feels personal and meaningful. Please know there is no rush, no pressure and no one right way to do this. Let it unfold as it needs to.

This Support Guide, developed by the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) at the University of Guelph, offers information and ideas to help with the journey of memorialization following the loss of your pet. While this guide can be a helpful starting point, it is not a substitute for speaking with a trained health professional. If you need additional support, please see the Resources section at the end of this guide.

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Where Do I Start?

The beauty of memorialization is that it can look however you want it to. Some people begin right away. Others need more time or may choose to do very little at all. All paths are valid.

Like grief, memorialization is deeply personal. There is no rulebook. If what you choose reflects your values and the love you shared, that is more than enough.

Making these choices while grieving can feel overwhelming. Below are some common questions, which will be explored further throughout this guide.

What are my options for memorializing my companion?

You can choose from a wide range of ideas. Some of these may include keepsakes like paw prints or fur clippings, planting a tree, holding a memorial or donating in their honour.

I'm not ready to think about this yet. Is that okay?

Absolutely. You can return to this process when you feel ready.

I don't have much money. Can I still do something meaningful?

Yes. Some of the most heartfelt memorials are simple: writing a letter, lighting a candle, creating a memory jar or keeping a collar or photo nearby.

My child/children want to do something. How can I include them?

Involve them in age-appropriate ways: drawing pictures, planting something together, writing stories or talking about favourite memories. For more information see *OVC Pet Trust: Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide*.

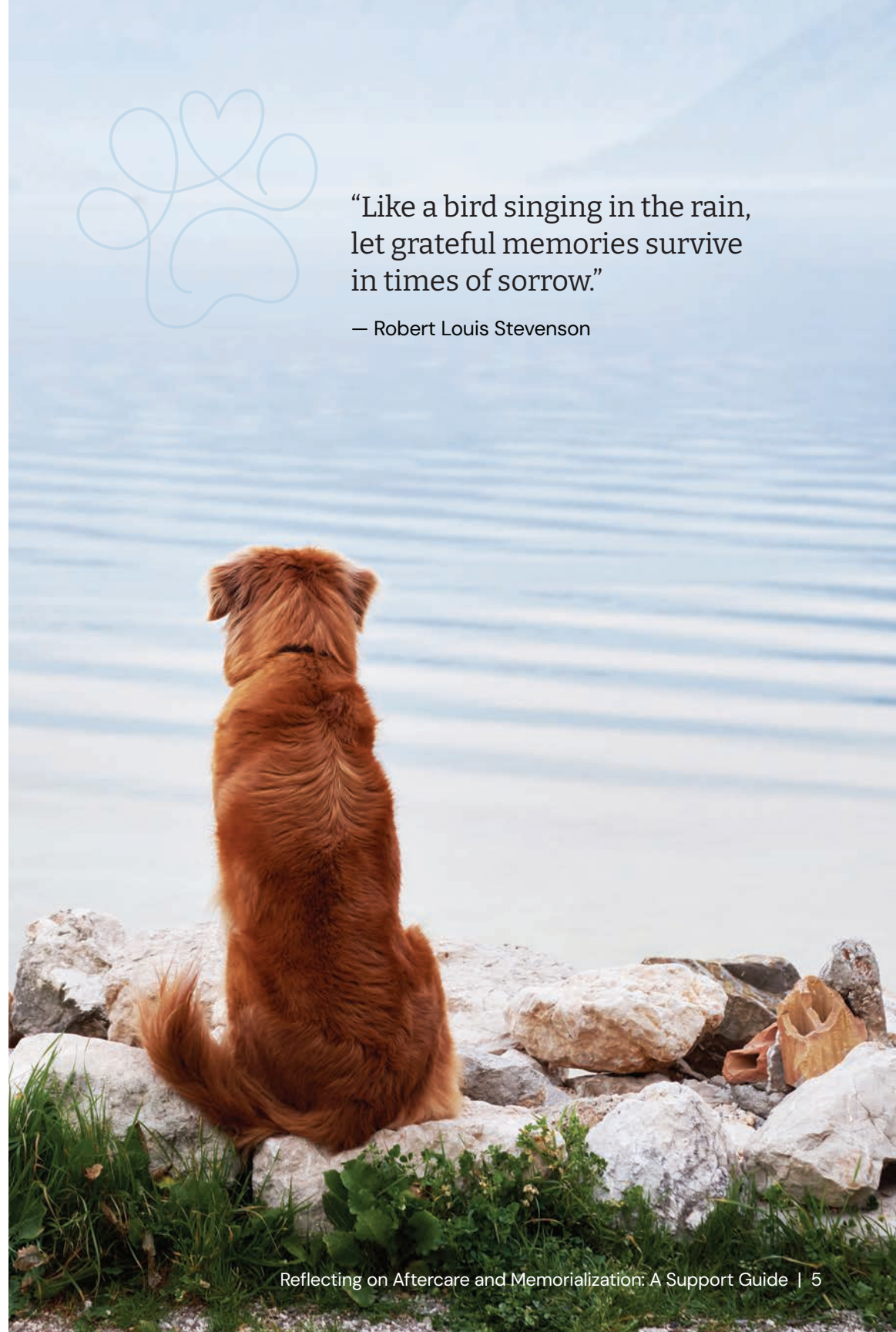
What if I make the wrong choice?

