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CANINE GRIEVING

Firstly, we do not know how much dogs understand about death, but many clients have told me about instances whereby the remaining pet has suffered lethargy, loss of appetite and weight, and has generally been upset or perhaps acting “strangely”. One has to remember that not only has the pet lost their best friend, but also he or she has lost a pack member. The surviving dog may be the leader, and hence has no one to follow him or her around. Conversely, the surviving dog may be the follower, now without a canine leader.

Putting aside human grief for this article, I would like to offer some advice to owners who are currently, or who may have to deal with this sad experience in the future.

The mere fact that you, as the owner, have already established a wonderful bond with your pet(s), will help you to help the dog find a new position in the social order. This special bond will allow the dog look to you for what may now be missing in his or her life. Some clients reported that their relationship with the surviving pet improved tenfold, and other clients noted that they began to see a different but wonderful personality emerging.

Interestingly, whilst we may be awash with grief, and we assume that our surviving dog may also be suffering, it is important to point out that the surviving pet may actually be less stressed. Dogs can impose a considerable amount of stress on each other, in their relationship, and we as owners, may be naively unaware of that agenda.

In my experience, I have found that the best way to deal with a grieving dog is to lavish them with attention. I found that after my “Rudy” (Golden Retriever) died, “Rosie”, my Black Lab became very depressed, as they were very close. My rescue plan, which seemed to work for me, was to take Rosie for many more outings and visits than she had ever done before. She was pretty old herself, but I engaged her mind by teaching her new tricks. We played hide and seek in the house and garden, and I attempted to find her new places to walk in the woods. I also took her out for many short car rides, which she loved, and I spent many quiet moments grooming her with a soft brush. I attempted to make her life more interesting.

The purpose of the above suggestions is to strengthen the bond with your dog, and to help your dog make the transition to a new stage in his or her life. Some clients found that they could encourage the “loss of appetite” dogs to eat by placing treats inside a safe food dispensing toy, e.g. a Kong, or they would hide treats in the house and play “go seek”. All dogs are different, but my advice would be to indulge in the things you know that your dog loves doing and then some.

Being a Black Labrador, Rosie never suffered from loss of appetite in her grief. She remained the piglet she always was!

If you feel that your grieving pet is not responding to your efforts, you should contact your veterinarian, who will be able to assist you further.