



## **Cherished Ones**

### **Expert's Corner: Volume 2, "Pet Loss, Grief and talking to Children"**

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**Interviewer: Remy Bibaud (RB)**

**Expert: Elizabeth Pavone (EP)**

**RB:** I am going to begin our interview with Elizabeth Pavone. My name is Remy Bibaud of Cherished Ones. It's July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, and today is our second installment of The Expert's Corner and it's in celebration of the launch of our 1<sup>st</sup> product, Pet Perennials. Again I am talking to Elizabeth Pavone. She is a grief and intuitive counselor from the Tampa Bay area. She is going to talk to us today about pet loss, grief, and talking to children about it. So without further ado, I am going to welcome Elizabeth. Elizabeth- if you can just give us a little background on your professional endeavors and these kinds of topics such as grief, loss, and just hardships in general.

**EP:** Hi Remy. Thank you for having me. My background includes training as a marriage and family therapist. I am also a grief counselor here in Tampa. So what I do is I see individuals, families, and even children who are suffering from a traumatic loss. I got into this work because my own fiancé died suddenly. After he died, I found the whole grief process so overwhelming that I needed support. So I decided that this would become my life's work and my life's passion. So- what we do is- people will come to see me and we really just talk through all of the issues with the grief. It involves so many different emotions that it's very overwhelming for people.

**RB:** Yes- I would only expect that you know when we are so enmeshed with our loved ones whether they be family members or pets that when we lose them whether we are prepared or we are not prepared it is certainly something that takes adjustment and there is many emotions. In a case that is really relative to the Pet Perennials. I lost my dog, Olive, in 2012. She was healthy by all means at the time, and it was sudden and unexpected that she took so ill. So it was really a process for me too. So Olive really became the inspiration for Cherished Ones and subsequently Pet Perennials. I am so pleased to have you today to talk about this. I believe our listeners, our future customers, deal this and often don't know necessarily how to talk about it. Others don't know how to lend support to people who are suffering and in a grieving process. And ultimately, how can we move people from grief and loss to more of celebration. That is the mission of Cherished Ones- to go from grief to celebration. I would like to move into the questions. The first one that I have is in regards to something that I read somewhere that said grief over the loss of a pet is the same as what is experienced over the death of a person in one's life. Why do you believe that is so?

**EP:** Well grief means deep sadness. And grief is a natural reaction to loss of a loved one or a pet. Our animals provide for us companionship, acceptance, emotional support, and unconditional love. And

many times, as you know, our bond with our pet is far deeper than with our friends or family. Our pets also rely on us for everything, so often when they die we feel responsible for their death.

**RB:** Yeah- I didn't think of it that way. Again- even back to my situation with Olive, I did everything I possibly could and yet I thought to myself- wasn't there something else I could do? And so at some point, we have to let ourselves off the hook I suppose, and just accept what is happening. Then maybe with thinking about the times- the good times- that we DID have with them would help us through that grieving process. I would imagine that there are people out there who wouldn't quite understand it- this affinity that we have for our pets. If they are not pet owners or they haven't had a pet or that experience, what can they do to support a family member or a friend who has lost a dear pet?

**EP:** That's a very good question. We can support a friend or family member by 1<sup>st</sup>- acknowledging their grief. You can do that by sending a sympathy card or by offering words of sympathy. You can sit with their grief. You can go and visit them. Hold their hand. And just give comfort. Other things you can do is plant a tree or a flowering bush in honor of their pet. But the things that you DON'T want to do is- you never want to say things to the person like- don't woRBy, you can get another pet. Or- it was just a dog, or just a cat- because these kinds of statements will shut down the griever.

**RB:** Yes- I can see that. It's almost like you are not taking it seriously. Or their feelings don't really matter to you. Even if the person does. What are some of the things that the grieving person can do to work through that grief?

**EP:** Ok. That is a good question too. I would suggest the grieving person first of all, needs to acknowledge the relationship that they have with the pet. Losing a pet is a life changing event. Your pet was a family member, and in some cases, your pet is your best friend. Just think about it- your whole routine changes. You were used to getting up at a certain time. You were used to walking them. You lost your unconditional love that they gave you. So give yourself permission to grieve the loss in your own way. You want to get plenty of rest. You want to eat right. Be gentle with yourself. And you have to know that everyone's grief process is different. My grief process might take a shorter time or a longer time than yours. It's all different. The common things that you will feel too are sadness, shock, anger, denial. These are all very normal reactions to grief. A good thing to do is reach out to people who you feel are very caring and supportive, like family or friends. You can reach out to a pet loss group or a pet loss hotline. You can seek out a grief counselor. You can plan a pet memorial. Or keep a journal to express your feelings.

**RB:** Those are all very good ideas. That's part of our goals here at Cherished Ones and then Pet: Perennials. As you'll see on our website, we offer a Tribute Page where people will be able to post tributes to their pets. There will be a gallery called The Flower Gallery, where we want folks to show us their flowers- where they have grown their Pet Perennials in honor of their pets. And then lastly, we have a forum, a community forum, where we invite people to come in and discuss topics about pets and everything pets. Loss, celebration, a funny story, it's really a community. Instead of just the product, it's a community we are building. We want everyone to know that we do care. So all of those bits of advice and ideas that you suggested are wonderful. And we hope just to be part of that process for people. Again- Cherished Ones mission is to help people move from mourning to celebrating. What are some ways you think they can celebrate? And do you feel celebration promotes healing?