There is no wrong choice. This process is about you, your grief and your relationship.



“Like a bird singing in the rain,
let grateful memories survive
in times of sorrow.”

— Robert Louis Stevenson





Aftercare Services: Honouring the Body

There's a part of grief that isn't often talked about: the "administrative" side. Even in our heartbreak, there are still practical tasks to manage, such as choosing aftercare services, handling personal belongings or arranging for memorial items.

Thinking about these tasks can be overwhelming, especially when emotions are raw. But these decisions are part of saying goodbye and they can offer comfort as you move through your grief.

What is Aftercare?

Aftercare refers to the ways your pet's body is cared for after death, as well as the opportunities to honour and remember them in physical and symbolic ways. If you feel unsure, your veterinary team can guide you through this process.

Here are some common aftercare options available:

Private Cremation

Your pet is cremated individually, and their ashes are returned to you.

Communal Cremation

Your pet is cremated with other animals. Ashes are not returned. This is often a more affordable option and still ensures your pet's body is treated with respect.

Home Burial

Laying your pet to rest on your property may feel like the best spot for them. If this is your choice, be sure to check local bylaws before proceeding.

Pet Cemetery Burial

A formal resting place in a pet cemetery offers the opportunity for a headstone or marker and a peaceful spot to visit over time.

Aquamation (Alkaline Hydrolysis)

A gentle, eco-friendly alternative to cremation, aquamation uses a water-based process to return the body to its natural elements. Ashes are returned to the family.

While these are more widely known aftercare options, they are not the only choices. Explore what's available in your area by speaking with your veterinarian and local pet aftercare or memorial services.



Keepsakes and Memorial Items

Memorial items can never replace your pet's physical presence, but they can offer a comforting, tangible reminder of the bond you shared.

Keepsakes might include:

- Clay or ink paw/nose prints
- Fur clippings
- Jewelry or keychains with ashes, hair or engraving
- Personalized urns, art, pottery or photo books
- Memorial stones, shadow boxes or ornaments

Did you know?

Your veterinary team can often obtain keepsakes like fur clippings and ink paw and nose prints themselves after your pet has died. If possible, consider asking about these options in advance or let someone on your care team know if this is important to you.



“The greatest gift we can give them is our love; the greatest gift they leave us is their memory.”

— Unknown



Remembering in Your Own Way: Culture, Spirituality and Meaning-Making

The way we mourn and remember those we love is often shaped by our cultures, faiths and spiritual beliefs. These systems can offer rituals, symbols and language that help us make sense of death and express love, grief and remembrance. But when it comes to pets, many people find themselves unsure of how their traditions apply or if they apply at all.

You might wonder:

Is it okay to include my pet in a cultural or spiritual ceremony?

Yes. In many traditions, animals are considered sentient beings, pets or even spiritual guides, and honouring their life through ritual is both valid and meaningful. You can adapt cultural or spiritual practices that resonate with you or create your own ceremony that reflects your beliefs and the bond you shared. Whether it's lighting a candle, offering a prayer, creating an altar or playing music, the intention behind your act is what gives it meaning.

