



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

EQUINE CENTER

Coping With the Loss of a Horse

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The bond between humans and horses has inspired myth, philosophy, and magic across cultures for centuries. It is surprising, then, that very little attention has been paid to the human experience of losing an equine partner. And as many horse people know, losing a horse is a distinctly different experience than losing any other relationship, human or otherwise.

In February 2006, after months of treating and hoping, watching and waiting, I lost a beloved mare. The condition that ultimately took her life was a chronic and insidious one that required constant research, nursing, and crisis management. Those many months of care were both labor- and cash-intensive, requiring me to orbit around her in an effort to meet her every need. So the day my mare died, I left the barn with a feeling so empty it defied description. I was rudderless and drifting without my horse. She had given my days form and routine—she had given me a new understanding of the word “commitment.”

There are many models professional counselors use to make sense of the grieving process, and these models (including the “stage model” of grief) can be quite helpful. More important, though, is the realization that grief is highly individual, variable, and illogical. No two people will grieve a loss exactly alike, and many times grief defies both explanation and expectation. Knowing this can be oddly comforting—that you are grieving

as you need to, and that somehow, some way, you will find a way through to the other side.

With that said, there are some things to remember if you are stumbling through the loss of a beloved horse:

Grief is a whole-body experience.

It involves all parts of the human system and often shows itself on physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual levels. People who are grieving often have bodies that are exhausted and uncooperative, hearts that are broken, and brains that alternate between confusion, numbness, and too much time spent on the “what ifs.” Learning to sit with the many faces of grief is a requirement of working through the loss.

Grief is misunderstood.

Humans fear and avoid death because it is simply too big to wrap our brains around. Many people may offer well-meaning, but ill-timed and off-putting, advice to those who have lost a horse. If this happens to you, thank them kindly for their thoughts and then find support from others who resist the temptation to offer a “quick fix.” Horses are not appliances to be replaced, but loved ones to be mourned and honored.

Grief is isolating.

Many bereaved people feel alone in their grief. It is not unusual to feel isolated by the indifference of people who clearly don't get

it. The antidote to this is found in connecting with people who will listen to you without judgment. Whether you find those people within the horse community, within your family, or through a more formal route (such as a support group or a grief counselor) does not matter. What matters, instead, is the power that comes from telling your story to others who can understand your experience.

Grief has no timetable.

Many mourners frequently note that others expect them to get over their loss in a matter of weeks or months. But there is no timetable for grief. People who are lucky enough to enjoy the trust of a horse have invested tremendous time and energy in building that relationship. As such, they must also spend considerable time and energy adjusting when that horse dies or is lost to other circumstances. Do not expect yourself to “get over it.” Loss is not something you get over, but something to which you must adapt.

Grief feels rotten.

Grief is a process that often hits us surprisingly hard. Even for people who have survived many previous experiences with death, it is not uncommon to describe the loss of a particular animal as significantly

more distressing. You may find that you have lost the capacity for finding comfort—your usual calming, self-soothing activities may not work. When all else fails, go back to the basics: hydration, nourishment, rest, and exercise. Support your body so your body can support your grief.

Grief is transformative.

Sometimes, one of the most healing things we can do is to honor grief as the teacher it is. By entering into relationships with horses, we open ourselves up to partnership, challenge, and transformation. When we lose our horses, reflecting on their gifts can enable us to live their legacies. It is not just in loving them, but in losing them, that we are afforded the opportunity to become better humans.

Those who have experienced a deeply satisfying relationship with a horse know the intense pain that comes from having to bid them goodbye. If you are working through a loss yourself, treat yourself kindly and find others who can do the same. If you know of a friend or colleague who is grieving a horse, reach out, even in small ways, to let them know you are available to listen.