

Euthanasia and Pet Loss

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When a cat enters our life, we are acquiring a friend who often sees us through many life stages and changes, such as marriage, divorce and the birth of our children. Regardless of what happens, our cats are steady and non-judgmental companions. In return, we lavish constant love and attention on them. However, in every cat's life, the natural cycle runs its course and a time will come when we must say goodbye.

In many cases, our cats die natural deaths in happy old age. Often, however, we must make the decision to euthanize a sick or injured cat. While such decisions are difficult to make, the ability to do so is actually one of the greatest gifts we can give to a treasured companion. When our cat is so sick or injured that a return to a quality life is not possible, humane euthanasia must be considered.

Many cat owners find it difficult to determine when the time is right to make such a decision. Invariably, however, we know our pets best and are capable of making that personal and individual decision. There are several factors that can be taken into consideration in making this decision and they should be discussed with other family members and your veterinarian when possible.

The most important criteria to use when making a decision about the timing of euthanasia revolve around quality of life. If your cat is no longer able to do the things she enjoyed most and no longer responds to family members in the same way, it may be right to consider euthanasia. Another consideration is the amount of pain a cat is experiencing. In cases of chronic illness or terminal diseases, the day will come when there is more pain and discomfort in your cat's life than good times and this is the point at which to consider euthanasia. Finally, in some circumstances, the emotional or financial burden of a cat's illness may be beyond an owner's means or abilities and this, too, can be a valid reason to consider euthanasia.

In most cases, there is time to consider all the factors and discuss all the options with your family and with your veterinarian. We are rarely forced to make hasty decisions and this should be avoided wherever possible. During the time when you are discussing euthanasia, you should also explore the options for care of your cat's remains. Depending on where you live, several options may be available. Most commonly, owners can choose between burial and cremation. Burial might be on family-owned property (providing local by-laws allow this) or in a pet cemetery or memorial park. Cremation might be a simple affair or an arrangement where the cat's ashes can be returned to the owner, usually in a tasteful urn or container. Many owners choose to keep their beloved cat's ashes nearby or will bury them in a garden setting later on.

Try to plan the actual euthanasia appointment in advance. You will need to discuss with your veterinarian what options are appropriate for your family and pet. A home visit might be possible for this purpose, or time can be arranged in the clinic for the family to attend. Each cat owner must make a personal decision about whether to attend the actual event; your own emotional make up is a considerable factor. It is generally not desirable for young children to be involved in such events, and for older children, the decision to include them should be made only after careful consideration.

Much has been written about how to discuss euthanasia with children and how to handle the death of a beloved pet. It is wise to consult some of the excellent books and publications on the topic, especially where a pet has been with the family for a long time. In many cases, children cannot remember a time when the family pet was not there and their sense of loss and confusion can be significant. In general, it is best to be truthful and

straightforward with children, giving them simple answers to their questions to help them understand at a level appropriate to their age.

Veterinarians are skilled at making euthanasia a smooth and pain-free event. Often, a tranquilizer is administered to the cat first to ensure the pet is calm and free of fear. Euthanasia itself is induced by the intravenous administration of a death-inducing drug, often through a catheter that might be placed in advance.

Once euthanasia has been performed on a beloved pet, the next phase begins. It is very natural and normal to feel grief and sorrow after the loss of a pet. People go through grieving in their own way and at their own pace, but some features of the process are common to all of us.

The first feelings are often those of shock or denial. These feelings may start even before the pet has died, when a serious illness or injury is diagnosed. Anger follows denial in many people and it may be directed toward other people around you. You may be angry with yourself or others for not recognizing a serious situation earlier or you may be angry with others for things they have unintentionally said that hurt you. Some people then go through a phase where they bargain with a higher power to bring their beloved pet back.

Guilt and depression are also common symptoms after the death of a pet. This is the stage where your loss is acutely and deeply felt. You may find yourself thinking of your absent pet often, or you may be surprised when something simply triggers a memory. Some people experience significant signs of depression, where they have trouble with day-to-day tasks and wonder if they can go on. In these cases, it is possible to seek the assistance of a professional counselor for help. Good sources for help are clergy, social workers, grief counselors, your physician, or a therapist or psychologist. Many such professionals are specifically trained for pet loss and grief.

Finally, a degree of acceptance with your loss will set in. This happens to each of us in our own time, and well-meaning comments from friends and family to "get over it" will not help. Many people do not recognize the true importance of pets in the lives of others and so may not understand the depth of grief at a loss. It is best to be honest with yourself and others about your feelings and not be ashamed of them.

It is comforting for some owners to memorialize their cat in some way. There are many good ideas on how to do this, ranging from a memorial donation to a feline medical research foundation to planting a special tree or plant that will always remind you of your cat. Photographs and mementos can also be used to make pictures or displays that recall the good times of companionship.

Many people have found it helpful to talk to others who have been through the loss of a pet as well. Depending on where you live, there may be a local pet loss support group that meets regularly. Your veterinarian will know if such a group exists and how to contact them. There are also several good pet loss hotlines available for telephone support, which are often run by veterinary colleges.