

What do you need to consider if you are a senior (or know one) whose animal family member has passed / is passing?



While losing an animal family member is tragic for all of us, there are additional considerations for seniors who suffer such a loss. These considerations apply to any and all of us, but what makes the situation unique is the life of the senior and their attitudes about it. In all situations, do not assume that any of this is true for someone—instead, ask, listen and be present. The following are considerations for seniors and those who know them:

Identity is ever shifting

Many senior adults have experienced (or are experiencing) changes to their career, income, mobility, and perhaps even their health. Their social connections are changing with the loss of some people and the removal of known “structures” such as work and connection to the community that brought other people and interactions into their world.

Animal family members are a constant, faithful companion

While this truth applies to us all, the difference for someone in their senior years is that their animal family members may be one of their only constant companions. Depending on the seniors’ ability and willingness to have social commitments outside home, their animals are essential to their social sphere. Added to this is the fact that the death of friends, family, and loved ones becomes more real with the progression of time.

A lot to give. Not as many (around) to give it to.

Many seniors give heartily (and wholeheartedly) to their animal family members. They spoil them with care, love, and affection. In return, their animal family member provides them with a sense of purpose and someone with whom they can exchange mutual love and affection.

Healthier

While statistics about this aspect are a bit sparse, I am certain that animals add years and meaning to all our lives. Any senior whose life has changed significantly with age will surely attest to this. Aside from caring for someone who adds vitality and purpose into our daily lives, spending time with animals has other remarkable health benefits. In fact, all of us engage in life differently when there is someone (or multiple “someones”) to care for who are dependent on us for their food, shelter, and love. Being touched and touching (such as giving and receiving hugs) has remarkable benefits as well... and then there is the balm of being loved—of giving and receiving love, unconditionally.

What can you do?

How can you help?

No one wants to be generalized into a group or have assumptions made about them. That said, always always ask. Here are some things to watch for and questions to consider:

Is someone in need of help for caring for their animal family member?

This is a tricky thing to consider. The fear of having someone remove or take away an animal family member (heaven forbid) is real for seniors (or anyone) who sense that people are beginning to make decisions on their behalf. If you have a friend or family member who could use your help taking their animal to the vet, picking up supplies, and so on, offer to do these things



knowing that this fear may exist. There is nothing you should do that suggests you could (or would) make this fear of theirs a reality. With that said, the following suggestions are for your consideration:

Suggestions for language/ questions:

- *“Would you like my help getting _____ to the vet? I could drive you and make sure that you both get back home safely.”*
- *“Is there anything I can do to help you with _____’s vet care? I would be happy to take you and (he/she) and (if it helps) would love to pay for the visit. I want to ensure you are both happy and healthy together.”*

Are they grieving?

The loss of an animal family member is devastating for most of us. When you have spent so much time together and are used to the exchange of love and companionship, the loss is immense. A senior may find that their social and friend circle has become smaller, making these relationships even more significant. If they lose an animal family member, they may not know how to grieve or feel that the significance of their loss will be appreciated. Demonstrate that you understand and ask how (and if) you can help. Walking them through options to commemorate the life of their animal family member and ensuring that they have any help (and perhaps companionship) they might need for a memorial service can be considered. Additionally, they may be now alone, and loneliness is a very real concern for all of us, more so when your sole (and soul) companion has passed away.

Suggestions for language/ questions:

- *"I am so sorry about your loss of _____. Can I do anything to help you?"*
- *"I am so sorry for your loss. Would you like to do something special to remember _____? I am here to help."*

Is their animal sick and in need of help, or do they have to make an end-of-life decision that they are unable to afford (or not equipped to discuss)?

Assisting animals at the end of their life or prolonging their health through medicine may be hard decisions. They may also be impacted by finances. In such cases, you may want to offer support such as joining them for their veterinarian visit. You may support them by asking the questions and taking notes to record the information. Ensure that you are clear about the expectations that they have of you before the visit. If beneficial, you may act in the capacity of prompting the vet with questions and asking them to repeat (or slow down while discussing) key information. You may want to ensure that they have the time and space to process the information and (if necessary) make a decision. Any of us who has helped an animal cross The Rainbow Bridge knows that the pain and loss are immense. Being able to be present with your animal and saying goodbye as they drift off is both terribly hard and very loving.

