

Gerbil Acts Strangely After Its Mother's Death

Why would a gerbil's behavior change after its mother's death?

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Q: We had two female gerbils, mother and daughter, but the mother died recently. Now, Winter (the daughter) is not acting as playful as she should be. When I cross my arms so she can run across them, all she does is dig her head into my elbow for a second. Why is she acting like this? Her mother died about a week ago.

A: Gerbils are social animals that like to live in pairs. A gerbil companion gives a gerbil someone to snuggle with, groom and thump out a warning. Gerbils that live alone can be nervous or lethargic. Digging in your hands may be a sign that she is feeling agitated and is not relaxed.

You may want to find a friend for you gerbil. If she is more than 2 1/2 years old, the best matchup is a male gerbil. Yours will be too old to breed at that age.

The problem is that you cannot just put two gerbils together immediately. You need to introduce them gradually using a "split cage," which is a tank divided by 1/4 inch meshed wire cloth and a secure lid so they cannot get over it. Or you can put a wire cage within the tank and swap the two gerbils daily. After about a week try allowing them together, but wear thick gloves in case they are not ready to meet yet and need more time in the split cage. The care handbook on the American Gerbil Society website has a section on introducing gerbils.

If you cannot introduce your female gerbil to another gerbil, make sure she has a wooden nest box to hide in when she feels nervous, a mesh wire wheel to run on, and a cardboard tube or box every day or two to gnaw up. She will also appreciate a free run in a gerbil-proofed area. All these things will help keep her busy and active.

Good luck!

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