

Never easy to say goodbye

Jamie Andrew reflects on the loss of a beloved pet and investigates the options available to help the recently bereaved

Earlier this year, I lost my beloved family pet, a lilac Burmese called Smeagol. Although Smeagol was over 20 years old and had deteriorated steadily over the past year, the decision to have him put to sleep was a difficult one, as it always is.

Since he passed, returning to the house in which we grew up together – he as a kitten and I as a boy – feels strange. There are many places that are still haunted by his outline, places where I expect to see him slinking around, sunning himself in a sliver of sunlight, or looking up at me with his expectant little face – usually with the assumption that I'll top up his dish with more food.

Perhaps a part of me will never stop expecting to see him in that house; will never lose that sweeping sensation of loss that accompanies each visit. The fact is, there is no right or wrong way to grieve; no right or wrong way to feel. Each person's grief is as individual to them as their relationship with their cat and each person deals with and reacts to it in a different way.

The science of sadness

Whether you lose your loved one through illness, age or accident, it's hard to cope with the hole it can leave in your life. General attitudes to grief in Western society and our British stiff upper lip can compound the feelings of sadness, especially when we're confronted with those who don't understand what it feels like to own, or lose, a pet.

People who have never shared a home with cats, or simply dislike being around animals, often trivialise the impact the death of a pet can have upon its owner. They believe that an animal's life, when measured against a human being's, isn't as valuable or significant.

In the past this sentiment has been echoed by psychiatrists. Dr E K Rynearson, writing in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (1978) about the bond between humans and pets, claimed that: "...under abnormal circumstances of developmental frustration a human may displace an over determined need for attachment to the pet. The attachment relationship is pathological because of its defensive purpose, and its interruption can create enduring psychiatric reactions".

Dr Rynearson is postulating, essentially, that the love you feel for your cat is nothing more than a mental delusion; the filling of a hole which should be plugged by human companionship. I would passionately counter this clinical,

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antiseptic assertion by doing a little postulating of my own: that Dr Rynearson has never kept a cat.

Thankfully psychiatry has moved on from this flawed, curmudgeonly and over-analytical point of view; though, unfortunately, some laypeople out there haven't. Most psychiatrists would now concede that the human-pet relationship is one of healthy symbiosis. The results of some experiments have even suggested that the time we spend with our pets not only enriches our lives, but also extends them. We may not have doctorates in matters of the mind, but we cat owners have known this all along.

One would hope that if Dr Rynearson were writing today, he would simply say: "...sometimes we love our pets so much, that when we lose them it can affect us profoundly and for a long time".

Indeed, losing your cat can be like losing a family member. The grieving patterns and processes are the same. You can suffer from depression, anxiety, loss of appetite, withdrawal from other people, shock, insomnia and illness. You can also be affected by a wide range of emotions from guilt to anger to sadness. Although there is no solution to grief, human or animal, there are always ways to help alleviate or control your anguish. Sometimes knowing your options and understanding the processes can help ease the burden.

Euthanasia

In her book, *Cat Confidential*, Vicky Halls tells us that "...one of the most difficult decisions a pet owner will ever make is when the time is right for euthanasia". I know that my parents agonised on the last day of Smeagol's life. Following a major and debilitating stroke, they frantically tested and retested his reactions and behaviour, desperately hoping to see some flicker of vitality or resilience that would justify a prolonged life. By this stage, however, Smeagol could barely move from his basket. When I held him and stroked his fur, he no longer sensed that I was there, or purred to broadcast his contentment.

David Barfoot, a vet from Brentwood, Essex, sees euthanasia in these circumstances: "[euthanasia is] the last act of kindness you can bestow" where the alternative "will be continued suffering". David's 30 years as a practitioner have convinced him that "delay can be a selfish act on the owner's part," albeit an understandable one. "It is often a profound relief," he says, "when the euthanasia has been performed and the pet is at peace."



The procedure

The act of euthanasia itself is quick and painless. It involves injecting the cat with a concentrated solution of anaesthetic overdose. This is usually administered through a vein in the foreleg, but the heart or kidney may be injected in the case of older cats with poor circulation. The solution immediately sends the cat to sleep, after which breathing ceases and the heart stops beating. Death will be pronounced by the vet.

Most people prefer to be with their cats at this time, but it is not insisted upon. Although the process is professional, efficient and dignified, it may be too traumatic to witness for some. A veterinary nurse will always be present to help you through these difficult moments, or be there on your behalf at the end.

Veterinary practices often have arrangements with a local crematorium and can organise cremation for your cat. This can be carried out either communally or individually depending upon your wishes.

The personal touch

Those of us who cherish our cats as family members may well wish to celebrate their lives in the manner we would a human friend or relative: with a bespoke coffin; a headstone engraved with a personal message; an urn or memorial garden.

Nigel and Sandra Walton are the founders of Poffins, an organisation where pet owners can go for advice on and practical, bespoke solutions to how best to commemorate the lives of their loved ones. Poffins was created in response to Nigel's experience with the death of his pet dog, Simba, who was euthanised at a veterinary surgery. The surgery dealt with the aftercare of Simba's body after gaining approval from a shell-shocked Nigel. Although Nigel holds fast to the philosophy that in grief different people need different things – and acknowledging that the vet's services may be a perfectly valid option for many people – he left the surgery feeling like he could have done more; wishing that he'd had more options. He felt like he'd let Simba down.

"There's a formality you go through following the death of a human family member," he says, "and at the end of it you feel like you did something; there's closure. Some people can walk out of the vets, stand in the middle of the street and think, 'Is that it?' Your life's changed forever and you think, 'What am I supposed to do now?'"

As well as helping you create the most fitting tribute for your cat with patience and understanding, Nigel and his team have a close relationship with the Blue Cross's Pet Bereavement Support Service and can put you in touch with them if you feel you need to talk things through with a qualified counsellor.



Photo: istockphoto.com

Home burial

Home burial is an option if you wish to lay your old friend to rest in the place in which you were happiest together. There is no legislation which prohibits or restricts home burial for your cat, although for obvious sanitation reasons the site of burial should be three metres or more away from any water courses. The majority of literature on the subject also counsels that graves should be at least three feet deep. This is purely to prevent ground scavengers like foxes from destroying fresh graves. Your health or age may limit how strenuously you are able to dig – and obviously some people will find the act as arduous emotionally as physically, which is perfectly understandable – but bear in mind that a shallow grave can be protected by placing a flagstone over the earth. This can then be inscribed with a personal message or tribute to your friend.

Children

The fear of burdening young minds with knowledge and mental images you consider too harrowing can often give way to euphemisms which, while well-intentioned, can cause even more confusion and upset. 'Put to sleep' may seem a reassuringly gentle turn of phrase, but runs the risk of creating false hope that their cat will one day 'wake up'.

Children are especially vulnerable at these times for a number of reasons. They often form deeper emotional bonds with their pets and many grow up from birth knowing no other family dynamic than the one which includes their cat. It's also common for the passing of a cat to be a child's first direct engagement with notions of loss, death and mortality. A grief or bereavement counsellor may be able to offer assistance if you feel unsure how to tackle the issue.

Looking forward

Dealing with grief does not mean exorcising all trace of your beloved cat. On the contrary. Talking helps. As does writing things down. Just remember: everyone deals with it differently. Hopefully, in time – your own time – the sadness will dissipate, and you will be left with the fond memories and affection you were privileged to share with an intuitive, fascinating creature. Something for which I am profoundly grateful when I think of Smeagol. And something that Dr Ryneason can only dream of. ●