

What I Learned About Grief After My Dog Died

I had an unfortunate history with animals, beginning at four when my mom and I visited our nanny's family farm in Southern Illinois. One foot barely out the car door, a sheepdog the size of a miniature horse pounced on me, *the size of a doll*, leaving me frightened and flat on the gravel. At six, a neighbor's German Shepherd lunged at my face through a screen door. After falling backward, narrowly missing three flights of stairs, I decided these beasts wouldn't be in my future.

I kept that pact for two decades--until the newlywed phase of my marriage when my groom convinced me to rescue a beautiful, three-month-old Golden Retriever, with some other unknown mix thrown in. Lucky, we would later learn, was not his namesake when, years after adopting him, he bit our 15-month-old son, taking a small piece of his forehead with him. Seven stitches later, Lucky moved in with another family, and I again swore off four-legged creatures.

Rightfully scared of canines, my son was all too happy to honor this agreement. But as he got older and braver, our family began considering the benefits of adding a pooch to our clan. When our next-door neighbors bought the sweetest dog on the planet, my now two children clamored repeatedly, "We have to get one just like Scout!" Scout would run up to the kids and me, wagging his tail, giving kisses, and wrapping himself in any of our laps whenever we were together. His unconditional and consistent love showed us it would be safe to open our hearts and home to a puppy someday. So, when my kids were 12 and 9 years old, respectively, and we moved into a townhouse after their dad and I separated, it was time to get a pet to help hold the emotions of starting anew.

Enter Cooper. We took in a red-headed Cockapoo, and he would be everything Scout was and more. Or maybe not. From the moment we welcomed Cooper at ten weeks old, he wasn't

interested in being a lapdog. Over the years, on the rare occasion he would lie on one of us, hanging his tiny chin over an ankle, “Look,” we would text our family group chat as we relished the most minimal amount of affection our dog could muster. But he was gentle and playful, wanting to always be near us, just not on us, and we instantly loved him.

Like all young people, mine believed themselves when they said, “We will take care of Cooper; you won’t have to.” And like most parents, I knew they were lying. True, Cooper was “ours,” but he was my other half when it came to sleeping, walking, and waiting for my children to return, whether it was from their father’s place, extended family holiday dinners, summer camps, or trips away. With an empty house, Cooper filled the air with purpose.

So, after only 12 years and 11 months of feeding, cleaning up after, and simply loving him, I was unprepared for the end.

Cooper started having difficulty eating for two months, and I hoped he was getting picky in his old age. My oldest, a 2020 college graduate living again with his mom and pup, looked in Cooper’s mouth and saw red sores. We also noticed Cooper’s right eye was starting to film over. “Must be cataracts,” I guessed, whisking him to get examined.

An assessment revealed an oral carcinoma growing from the back of Cooper’s mouth and shooting up into his eye. The vet explained this type of tumor quickly metastasizes. With a hand on my shoulder, she said, “I’m sorry. I am not optimistic.”

It wasn’t the first time I heard this news.

Twenty-five years earlier, in a crowded Minneapolis, MN Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, a neonatologist told me and my then-husband that our first newborn had suffered catastrophic brain damage while in my womb. “We are not optimistic,” she said. Those words floated through the air then, now permanently etched in my mind.

Alex was my third pregnancy. The first of three that wouldn't tragically end in miscarriage. The pregnancy that resulted in a fully formed and perfectly healthy baby, but without a functioning brain. The child, whom my mother to this day cannot add, "I'll never understand--Alex was just the most beautiful baby," when talking about her first grandson. The pregnancy that went five days overdue where likely the umbilical cord wrapped around my infant's neck and would amaze all the physicians with surviving in utero and through labor, only to meet the world without a single cry. In his nine days living in a hospital bassinet, Alex never made a sound until taking his last breath, lying on his daddy's chest. The three of us intertwined in a love and pain nobody should ever experience.

Because of Alex, I felt I'd earned the gold medal for grief. If someone had a miscarriage, I thought, "Unfortunate but not the end of the world," or when an older relative passed away, "At least they got to live." I'm an empath by nature, so that perspective softened over time as my sorrow found its place in the background of life. I had never lost a pet to death; therefore, I could not fathom the anguish it would cause. I've learned no matter the heartbreak, grief is not an emotion one can measure. And it is impossible to separate one loss from another, where, like bricks, they layer onto one another, building a protective wall forever surrounding you.

Back at the animal hospital, Cooper and I walked out with me needing to determine his fate. We went to his favorite doggy park to see if he would play. He ran slower than usual but still had a spring in his step. "Maybe you have more time," I told him.

But two days later, he was unable to move off the couch. Calling the vet for guidance, she shared she and her colleagues reviewed Cooper's case and agreed he wouldn't have any quality of life left in him. "Don't feel guilty about doing what is 'humane,'" she said.

My now two young adults and I huddled together to say “goodbye” to our cherished playmate. The three of us recounted stories about the best, worst dog ever. While we each stroked his curly hair, we laughed at how he ate everything during his lifetime. Money, sunglasses, a Barbie doll (I now regret not saving), and my favorite, a can of sardines, including the lid. After we couldn’t take the sadness any longer, I scooped Cooper up, placed him in the car, and watched my offspring console one another as we drove away.

At the veterinarian's office, I told the doctor not to give me a “play-by-play” of what would happen. I knew the outcome. Cooper spent 15 minutes swallowing all the treats he wanted without a clue his mom was about to let someone stick two needles in him. We lay on the floor together, cozy on a blanket, his eyes looking up at me with so much love. At his last breath, I’m sure the other patients were terrified by the wail coming out of my body.

The first few weeks after losing Cooper, I packed up for a new life that wouldn’t include him. I was getting ready to move to Southwest Florida to support my mom on her dementia journey. At times, I could still hear little paws clicking and clacking on the hardwood floors or even the dangle of his collar. In my mind, I felt like it was his way of telling me he was OK.

Similar to bringing two more children into the world after Alex died, I was confident another furry friend would be invited back into my life—a puppy who would feel all the feelings of having loved and lost and continued to have high hopes for brighter tomorrows. This time, I couldn’t swear off having another dog.

So, on a rainy Sunday morning, waking up to only the sounds of birds outside my new apartment, I dragged my mom to the pet store to “Just look and smell puppies.” Feeling satisfied after playing with five or six different breeds, we were headed out the door when a nine-week-

old tri-colored Mini-Bernedoodle caught my attention. Enter Milo. As he pawed at the glass and stared at me with big chocolate eyes, my heart reopened.
