

# Living With the Loss of Your Cat

Through the course of their lives most cat owners have to face the death of a beloved cat. The sad fact is that our treasured companions do not live as long as we do.

Western cultures do not allow for much expression of grief, and death is often considered a taboo subject. Many people, even our closest friends, feel uncomfortable about talking to us about our losses. Because of this, we are sometimes most alone just at the time we most need support. This applies especially for the death of a pet, as our society often does not acknowledge loss of a companion animal to be a significant cause for grief. With this article, it is hoped that learning about factors involved in the pain of grief may help to accept that loss and grieving are a normal part of our lives, that the grief is real, valid, and appropriate and that your pain can be expressed to others. Then can begin the process of healing and building new relationships.

## What are grief, bereavement and mourning?

Grief can be defined as an emotional response to a perceived loss. It does not have to be the response to death. In fact, as I will discuss later, grieving usually involves the loss of many different things. This article concentrates on grief from the death of a cat, and losses associated with that death. Bereavement refers to a state that follows a loss, which may be from death, loss of employment, or marriage. Culture usually determines what is considered appropriate reason for bereavement, and pet loss is not usually included. Mourning is the outward expression of loss, including rituals and customs.

For most people, the first loss of a loved one can be the strongest and most overwhelming experience they have had. Its very intensity can be frightening and seem uncontrollable.

### Normal Grief.

It is commonly expected that a death will lead to grief. Many people will have heard about different stages of grief suggested by Kubler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These days it is thought that grief does not necessarily follow any set pattern, and some of these stages may not be present at all. It has since been suggested that typically, the period of bereavement includes four phases of shock and numbness, yearning and

searching, disorganisation and despair, and reorganisation.

Grief usually has many components including physical and emotional distress, preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased, and disruption to daily living. The process of grief is no different for the loss of a companion animal or a human.

## Complicated grief

Grief may be complicated for many reasons, and may make it harder to resolve your feelings. This may occur if you have other unresolved losses where you were unable to express your feelings honestly, you have little social support, there was a particularly complex or ambivalent relationship with the deceased, feeling guilt, where the death was untimely. Also, deaths that are sudden and unexpected and deaths that occur after long illnesses can lead to complicated grief. Of course there can be many other factors.

## Anticipatory grief

Grief does not necessarily begin with a death. Especially when there has been an illness, you may have started grieving before the actual physical loss. This is particularly the case with a long and difficult illness, when you have had warning that your cat is likely to die. The death itself may actually bring about an initial feeling of relief. However, it does not mean you will feel less pain later on.

## Getting through grief and moving on

Worden, a prominent researcher in the field of grief, has identified four major tasks involved in moving through the process of loss.

- ❖ To accept the reality of the loss
- ❖ To experience the pain of loss
- ❖ To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing. This definitely takes time. So many of our thoughts and actions are automatic – we assume that things remain the same. It can be a shock each morning to realise that there is no need to refill the food bowl.
- ❖ To withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in other activities. This may involve considering getting another cat.



Brz Dbl GPR Biegatti Lovok Mau (Sausage) [14-Dec-98 – 24-Jun-11], to whose loving memory the article is dedicated

### **Why does it hurt so much? How much have you actually lost?**

Certainly, not all people react to the death of a cat in the same way. Each person, each cat and each relationship is unique and has unique components. Loss does not involve simply the physical presence of the cat. The psychosocial benefits of living with a cat are well documented and include social support, companionship, an increased sense of our own worth and the emotional bond we have with our cat. These are part of what you are grieving. You will be reminded of the special things you did with your cat by their absence. The losses may not be tangible – they may be the emotions that your cat elicited from you. You may have lost the good feeling you had when your cat jumped on your lap, or groomed your hair. The laughter that came when he leaped in the air at the light switch, and the assistance you received when making the bed. The warm feeling when you arrived home to find her waiting at the door to welcome you. The degree of daily interaction you had with your cat will influence the number of losses, and therefore the degree of grief. These aspects do contribute to the anticipatory grief, where little by little, your cat may have lost the ability to perform loved behaviours.

### **Guilt**

This merits a section of its own, due to the significant role it has in making a normal grief complicated. We are very good at “beating up on ourselves” when we are feeling low. There may have been aspects or decisions that we may have made differently with the benefit of hindsight, which had an impact on our beloved cats’ life or death. Our decisions may have directly or indirectly led to the death or illness. The only useful thing that can be done is to learn from the experience for the future. We need to be kind to ourselves at this time. We are all fallible humans, and do the best we can to get through our lives. Some people can feel relief with the death of their cat after a long illness, and experience guilt because of this. Again, this is perfectly normal. Some people feel guilt if they think they are grieving more for a loved cat than for a human they have lost. Again, the loss of a companion animal is not to be underestimated.

There may have been aspects that we are glad to do without – long and intensive nursing can be a great strain, and we can feel guilty about being glad that this is over although you are sad that it is no longer necessary. Your cat may have been a difficult patient, perhaps your cat had an unpleasant smell due to the illness, perhaps he was incontinent, which was difficult to deal with. You might be glad you don’t have to do these unpleasant jobs anymore. And you might feel guilty about feeling that way. That’s quite normal and okay. This in no way diminishes how much you loved your cat. The aspects you don’t miss are parts of the *illness* – and you – *and* your cat – are relieved to be without them.

There are no rules about how much we should grieve – these sorts of “shoulds” are not helpful either. For ourselves, we should not minimise how much the cat means to us.

### **Special features of grief with companion animals**

All grieving is painful, and for those of us whose cats are an integral part of our lives, the loss of a cat is not different that the loss of a close friend. However there are some aspects of pet loss that are not common with the loss of a human, and some of these may make your loss difficult to deal with.

