

Here to help you through
the retirement of your dog



To help you with your loss

We recognise that your canine partner retiring from their role earlier than anticipated can be a very difficult time. Grief can come in many different forms and having a canine partner retire early from their role can invoke a range of emotions. We have created this pack as a resource of support, to outline what you can expect from us and, should you wish to gain further support, we have identified some key external resources.

*Dogs come into our lives to teach us about love,
They depart to teach us about loss,
A new dog never replaces an old dog,
It merely expands the heart*



Illustration © Sarah Flint

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Grief

Just because your canine partner hasn't passed away, doesn't mean you're not grieving a loss. It is important to recognise that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, everybody is individual and unique in the emotions they go through. The grieving process takes time and will happen gradually and naturally. Remember to be patient with yourself and your loved ones, who may also be grieving.

There are many emotional and physical aspects of grief. Traditionally it is thought that grief involves a five-stage cycle of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. This model, referred to as the Kubler-Ross cycle after the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, was first used to describe the stages that somebody experiences when they have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. It was identified that this is similar to the stages of a bereavement. There are now thought to be two additional stages of pet bereavement – shock and guilt. The stages of grief are completely fluid and perfectly normal to move back and forth through them or not experience them all.

Shock

A stressful situation can cause the release of adrenaline and cortisol hormones, which can trigger a natural fight or flight response. This can often happen when you have been given the news that your dog needs to retire early. Physical symptoms can involve increased heart rate, confusion or an inability to think clearly, fatigue or numbness. These feelings will pass over a period of time as your body begins to process the situation.

Denial

In a similar way to shock, denial is your body's attempt to slow the process down and protect yourself from emotional trauma. You may find it difficult to accept what you have been told or what you see. You may feel irritable, have fatigue or disturbed sleep and general restlessness. This stage of grief may be a time when you feel you want to try to seek a second opinion about your dog's diagnosis or retirement and try to look at other ways to keep them working. Denying the truth may be a conscious or unconscious choice, and may last for varying degrees of time.

Guilt

This can take many forms and often revolve around things you feel you could or couldn't have done earlier. These feelings of guilt are perfectly normal and a way of self-punishing, despite there being no way to change what has happened. It's important to try to look at things in a different perspective to reframe this guilt.

Anger

It is very easy when you have suffered a form of loss to become overwhelmingly angry or resentful at the cruelty and unfairness of your canine partner retiring early. You may feel anger or frustration towards medical professionals, anger at the charity, or other relatives or friends, even anger at the dog. This anger is rarely rational, but it can be overwhelming and consuming and is often as a result of feeling powerless.

Bargaining

It's not unusual to feel desperate and that you are willing to do anything to change the situation. This can produce feelings of helplessness or thoughts of 'what if'. This can be fleeting or can be attempted over and over and allows us to hold onto some hope.

Depression

Depression associated with grief can generally last a couple of months and is not the same as diagnosed clinical depression, if however these feelings do not begin to subside, it is important to speak to a doctor or healthcare professional. If an individual was clinically depressed at the time of their loss, the feelings may be compounded and it may take longer to work through this. This stage of grief may cause a range of physical and emotional responses including sadness, anxiousness, lack of concentration, fear, isolation and socially withdrawing. These physical and emotional responses are often the first hints at beginning to accept the loss and leads onto the last stage of grief: Acceptance.

Acceptance

This final stage of grief is about accepting the reality of the bereavement, it is not about closure or no longer feeling sad. Acceptance is about acknowledging and being able to move forward into a new way of living. The intense feelings of grief (physical and psychological) may be experienced again and you should not worry about this.

The Ball in the box analogy

This analogy suggests grief is like a ball inside a box, that has a pain button at the side. In the early days of grief, the ball is large, out of control and when it bounces around inside the box, it frequently hits the pain button. Over time, this ball can become smaller and it hits the pain button less often, but the feelings are just as intense. Some days this ball can be bigger than other days and therefore the pain or emotions are more difficult to control.

