

WORKING THROUGH LOSS



AFTER

Some elderly companions who lose their owners become depressed, withdrawn and visibly distressed.



THE DEATH OF A DOG'S HUMAN GUARDIAN CAN BE A DEVASTATING EXPERIENCE. HOW CAN WE HELP A GRIEVING PUP FIND HAPPINESS AGAIN?

» *By Jen Reeder*

LIFE

The Chihuahua was clearly terrified. His owner was found dead in bed—with the little dog cowering beneath it. He landed in a Rhode Island animal shelter, where he stayed wide-eyed and growling.

Since the dog was a senior, the shelter called Vintage Pet Rescue in Rhode Island. Someone from the team gently wrapped the dog in a blanket and drove him to the senior dog sanctuary.

Kristen Peralta, co-founder of Vintage Pet Rescue, said the key was to give him time in a private area to decompress. A couple days later, she brought the dog—dubbed Pedro Pascal—to see a veterinarian, which went well.

With slow introductions, he started to socialize with other senior dogs on the property, even rolling onto his back in the grass gleefully.

“He was kind of prancing around and started rolling two days after he arrived here,” she says. “He was giving me kisses. It didn’t take that long.”

According to Peralta, Pedro is one of hundreds of dogs brought to Vintage Pet Rescue after their owners die. Many come from older people on fixed incomes without any family, so they don’t have a will that provides for their pet.

“If you don’t have family, definitely reach out to nonprofits in the area early on,” she advises. “Even talk to your vet, talk to your groomer. Just try to get the word out there, because if rescue groups and people who love animals know about the situation, they’ll work together to help.”

She feels it's important for people to understand that dogs can recover from the death of an owner. She's heard many people say they want their dog euthanized when they die—a practice Vintage Pet Rescue discourages, as the team does not believe healthy dogs should be put down.

"Animals are so much more resilient than people," she says. "While they absolutely do feel anxiety and sadness, they adapt so much better than we do. They bounce back and are ready for a second chance usually."

Scientists haven't directly studied whether dogs have a concept of death, according to Clive Wynne, Ph.D., director of the Canine Science Collaboratory at Arizona State University and author of *Dog Is Love: Why and How Your Dog Loves You*. But the disappearance of an important person can certainly cause confusion, sadness and distress.

"The death of that person means the dog's whole world is upended,

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* Clive Wynne, Ph.D., ethologist

especially if they end up in a shelter," he says.

He notes that if he were to die, his greyhound, Ginger, would likely be sad about his absence but comforted by continuing to live in their house with his wife, son, son's fiance and family cat, Olipher. Conversely, living alone with a single person would create much more change and upheaval for a pet if the owner dies—but it wouldn't be insurmountable.

"The love that dogs have for us is real, and it's powerful and it's strong. But it's not the same as the love that human beings have for

each other," he says. "One of the ways that it's different is dogs can be more fluid about these things, so a dog can be re-homed into a loving family."

Dogs will grieve the absence of a beloved person and might seem withdrawn or quiet, Wynne notes.

"I think dog emotions are not necessarily complex, but they are intense," he says. "Dogs can feel intense joy and emotional connection, love. When they experience the flip side of that, they feel grief and sadness when people that have been important to them disappear from their lives."