- ✧ Loss of a cat may often involve decision making about when to end the life. How comfortable you are with the decision will affect how you grieve. As mentioned above, guilt can play a role with how the decision was made, and can either be a comfort or a source of guilt depending on how you feel about your actions. This decision can be a terrible dilemma for some people. “Did I make the decision quickly enough? Did I let him suffer? Should I have let her keep going? Did I give in too quickly?” are common questions that grieving cat owners may ask themselves. Sometimes guilt may revolve around the financial aspects of veterinary care – “I couldn’t afford the expensive treatment”. However euthanasia is the most loving gift for a cat that is suffering, has lost his quality of life and has no chance of improvement.
- ✧ Another aspect is the simple fact that we gain so much support from our feline friends – they can be a source of unconditional love that will help us through our difficult times – and not only do we have to deal with the loss of the cat herself, but her support is no longer there to help us.
- ✧ Not all people around us appreciate the integral role that a beloved cat may have in our lives. There may be some around who may minimise your loss, and expect you to get over your grief more quickly than you are ready to. This may also include employers who do not appreciate the degree of pain you are in. Ensure that you seek others who value their companion animals as you do, and who can allow you to express your feelings honestly. There are many who feel as you do.
- ✧ Another factor is that while the ritual of a funeral marks the death of a human loved one, losing a cat does not have such a custom. Rituals have important functions in allowing the bereaved to proceed to acceptance by acknowledging your loss in a supportive environment.

Allow yourself time and tears. Don’t overburden yourself with difficult tasks – your concentration may be impaired. It is also important to attend to yourself in the simple matters of daily living. Ensure that you continue to maintain a balanced diet. Avoid excessive alcohol or drugs. As you are in a stressed state, you are more liable to pick up colds and flu, as your immune system is weakened. Avoid making important decisions while you are in a vulnerable state.

Expect ups and downs. You may feel that you have passed the worst feelings, but suddenly be overtaken by them again. It can happen out of the blue, or perhaps you find a favourite toy when you move the fridge, or see that favourite food in the pet shop. Then it is back as raw as if the loss happened yesterday. Don’t underestimate the strength of the emotional response. Don’t think you can push it aside and get on with everything – the grief will find a way out, whether it is expressed as such, or displaced to other situations and topics.

### **What can I do to feel better?**

There is no magic pill that can remove the pain completely. With time the feelings will become less intense. However there are activities that may help you to focus on the happy memories you shared. Some people find the following useful:

- ✧ Writing poetry or a letter for your cat to express your feelings for him or her
- ✧ Arrange photos in a special album
- ✧ Have a special photo enlarged and framed for you to see often
- ✧ A memorial page on the web (if you don’t have a web page of your own, there are specific sites that welcome photos and poetry to memorialise your cat).
- ✧ Joining a email group – there are several that provide support from people who have also lost their cats
- ✧ Share your cat’s photo on social networking sites such as Facebook and tell their story
- ✧ Have your own ritual. Invite like-minded and supportive people to share in memories of your cat.
- ✧ Plant a rose or tree for your cat
- ✧ Sponsor an animal in the zoo in memory of your cat
- ✧ Give a donation to a feline health research foundation or charity
- ✧ Read a self-help book. There are many available on grieving
- ✧ If your grief is overwhelming and causes major disruption to your daily life over a long time, consider seeking help. There are counsellors and psychotherapists who are sensitive to the needs of people who are grieving for their pets. However ensure that they have the same qualifications you would expect for grief counselling for humans (eg psychologist, social worker, counsellor of professional association).

## The new cat in your life

The decision when, or whether to get another cat is a very personal one, and should be done in your own time when you feel comfortable. It should not happen when another well-meaning person thinks it should happen. Again, there is no “right” or “wrong”. You may feel ready soon after you lose your cat – this may be the case if your cat had a long illness and your grieving started long before the death. Ensure that you feel happy with the timing – some well-meaning people may try to give you a cat or kitten in order to replace your previous cat. Others may try to talk you out of getting a cat when you feel ready. Some may advise not to get the same breed, colour, sex and so on.... Again,

You know best.

Some people find themselves preoccupied with the health of the new cat, with fears of his or her death. This is quite normal as the pain is so fresh for you; it is natural that you are anxious that you may experience it again soon. Again, this will become less intense over time.

The path through grief is never easy. Each of our cats is unique and irreplaceable. However as life and death are two sides of the same coin, so are love and grief. Neither exists without the other. Make life easy for yourself until you can remember your loved cat with more smiles than tears, and you know the time is right to begin a new, unique and perfect bond with another, who will benefit from the caring person you are.

## Web links that you may find helpful

The Centre for Grief Education in Melbourne provides a list of web resources about grief, including for pet loss

<http://www.grief.org.au/internet1.html>

A site dedicated to pet loss, which includes a weekly worldwide candle memorial ceremony for pets

<http://www.petloss.com/>

General links to grief web sites from Medline

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/bereavement.html>

About.Com’s list of pet loss resources

<http://dying.about.com/cs/petloss/>

Cat world has a page which will display a photo and biography to memorialise your cat

<http://www.cat-world.com.au/InMemory.htm>

There are many e-groups at yahoo and google. If your cat died of a specific disease, there may be a group for this, where others can offer both support and information about the disease.

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Here I have included a well-known poem that many people find helpful when thinking of their pets who have died. *Author unknown...*

# Rainbow Bridge

*Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.*

*When an animal dies that has been especially close to someone here, that pet goes to Rainbow Bridge.*

*There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together.*

*There is plenty of food, water and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.*

*All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigour; those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams of days and times gone by.*

*The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, who had to be left behind.*

*They all run and play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent; His eager body quivers.*

*Suddenly he begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.*

*You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.*

*Then you cross Rainbow Bridge together.....*