



# Death, Desolation & Darkness: How to Survive Your Best Friend's Death

By Diane Richardson



frontierrots@msn.com

www.frontierrots.com

To some, dogs are "just dogs"—animals you breed, compete, and work with, a means to an end, or even a way to make money. To others, though, dogs are not just dogs and partners in work or competition; but, they are friends. In some cases, these friends become even more than that and that relationship transcends even that description. I have had purebred dogs for 28 years with numbers ranging from 1-18 adult dogs at a time. All of those dogs have been friends, some of them good friends, and a few have been something really special. REALLY special, as in a relationship that can't be described, but, as if the dog was a soul mate or a hunk of your heart. In these 28 years, I have lost 21 dogs who lived with me. Death is always sad. Death is also a certainty. If you have dogs, you will eventually experience death.

Sometimes, as was the case just this past August 13, 2013 when we lost our boy Bill to a spleen tumor bleed at less than 2 months shy of 15 years old, the death is very sad but something you have come to terms with. You knew time was running out, but you have so very many good memories that you are able to celebrate the long life the dog had. Sometimes, the death makes less sense, and yet you manage to continue with your life while grieving the loss.

However, the death of one of those special dogs, the heart and soul dogs, the dogs that ARE your life, is far more mentally traumatic. Even when you have advance warning that the death is coming soon, you are mentally in denial. You cannot imagine this could happen. When the death is a surprise, the mental anguish is even worse. People who have not had one of these special dogs in their life won't understand. People who don't have dogs at all will never understand. I have been blessed with and lost four truly special dogs: Magic, Darla, Bea, and Bonnie. They were all special in different ways; they all died of different things and at different ages (14 months to 8½ years). All of those deaths were hard, horrible things. There seemed to be no end to the grief and heartbreak. Darkness and desolation were looming large in my soul. But, I have learned much from these experiences, and because I hear from many people unfortunate enough to go through the same despair, I thought writing this article may in some way help others climb out of the darkness that threatens to take over mind and soul during these times.

First and foremost, GRIEVE for your friend! Don't let people convince you to hold it in because it "was just a dog." Go ahead and cry. Go ahead and be angry. If you work, take a few days to a week off even if it has to be unpaid. You will not be able to function well anyhow and you might as well take some time to be home and just grieve!

TALK about the death online, and if you can, on the phone. Reading the influx of sympathetic emails and posts, though each brings forth new tears, HELPS. In the case of something like a disease, research the monster that stole your friend so that you can understand the process. There may even be ways to help studies raise money and awareness so that someday there could be a way to avoid this for other people!

PLEASE, after a day or two at the most, put away your dog's crate, bed, collar, toys, and bowls. Those staring, empty

crates and bowls are gut-twisting reminders. It's okay to put an item or two on a shelf or desk as a reminder, but do not keep everything hanging around as if the dog will come home tomorrow. If you have multiple dogs, rearrange them out in the kennels and rearrange crates in the house. Rearrange the entire dog room as well as your bedroom and office. You are NOT erasing the dog's memories, you are simply doing things to help your mind and heart deal. Seeing things differently placed helps more than you would think.

If you have other dogs, do not be angry with them that they are still here while the special dog is gone. I've been down this road. It helps neither you nor the dogs still alive. If you had a dog who was a special friend and close to the lost dog, remember that he/she may also be mourning. You need to help them cope as well through extra activity, and the rearranging will help them, too. If you have a litter of puppies, sit down and talk to them. This sounds totally and completely ridiculous, but it helps a ton. You may discover over the course of a week that one of these small souls will understand. If so, KEEP this puppy! This is important.

If you don't have a litter but do have other dogs, talk to them. They are not used to this since the special dog was the one you always really spoke with, so it may take a few weeks, but see if one of them understands. It is possible that another special dog was right there with you all the time and you never knew it. I don't usually suggest that people who have lost their special dog go out and buy a puppy from someone else, but if it is someone you trust and you can physically go and see and talk with the puppies, give it a try if that is what you think you want. Do not be at all surprised though if strange (not your own) puppies bring only tears and a desire just to go home. This is normal. If you begin to work with, develop, or change a relationship with a puppy or a dog you already have or obtain, PLEASE remember: this is NOT THE SPECIAL DOG. This dog or pup is NOT THE SAME. They are their own self—they are different. They may need a different training style, they may not communicate well, or they may not click right at first. THEY ARE NOT YOUR LOST DOG! You cannot expect them to be. You cannot! If you do not believe you can do this without expecting them to be the same. Or, if you are constantly comparing them to the dog who is now dead, and whose ashes may be on your mantle, then do NOT keep the pup or work at changing the relationship with an existing dog at your home. It is NOT fair to the other dog or pup at all. I have seen far too many good and great dogs ruined by people who cannot stop comparing them to the prior special dog. Yes, I have also been down this road a little myself.

If you don't have other dogs to work with, then find SOMETHING to do that takes up brain time (not drinking or drugs either). Just do not spend too much time in the "what if" and "if only" worlds. I can tell you how destructive that can be—for yourself, your other dogs, and your friends and family! Whether or not you start working with another dog or take up a new task, you are not trying to forget the dog you just lost. But you have to get your mind past the desolation or the darkness will creep into your life and make you non-functional. You can always shed tears for the special dog; you will always miss them. They will never be replaced (or replicated!) and the hole in your heart will remain to some extent, but you must live. Once you start living again the pain of the loss becomes tolerable and the wonderful memories remain strong.