Physical aspects of grief

The mind and body are connected and it's important to acknowledge and recognise the physical aspects of grief that you may experience:

- Feeling tired/exhausted - often having no energy for everyday tasks
- Being unable to sleep properly
- Lack of concentration
- Fluctuations in your heart rate
- Nausea or an unsettled tummy
- Changes to your appetite - loss of interest in food or comfort eating
- Lowered immunity
- Aches and pains such as headaches, neck or back pain

Psychological aspects of grief

- Depression/Crying a lot
- Confusion/Inability to think clearly
- Anger/Frustration/Fear/Guilt
- Disturbed sleep/Racing thoughts
- Anxiety



What can I do to help myself through this time?

Grieving is a natural process which everyone may experience slightly differently, you should allow yourself time. If at any time grief becomes overwhelming or your physical and psychological symptoms do not begin to ease, we would advise you to speak to a medical or mental health professional for further support.

It is important to recognise that our physical and mental health are linked. Often we can neglect our physical health during a time of sadness and grief, which can lead to a lowered immune system and can exasperate the grieving process.

- **Relax** - Find something to do that relaxes you and be kind to yourself; this can be breathing exercises, yoga, reflexology, meditation, or something that works for you as an individual. You could consider activities such as writing a diary, art therapy, craft projects or something you enjoy.
- **Exercise** - Try to get out in the fresh air if you can. Losing your dog can mean that you change your routine of not getting out and walking them. You might find it easier to go somewhere you wouldn't have normally gone with your dog.
- **Sleep** - Lack of or too much sleep can impact our physical and mental health. This can be easier said than done! Try to have a good bedtime.
- **Routine** - Think about what helps you to relax - can you take a bath, listen to some music or a podcast. It is recommended to avoid any electronic devices that emit a blue light before going to bed e.g. computers, tablets or mobile phones. Think about your environment including lighting, background noises, temperature, bedding and any scents, such as lavender, that might help you to feel relaxed. There are some great sleep apps that can help with relaxation.
- **Eating and drinking** - Avoid caffeine a couple of hours before going to bed. Similarly avoid eating a big meal or doing excessive exercise close to bedtime.

- **Try to eat a healthy and balanced diet** - You may not feel like you want to eat or you may feel like you want to eat 'junk' food. It is important to try to eat something nutritious, even if you can only stomach something light.
- **Talking to others** - Talk to friends, family, your Canine Partner Representative, others who have experienced early retirement of a canine partner. Remember you can access the Individual Assistance Programme. For further external support please visit our bereavement page on the website caninepartners.org.uk/bereavementsupport or for further internal support please contact a member of the team on bereavementsupport@caninepartners.org.uk
- **Be wary about resorting to alcohol, drugs (including sleeping pills) or excessive caffeine intake** as this can exacerbate psychological (and physical) symptoms of grief.
- **Take one thing at a time** - Try to focus on each individual thing, e.g. I am just going to make myself a cup of tea; I am just going to drink my tea; I'm going to make myself a slice a toast etc. Don't try to think too far ahead or become overwhelmed by thinking about the whole day.
- **Remember grief takes time** and there is no quick fix, over time you will find ways to live with your loss and begin to think about the happy memories.

Support and what you can expect from Canine Partners

After a retirement of a canine partner, it can lead to an unsettled and distressing time. Your Canine Partners Representative will connect with you as soon as possible and discuss the frequency and method of keeping in contact with you to ensure you are supported. As a minimum, we will contact you within 48 hours and then one week later. This will provide an opportunity for you to talk through any practical decisions, as well as a time for you to talk through your thoughts and feelings about your dog's retirement as well.

We will either collect your dog's equipment or ask for you to post it back to our centre. This will include your dog's jackets/bandanas, ADUK ID book, vet book (if your dog is not remaining with you), lead flash, green tag and lead/attachment set (if you are not waiting for a successor dog). We will also require a retirement form to be signed.

We do understand that this is a very unsettling and sad time and we will do everything that we can to help you. We will let everyone within Canine Partners who was involved in your dog's journey know that he or she has retired. We hope that this bereavement guide will provide useful information for practical and emotional support at this time. We appreciate that every situation is unique and if you would like our help with anything please just ask.

When a canine partner retires, we like to send a certificate as a small way to celebrate your partnership and the work of the dog, but if you would find receiving this upsetting and would rather not receive it, please let us know.