“What we once enjoyed and deeply loved we can never lose, for all that we love deeply becomes part of us.”

— Helen Keller



What traditions could help me feel closer to my pet's memory?

That depends on what feels sacred, comforting or familiar to you. Some write letters to their pets or set up a space with photos and keepsakes. Others find peace in natural rituals, planting something, walking a meaningful path or leaving offerings in nature. If you follow a specific faith, consider what prayers, readings or customs might be adapted. If you're more spiritual or secular, personal rituals like storytelling, music or acts of service may help you stay connected to your pet's memory.

Who can I talk to if I want to create something meaningful but I'm not sure how?

You don't have to do this alone. You can talk with your veterinary team, a veterinary social worker, a spiritual care provider (chaplain, elder, faith leader) or a therapist who understands grief. Some people also find support and inspiration through online communities or pet loss support groups. The most important thing is choosing someone who will listen without judgment and help you explore what feels right for you.

Take a moment to reflect...

The following questions can help you think about how your beliefs, identity and values might shape a meaningful tribute:

- Are there mourning or memorial rituals in my culture that feel comforting? Could any of them be adapted to include my pet?
- What languages, symbols or practices bring you peace when you're grieving?
- Is there a space (spiritual or physical) that you associate with connection, healing or remembrance?
- Who in your community or faith tradition could help you think about honouring your pet in a way that aligns with your beliefs?



Remember...

You are allowed to ask questions or create something new. You are allowed to blend traditions. You are allowed to honour your pet in any way you choose, even if it doesn't follow a familiar path.

Whether you light a candle, whisper their name in prayer or simply sit under a tree and feel your love for them, that act is meaningful. That act is remembrance.

If you're unsure of where to start, consider reaching out to a spiritual advisor, cultural elder or someone you trust within your community. These conversations can inspire new forms of healing and connection that honour both your identity and your beloved pet.

Creative Ways to Memorialize

Memorializing doesn't have to be costly or complicated. There are countless ways to honour your memories of your pet with intention and creativity.

If you're feeling unsure about where to begin, here are a few ideas for inspiration.

Personal Keepsakes

- A locket, memory box or shadow box with fur, ID tags or a favourite toy
- Jewelry made from ashes or engraved with their name or pawprint
- Custom artwork or pottery, or a quilt made from their blankets or bandanas
- Friendship globes, holiday ornaments or personalized portraits

Tributes and Rituals

- Write a letter, journal entry or share a tribute on social media
- Celebrate their "gotcha day" or birthday with a toast, photo or story
- Hold a memorial gathering with others who loved them
- Dedicate a bench, tree or plaque in a place they loved
- Plant a tree, bush or garden where you can reflect and connect
- Mix ashes into a memorial garden stone or piece of landscape art
- Consider rituals, traditions, or practices from human memorials in your culture or faith that you might adapt to honour and remember your pet





Community Contributions

- Create or contribute to a donation fund in their memory
- Support a charity, non-profit or research organization that aligns with your values
- Volunteer at an organization that holds meaning in your shared story

Take a moment to reflect:

Memorialization doesn't have to follow a script. Let your heart guide you. These questions may help you discover what feels right for you:

- What object or item reminds me most of my pet?
- Is there a place I'd like to visit to feel close to them?
- What memories bring a smile to my face?
- What do I want to say to them now?
- Would I like to create something with my hands?
- How do I want to remember them on birthdays or holidays?
- Is there a ritual or tradition from my culture I'd like to include?
- How can I honour them by giving back or helping others?



When to Consider a Post-Mortem Examination

A post-mortem examination—also called a necropsy or autopsy—is an option after a pet has died. Like all aftercare decisions, choosing a post-mortem is a personal choice.

Why consider a post-mortem?

Caregivers may choose a post-mortem for:

- Educational purposes: Some find comfort in knowing their pet continues to contribute to the learning of student veterinarians, trainees and professionals, ultimately helping other animals in the future.
- Understanding the cause of death: A post-mortem may answer questions about what led to your pet's death or insight into the disease process. For many, these answers provide information and clarity which may be important in their grief process.

