

WHEN YOUR LOVED ONE PASSES AWAY

We all love our cats but sadly one day, they will pass away. Grief and loss are emotions that can convey that the depth of our love for our loved one is seen by the complexity of our grief at the time of their death. The relationship that we have between our pets provides us so much joy and love at the time but unfortunately their lives are so much shorter than ours and it can be heart breaking to say that final 'goodbye'. It's harder still if you have to make that decision at the Vet's when your cat's life declines. The death of any animal can be devastating.

With the loss of any pet it can be difficult. A disenfranchised grief can occur when the person grieving can feel unsupported by family, friends and society as their grief can be unacknowledged and even regarded as unworthy by someone who doesn't understand the love a person can have for a pet. It is a 'hidden' grief or sorrow that often is not acknowledged or validated or even understood. This disenfranchised grief can then become more complicated as it can become more difficult for the person grieving over the loss of their pet to share their feelings and pain with others.

Our response to the grief process can take three different courses:

- a normal grieving process and response,
- a more difficult and long-term (2 to 4 years) process of healing and readjustment and
- a more delayed response when the grief itself is either denied or distorted.

Grief is a journey over time where we find healing. It is a process that we all need to go through throughout our life that includes different stages such as: shock, denial, anger and bargaining, depression and finally acceptance: not necessarily all in this order.

Mourning itself has no timetable and its best to let grief unfold at your own pace and time remembering to take care of yourself and your emotional needs. Surround yourself with family and friends who understand how heartbreaking it is to lose a much loved pet. Others who have walked this pathway will understand what it is that you are going through and experiencing.

It's important that if you have other cats and even kids to try to keep to the usual routines as they can easily pick up on the grief and stress you are currently experiencing.

Some people find that a memento, a reminder of their pet's life helps them cope with the hurt they are feeling. Perhaps you could take some photos during your pet's final days so you have something to remember them by.

Another idea is to honour their memory by displaying their photo or collar, or imprint of their paw. Paw prints can be very meaningful. You could even collect photos of them and their life and make a montage (*a picture made of an assembly of various*

pictures to make a larger art work) of them for display so you can remember all the good times and memories you shared. Some people have found that by writing down and expressing their feelings in a journal or even a poem or story helps.

Be kind and patient to yourself. Your pet and family would want that. Take comfort in all the happy memories you shared together and know that time helps to eventually soften the blow. Never be afraid to reach out and seek professional help and assistance.

While we all respond to the loss of a pet differently, the level of grief you experience will often depend on factors such as the age and personality of your pet when it passed away along with the circumstances of their death. Generally, the more significant your pet was to you, the closer you are to the animal, the more intense the emotional pain you'll feel.

Remember if the beloved pet passed away at the Vets and the Vet was recommending it, don't feel guilty. When animals become very sick or old the owner is faced with the incredibly hard decision of when to say goodbye. This can lead to feelings of guilt. You might think '*Did I make the right decision?*' or '*What if they had more time?*'

If these feelings come up for you, it can be helpful to shift your mindset to view euthanasia under these circumstances as an act of compassion. Remember that if your vet was recommending you say goodbye, your pet was most likely in a lot of pain, and it wasn't going to get better.

Remember that losing the unconditional love and friendship of a much loved pet is, and will be: very difficult. Pets love and comfort us and ease our hurt and pain in ways that a human just can't.

Hilary Stanton Zunin, *Author states:*

'The risk of love is loss, and the price of loss is grief. But the pain of grief is only a shadow when compared with the pain of never risking love.'

Sandra Sweetman is a qualified Counsellor, Psychotherapist, Family Therapist and Workplace Assessor and Trainer. She is also an author of '*Be Bold: Overcoming Shyness*'.

Article dedicated to lilac kitten Arabella who passed away far too young.