If you ever feel like you need any support or wish to talk to someone, you are always welcome to reach out. You can email our dedicated Bereavement Support inbox at bereavementsupport@caninepartners.org.uk and we will do everything we can to help.

Social media guidance and telling others

Social media is often a big part of our everyday lives and you may choose to share the news of your dog's retirement on your social media platforms to mitigate the need to notify people individually. However, this is a very personal choice and there is no right or wrong way to share this news. You may want to stay off social media altogether. Some things to consider:

- You may wish to post a photo and a brief notification to inform others of your dog's retirement.
- You can always turn off comments on your post if you do not wish to have notifications coming through to your phone, tablet or computer.

- You may want to have a complete break from social media for a little while – this is absolutely fine, you do not ‘owe’ anyone an explanation.
- It is completely understandable to ask that friends or family do not contact you via social media for the foreseeable future, to give you time to process privately.
- Equally, if you find it better to keep in close contact with others then you may want to post regular updates of your dog on your social media platforms or ask that others share their favourite memory of your dog when he/she was working in a comment thread.
- As mentioned before – social media is very personal. It is totally up to you if you want to utilise it to notify others of your dog’s retirement and share memories of your dog’s working life, or if you would rather keep things more private. Everyone is different and it is important to find a way that helps you to process the retirement of your dog.

Preparing for everyday triggers and conversations

After a bereavement such as a retirement of a canine partner, there are often many things that crop up in everyday life that can remind us of our loved ones and can invoke happy, but also at times upsetting, memories. Initially this may be conversations with others, certain items or places and in time, it may be anniversaries.

It is important to acknowledge that there will be occasions when you are up against a trigger or a conversation that you were not expecting. Being prepared mentally for this is an important thing to consider. Emotional reactions to triggers and some conversations are normal. Acknowledging that you are likely to experience these reactions can help you understand them and even turn them into opportunities for healing. Here are some tips:

- You may wish to notify family and friends of your dog’s retirement in a round robin text message or social media post, to avoid having to discuss it each time you speak to someone.

- Connect with others and consider asking a relative or friend to accompany you to your usual excursions such as shopping or clubs, if you feel like you need moral support. If you work, notify your colleagues of how you are feeling and be open about any support you might need at work.
- Stay connected to your usual support systems, such as friends/family, spiritual leaders and social groups. Consider joining a bereavement support group if you are struggling.
- Be prepared for scenarios or conversations such as well-meaning people asking where your dog is. For example, visiting the local shop without your dog for the first time may result in a staff member asking where your dog is. You can be prepared with a statement such as “Unfortunately, my dog has recently had to retire. I appreciate you asking after them but I am not in a position to be able to talk about this right now. Thank you for understanding”.
- Keep a journal of what your triggers are – be that a smell, a place, a specific date etc. Self-reflection through journaling has been found to be very therapeutic for the grief recovery process. You can better learn about those triggers to find a solution so that you can gain some control over them as you progress through your grief recovery in the future.
- Once you recognise what your triggers are, you can better prepare for them and create some distractions where possible.

Care provisions

When your canine partner retires, we appreciate that this not only leaves a big hole emotionally and mentally, but often it can leave a big hole physically as well. Your dog will have done many tasks for you over their working life and suddenly being without this physical support can be daunting and upsetting, especially if the presence of your canine partner has meant that you have not had to rely on care support.

If you did rely on your dog for a lot of support, it is worth considering what this support may look like now they have gone. Although we appreciate this is not ideal for many partners as it can mean a loss of independence, it is important that you do have the necessary care and support in the absence of a dog. Possibilities may include friends or family members, a voluntary community support team, a personal assistant, or agency care. We would advise speaking to your care team or social services as soon as possible to ensure you have the necessary and appropriate support.

You can visit the NHS website for information on supported living services and to find supported living services in your area.

Insurance claims

If your dog has received investigation or treatment before their retirement, you may wish to process an insurance claim. After the excess fee of £150, treatment is claimable up to £3500.

For further external support please visit our bereavement page on the website caninepartners.org.uk/bereavementsupport or for further internal support please contact a member of the team on bereavementsupport@caninepartners.org.uk

Canine Partners will transfer your policy into your name or an alternative name. If you chose not to continue your policy then we will cancel your insurance policy for you, any treatment that has taken place whilst the policy is active will still be claimable even after cancellation. We would ask that all claims are completed within three months.

