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Dr. Sara Fletcher is a Greensboro native and graduate of Page High School. She graduated from NCSU with a BS in Animal Science and a BS in Zoology in 1999. She graduated from NCSU College of Veterinary Medicine in 2003. She and Jeremy live in Lindley Park with their four pets; two dogs, Beary, a nine-year-old German Shepherd, and Buster Brown, a three-year-old Pit Bull mix, plus two three-year-old 'felines of leisure' named Tulip and VyLynn.

Anticipatory Grief -

May Be Robbing You of the Precious Time You Have Left

What is Anticipatory Grief? It is the grief and mourning that occur when we become aware death may occur. It begins with the onset of the 'evening' of life, with a terminal diagnosis, or sooner for some of us. For me, it begins the moment I fall in love with one of my Fur-People. As pet lovers, we all know that we are likely to outlive our animals and we enter in to the Human-Animal Bond with the knowledge our hearts will one day be broken by it. Anyone suffering the loss of a pet can tell you it can be traumatic, anyone daring to do it again may tell you it was even worse the second time around.

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Roosevelt said it first, but Kennedy made it look good, some 40 years later.

Grief is cumulative, and when we aren't able to grieve a loss properly, all subsequent losses feel like salt in the wound from the first. I personally sought the help of a grief recovery specialist, Ellie McFalls, after the loss of my second greyhound. If interested, Ellie can be reached at 336-362-4170.

Anticipatory Grief can start as soon as we know death is on the horizon. In advance of death, we grieve the loss of the pet we once knew, whether they used to love to play frisbee and no longer can, or if there is dementia and they don't seem like themselves. Anticipatory Grief is not just about accepting a future death, but the many losses that occur in our loved ones as their illness progresses.

It is harmful, because it keeps us in a heightened state of awareness. I like to think of it as 'the other shoe' that you know is going to drop at any moment. We panic and read so much into every detail of our pet's condition and our anxiety is through the roof whenever we hear them sneeze. It's painful to watch our fur-people deteriorate, and what we do to ourselves can be even more painful.

Some things you can do for yourself when experiencing Anticipatory Grief:

- Remember that it is normal to feel this way. There's nothing wrong with you, you are allowed to have Anticipatory Grief; it is quite common and you are not alone.
- Acknowledge your losses. People will say unhelpful things when they don't understand, like, "well at least you still have two other dogs." They are trying to help, in their own way. Allow yourself to be present with the feelings you have.
- Connect with others in similar situations. There are a few pet loss support groups in the area, many are attended by those with Anticipatory Grief. It helps to talk it through.
- Reflect on the time you have left. Think about how your fabulous friend would like to spend it. I'll give you a personal example. When my second greyhound, Bosley, was diagnosed with a squamous cell carcinoma in his upper soft palate, nothing could be done to treat him. Knowing his upcoming birthday would be his last, I threw him a big party. Invited all of his friends, two and four legged, and made him a special cake. We had a blast. Now, in his memory, I make the special cake, "Bosley's Hippo Birdie Cake" (Hippo Birdie is code for Happy Birthday) and I take it to events with me, handing out slices with the recipe. Your pet may love the beach- try to fit in one last special trip. Make their last days as special as you can.
- Take care of yourself. The situation you are in as a caregiver can be mentally and physically exhausting. Ask for help.
- Seek counseling if you need it. There's no shame in talking through this difficult time with a professional.
- Finally, have a plan in place. Churchill once said, "It's not the plan, it's the planning that is important." Talk to your family about your pet's quality of life. Determine the things that define it and decide what will have to happen so that you know "it's time".

One good place to start is with our *Pet Hospice Journal*. It's free at: www.pethospicejournal.com, or you can call Lap Of Love to help you with a quality of life assessment.

See ad for Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice on page 15