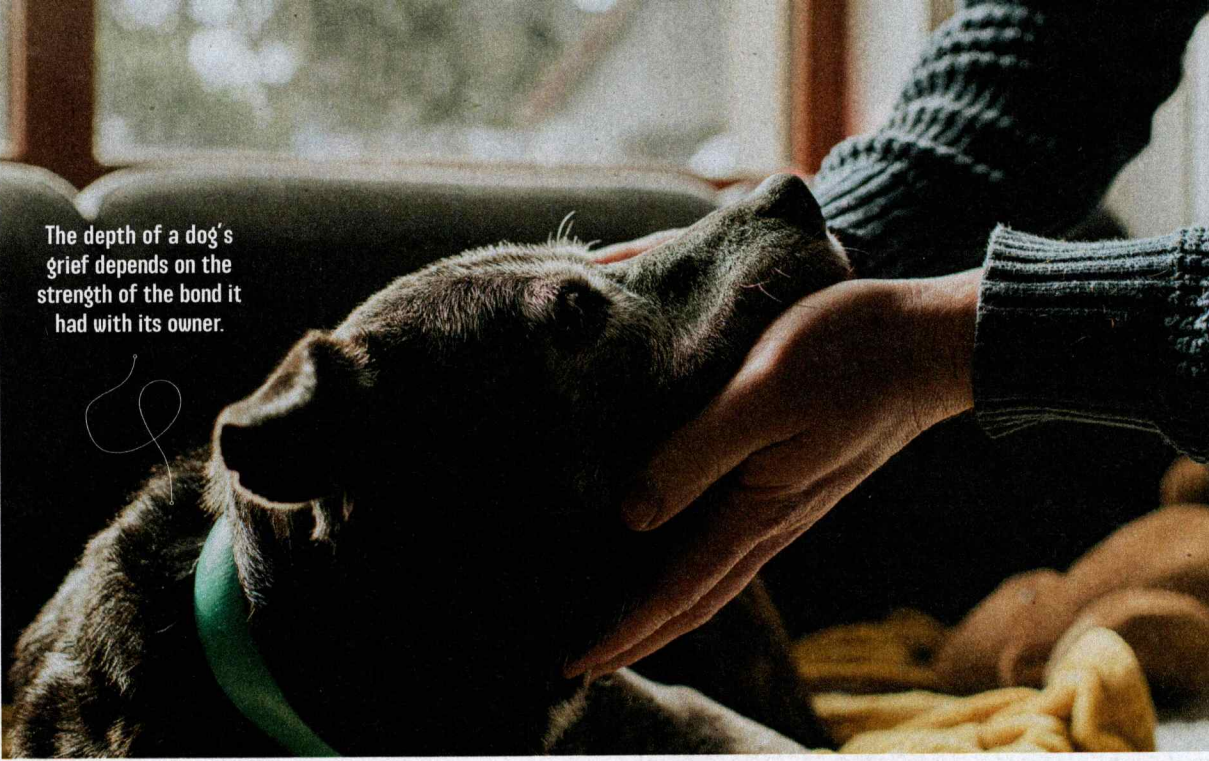
ADOPTING SENIOR DOGS

Often, senior dogs lose their senior owners and need new homes. Kristen Peralta, co-founder of Vintage Pet Rescue, hopes potential adopters will consider welcoming a senior home.

"It's so rewarding," she says. "You're giving them a safe spot to live the rest of their lives, and they're so grateful. And they don't have puppy energy. They don't want to be walked at 5 a.m. They're over the stage of chewing up your slippers. They just want love, and to feel safe and cared for. It's really amazing."



Many mature canines are looking for loving homes.



The depth of a dog's grief depends on the strength of the bond it had with its owner.

Mirah Horowitz, founder and CEO of Lucky Dog Animal Rescue, a nonprofit with a rescue center in South Carolina and a foster program in Northern Virginia, feels it's heartbreaking when someone dies and their family or friends cannot take in their pets.

To help dogs cope with the loss of an owner, she recommends getting them into a home environment as quickly as possible. Then she suggests fosters or adopters try to learn what motivates the dog, such as affection, play or food.

"Then sometimes you have to find out the food that motivates them," she says. "We've had some dogs that when they're really depressed, they will come out for cooked hamburger, but that's it. Or boiled chicken, and that's it. So finding that out is important."

Family members can also take steps to try to help a dog adapt to their home. Laura Oliver, founder and director of Lionel's Legacy Senior Dog Rescue in San Diego, California, has been surprised by how many people agree to take in a pet if the owner dies, but then change their minds when they become overwhelmed by

grief and dealing with logistics like funeral arrangements.

DON'T GIVE UP

If a dog shows their grief and stress by pacing, vocalizing and staying up all night, people often give up. So she urges patience, as well as these steps:

- ✦ Establish a routine, such as meals and walks at certain times of day. "The best thing you can do is just create routine and structure for them, so they're not guessing what tomorrow looks like, but rather what the next hour looks like."
- ✦ Use structured language to create consistency, such as "Let's go" or "Come on."
- ✦ Look into tools to help the dog relax, such as calming supplements,

heated blankets or essential oils sprayed onto an object (never the dog).

- ✦ Ask a veterinarian about medication, even for temporary use to help them through the transition.
- ✦ Research shows our stress stresses out dogs, so when stress levels rise, step away from the dog and take deep breaths in order to calm yourself.

Ultimately, with love and space to heal, the dog can blossom into a loving companion.

"Just try some things, and if they don't work, don't stress about the fact that they didn't work," Oliver says. "Give yourself some grace, give the dog some grace and realize that in time, everything will be OK." #

LINKS FOR MORE INFORMATION

Vintage Pet Rescue:
vintagepetrescue.org

ASU's Canine Science Collaboratory:
psychology.asu.edu/research/labs/canine-science-collaboratory

Lucky Dog Animal Rescue:
luckydoganimalrescue.org

Lionel's Legacy Senior Dog Rescue:
lionelslegacy.org