Can I still bury or cremate my pet?

In some cases, yes. However, a post-mortem may affect whether remains can be returned, depending on the procedure and the facility.

How do post-mortems work?

Your veterinarian or a veterinary teaching hospital can provide detailed information about the process, what to expect and any options for receiving your pet's remains afterward.



Helping Children Remember

Memorialization provides an opportunity to support a child's grieving process for their pet. When children can creatively memorialize, it encourages them to express their thoughts and feelings and offers a tangible way to provide some comfort during grief. It is also a great way for the family to come together and remember their pet.


Some child-friendly memorial ideas include:

- Read a children's book about pet loss
- Make a memory jar or scrapbook
- Write stories or draw pictures
- Hold a small service with music and shared memories
- Take a walk and share "remember when" stories

"Your memory feels like home to me. So, whenever my mind wanders, it always finds its way back to you."

— Ranata Suzuki





Prompts to Support Memorialization with Children

Memory Sharing

“What is your favourite memory of them?”

“Can you tell me about a time they made you laugh?”

“If you could say one more thing to them, what would it be?”

Creative Expression

“Would you like to draw a picture of them doing something they loved?”

“Can you help make a scrapbook about them?”

Tangible Memorials

“What special things should we keep to remember them? A collar, photo or toy?”

“Should we make something together to remember them? A picture frame, memory jar or garden stone?”

“Would you like to plant a flower or tree in their honour?”

Rituals and Goodbyes

“Would it help to say goodbye in a special way? For example, by having a little ceremony?”

“Should we make a special spot in the house with their picture and a candle or toy?”

“Is there a song or story that reminds you of them?”

Continuing the Bond

“How could we help other animals in their memory?”

“Do you want to celebrate them on their birthday or ‘gotcha day’ each year?”

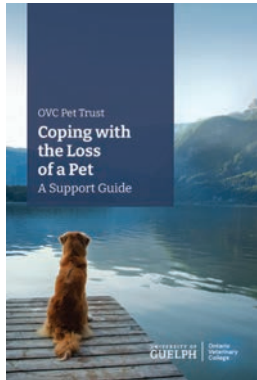
“Is there something you’d like to do when you miss them, like hug their blanket, look at pictures or talk to them?”

When talking to children about memorializing a pet, allow them to guide how involved they want to be. If your child or teen doesn't seem interested or engaged, that's okay. It's important not to push them into something they're not ready or willing to do. Even if they say "no" right now, you can gently leave the door open for later. Simply knowing they have options can be reassuring.



Resources

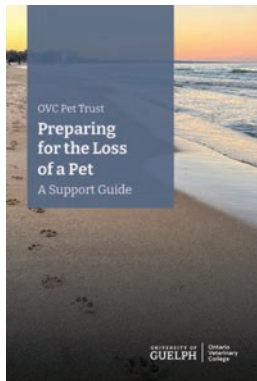
Also available in this series:



OVC Pet Trust

Coping with the Loss of a Pet

A Support Guide



OVC Pet Trust

Preparing for the Loss of a Pet

A Support Guide



OVC Pet Trust

Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet





A Support Guide

Visit

OVC Pet Trust's Pet Loss Support Digital Resource Centre

at pettrust.ca/petlossresources

to access support, including:

-  *Always Near Me: Navigating Pet Loss*, a six-part video documentary series of individuals and families who share their experiences with pet loss and healing through memorialization.
-  An online video library of expert interviews on the topics of pet loss and grief.
-  Information about the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) Veterinary Social Work Service.
-  Additional resources (not affiliated with OVC): support groups, books, podcasts and mental health supports.

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OVC Pet Trust was founded in 1986 at the University of Guelph's Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) and is Canada's first charitable fund dedicated to the health and well-being of companion animals.

OVC Pet Trust supports innovative discoveries, health care and education that improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatments of diseases of pets.

OVC Pet Trust's Pet Memorial Program provides an opportunity for people to honour the special relationship they have with their companion animals.

Learn more about how OVC Pet Trust improves life for pets and the people who love them at **pettrust.ca**.



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