Memorial ideas

There are many special and creative options available for memorialising a dog that has retired. You might want to consider a personal option, a memorial at our training centre, or a combination of both.

Jewellery

There are many options for memorial jewellery on the market these days. Some of your dog's fur can be included in a bespoke piece of jewellery.

Paw prints

A paw print of your dog can be used to create a memorial item in various mediums, such as glass, jewellery, and casts.

Plant a tree or rose bush

A tree to remember your canine partner's working life could be planted in your garden or possibly even at a place that you both used to visit.

An online search might help to identify whether there is a rose bush or other flowering plant that shares the same name as your canine partner. We may be able to plant a tree or rosebush at our training centre. If this is something you would like to enquire about, please email bereavementsupport@caninepartners.org.uk for advice. We recommend a bird cherry or alder buckthorn trees. These are both small native trees and are great for bees and birds. We recommend also purchasing some fencing to put around the tree to keep it protected. Please note, the fencing will need to be purchased and provided by yourself.

Memory box

Memory boxes are lovely keepsakes that you revisit time after time and when you wish. You could include your dog's tag, a favourite toy and collar, some fur, a paw print and favourite photos of your dog.

A plain wooden box could be purchased and decorated on the outside by yourself but there are also engraved wooden boxes available to purchase.

Canine Partners Training Centre memorial options

You may wish to commemorate your dog by placing a memorial at our training centre. As well as planting a tree or rose bush (mentioned above), there is the possibility an engraved plaque or bench can be placed at our Midlands Training Centre. We cannot purchase plaques or benches from charity funds, or purchase them on your behalf, but you can place the order for delivery to the Midlands Training Centre.

We do already have some memorial benches at our Midlands Training Centre. and for this reason we like to keep the look and feel of the benches similar to those that are already on site. If you would like to look into this option, please make contact with us first so we can discuss it with you.

You are welcome to come and visit your plaque, bench or tree once it has been placed, but please do contact the centre before travelling to ensure we can accommodate your visit on your chosen day.

If you are interested in a memorial item at the Midlands Training Centre, please email us at bereavementsupport@caninepartners.org.uk for initial discussions.

Other ideas to consider include:

- Wind chimes
- Personalised hanging ornaments
- Christmas tree ornaments and wooden hearts
- Paperweights
- A memorial frame
- Name a star



The first year

The first year following a loss can be particularly challenging. This could be things from everyday tasks, actions or routes that remind you of your dog to more significant anniversaries, such as birthdays, 'gotcha-days' and holidays. Many partners find the process of applying for a successor dog can be particularly triggering. It is important to be prepared for these emotions and to acknowledge and recognise them, however try not to 'overthink' or prepare how you 'might' feel.

Think about how you managed your grief in the early days of your loss and be kind to yourself. Some people find it useful to have a specific way of memorialising their dog on specific dates; other people prefer to see how

they feel on the day. It might be that you would like to 'keep yourself busy' and do something you would not normally do, living in the moment, just as your dog would've done. As with all grief, there is no right or wrong way, it is whatever feels right for you.

Successors

The loss of a canine partner may not just affect you emotionally. As you know, having a canine partner can have a huge impact on you physically. You may need and want another canine partner. However, it may seem a difficult decision to make for a variety of reasons. It is important to know you are not replacing your canine partner – they can never be replaced.

Key points to remember:

- **You don't need to rush your decision** - to be classed as a 'successor' for application process you have up until two years to apply from your late canine partner being out of your home or a canine partner being retired out of the home.
- **Do not compare yourself to other partnerships** - everyone grieves differently, has different needs and lifestyles.
- **Your new canine partner is not your previous canine partner.** Try not to compare they will be completely different, have different personalities and different strengths.
- **Training** - you will be required to complete a training course with your new canine partner. Remember, your partnership will be new, training has evolved, you will differ from when you applied for your first canine partner. We are here to support you.
- **Focus on the positives.** You know us and we know you much better. Your Canine Partners Representative will be working closely with you, the Applications Department and Advanced Training Team to find the best-suited dog to you now. Here you can access the eligibility criteria appendix. Please see the flow chart to show how the application process works.



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