**EP:** Yes- I absolutely feel celebration promotes healing and it's really essential to the grieving process. I think it's a good idea ALWAYS to celebrate your pet's life. One thing I recommend that you can do is to

create a sacred space to pay tribute and acknowledge the life of your pet. It could be in your home, in the woods, in a favorite park or at the beach. And you can fill that space with pictures, candles, music, poetry, any treats or toys that were special to your pet. You could invite those who you feel will support you in this journey. A group of people that you can talk openly about your relationship, your memories and feelings of what your pet meant to you. All of these things help you to heal. It helps you to acknowledge that a significant part of your life has changed and you are validating the relationship that you had with your pet.

**RB:** Celebration is definitely, in my eyes, a way that we can move from mourning to something that is recognizing and honoring that life, and even ourselves. Recognizing ourselves, and being able to move and make that transition onto the next thing. Do you think that children handle pet loss differently than adults? Why and how?

**EP:** Absolutely. Children are commonly referred to as a silent griever. They deal with death in a unique way which is very different from adults. Adults need to express their grief through talking. Children- not so much. Children express their grief through play and how they play. For example, they may play act out how the pet died. So let's say the pet was sick and had died. The child might pretend to be a doctor or nurse who is caring for their pet. When a child experiences the loss of a pet, you have to remember too that it might be the very first death that they have ever experienced. Children do form very strong attachments to their family pets. They see the pet as a playmate, a sibling, or their protector.

**RB:** Wow. Yes I can just imagine that. And in my own life, the children that were around me, dealing with when they've lost a pet or even when Olive passed too. It was very interesting. You know- they are so innocent. I think parents, and guardians, we just have to look for the visual signals then. Read them. See what they are doing and how they are playing. How they are acting out because maybe they won't talk about it. So- that is good advice. What do you think is the best way to address pet loss with a child? Do you address it? Or do you do what I said and just sit back and watch?

**EP:** What you would do is this. It is very important if a pet has died in your family, you want to tell the child the truth. No matter how difficult. A lot of times, parents will pretend that the death didn't happen or that it was no big deal. The child then may not understand the concept that dying is final. There have been cases that I have dealt with where a parent did not tell the child that the pet has died, and the child comes home from school and the pet is not there. Then they're thinking- well- where's the pet? This is strange. Is the pet coming home? It was just never handled correctly. So you want to tell the child. And you have to remember too that children may see the death very differently than we see it. So you want to explain it as best you can according to your own beliefs or religious beliefs. This is how you would want to explain it to your own child. And it is very important to know that how you handle this will stay with the child for their entire life. Children do pick up your cues. Telling a child, "well- ok- our little doggie is sick and we had to take it to the vet". The child in the family is going to know something has happened. They are going to sense your grief, your pain. You are their model at this age. They are watching you. How do they handle it? Do they not talk about it? That's really weird. So just be aware of those things.

**RB:** I think that is vitally important. And I feel like hearing that is a little bit overwhelming because it makes you think- if you know that you are setting a tone for the rest of their life, it is important to deal with it honestly and openly. And maybe a pet dying doesn't seem as significant as a person dying, but- right off the bat to brush it off, knowing that sets the tone. You verifying that, as a grief counselor, I

think is very helpful for our audience. Therefore, this is a good caveat into the next question. So what are some practical tips that parents or adults can do right away to help a child?

**EP:** Right away what I would do is- which is very important too- allow your child to see you grieving. But do not allow the child to become your care giver. What happens a lot of times is- if there is a death of a pet in a family, everybody is very sad. But sometimes, parents will go inside their bedroom and cry. They won't cry in front of their children. What I am saying is YES- cry in front of the children. It's normal. You want your kid to see you crying. You are crying because you're sad. And that's very normal. Your pet died and you are sad. You also want to, after a death, keep to a normal family schedule, bc that is going to make your child feel safe. Remember, their best friend just died, so they need to feel safe. Again- like I said before, remember that you are modeling how to grieve. And the death of a child's pet matters a great deal to the child. They need your support and your guidance to understand their loss and how to mourn that loss. Reassure your child that it was not their fault that the pet died. Many times I see this- children feel that they are the cause of the death. You want to reassure them that it was not their fault by explaining properly what happened. Another thing that happens with children is once there is a death, the child feels "Well is Mommy going to die next? Is Daddy going to die next? Am I going to die?" So you will see children become very, very clingy to you. And that's normal. But if you explain things correctly, that should go away.

**RB:** Right.

**EP:** Another good thing too is- have the child draw pictures of their pet, their favorite memories of the pet. You want to include the children in the memorial or the pet celebration because you want to normalize things so include them in it. You want to answer their questions. They are going to have many, many questions, so answer their questions over and over again. That's going to help them, again, feel safe. And have a ritual where the family can talk about what happened. Have everyone come together maybe at dinner. Talk about it. Talk about stories about the pet, the memories that you have. So that it's not something that we don't talk about at our home. You want to bring everything out in the open.

**RB:** So in calculating everything that we have talked about and this last question, I think some of the tips and suggestions that shined through for me was honesty.

**EP:** Yes.

**RB:** Safety. Security. Making a child feel safe and secure even though they are scared. And you may be scared and having certain feelings, but they need to be aware that they can still come to you. And the other part that resonates through all of this is "Celebrate".

**EP:** Yes. Express ourselves through happy memories and by taking actions that are celebratory. It's going to help us to heal.

**RB:** I am so grateful for this opportunity to talk with you. To go over these topics and subjects that are not the easiest to deal with. And- to have you as our person with our launch of Pet Perennials because I know your own personal affinity for pets and doggies. I look forward to talking with you again in the future on other subjects as we move forward. And certainly, we will be providing your contact information for anybody that is on our site should they need somebody to help them through their process.

**EP:** And thank you so much for doing this work. It is so important to get the word out, so thank you.

**RB:** Thank you Elizabeth, very much! And I will be talking to you again. Have a great day and take care.