Suggestions for language/ questions:

- *"Would you like for me to go to vet with you and _____? If it is helpful, I could ask questions of the vet or take notes, so you have them for reference later."*
- *"Do you have any concerns about _____'s health?"*

After the veterinarian visit:

- *"Did you understand what the veterinarian said about _____?"*
- *"I am so sorry to hear that the veterinarian has recommended that _____ be helped to cross The Rainbow Bridge. Is this a decision that you agree with? Would you like me to go with you?"*
- *"Is there anything that I can help you with the decisions that you are making?"*

- *“I know it is hard, so hard to consider putting _____ to sleep/ helping _____ cross The Rainbow Bridge. I am here to help you both.”*
- *“I can be there with you, while you sit with _____ as he/she crosses, if you would like that.”*

Have they planned for their animal family members in the event of their own passing or sickness?

The concern over passing before an animal family member is very real, as is the concern of being hurt or out of the house for an extended time without having someone to care for the animal.

There are several options to consider here:

Help with arrangements for short or permanent care alternatives for animal family members.

Coordinating the care and perhaps future home of the animals can afford the senior a lot of relief. If no family is in place, help identify friends or animal rescue groups. This needs to go beyond the identification of the people/organization to a committed arrangement that can be implemented if necessary.

Suggestions for language/ questions:

- *“Have you identified someone who could take care of _____ if you needed to be out of the house for an extended time? If so, who?”*
- *“What if _____ needed another home, heaven forbid. Have you thought of a person or family for this? Would you like me to help you?”*
- *“Have you formalized (got into writing) an agreement? Would you like help with this?”*

Note, if the response is “no,” consider the following:

- *“I would be happy to be that person (if this is the case) or to help you identify and check in with that person. Could we do that? We want to make sure that their contact information and a note about your animal(s) is in the house and on your person. I can help you with that too, if that is all right.”*

Carry a wallet-sized information cards about animals and post one (or more) in home

Ensure that the card is headed, in bold, with ANIMALS AT HOME IN NEED OF CARE Make a card that outlines the names of the animals, ages, breed, health conditions, veterinarian information, and the party to contact in the event of an emergency.

Note: This entails ensuring that the first point is in place.

Suggestions for language/ questions:

- *“I have made a card that has all the information about _____ (name/s) in the event you travel or have an emergency. Do you like it? Would you like any changes to it? Could we place a couple in the house and one in your wallet or purse? Can you think of placing it (or sharing it) anywhere else (or with anyone) else?”*
- **Estate/will provision** stating where animals will go in the event of their death
Estate planners or even automated will services (there are several available at no charge online) can serve to identify where animals are to go and who will care for them.

Suggestions for language/ questions:

If you are related to the person, the following are for your consideration:

- *“Have you included _____ in your will? Would you like to? Would you like my help?”*
- *“Do you have a will? Does it include provisions for _____?”*

If you are *not* related to the person, the following are for your consideration:

- *“Have you included _____ in your will? Would you like to? Would you like my help?”*
- *“Did you know that there are online will services that are at no charge? If you have not done this, you could consider one of those. I can help you if you like. This would make sure that _____ is cared for.” . (An example of a free service is the app, “Tomorrow.”)*
- *“While I am not totally comfortable talking with you about your will, I wonder if have included care for _____?”*

Finally, there may be reservations about adopting another animal family member after one has passed. There are many senior animals in shelters that do not have a long life left and would benefit from a caring family member. This is enough reason to offer up and perhaps even, with permission, coordinate a visit to a local shelter or sanctuary when they are ready. There may be some reluctance about such a decision, at which point reminding them of the many benefits (for all parties involved) could be an effective and honest strategy.

Above all else, listen and listen some more. The loss of a family member is hard and profound. You may be able to support them through this in ways that have everything to do with honoring them and their loss and the special relationship that they shared.

We will all be that person some day.

Reflection: People to Consider (Including Yourself)

- *Are there seniors in your life that you might consider sharing this information with?*
 - *Who?*
 - *List their animal family members (if known)*
 - *How might you help them?*
 - *What are the next steps?*

- *Are you a senior with animal family members to consider?*
 - *What would you like to do with this information?*
 - *Do you want anyone to assist or support you?*
 - *If so, who?*
 - *In what ways would you like them to assist or support you?*

Written as supplemental content for *“Returning from The Rainbow Bridge”* written by Lisa Gravel

ReturningfromTheRainbowBridge.com

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