

Pet Loss and Grief

Support for you and your family





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The Emotions of Euthanasia



Euthanasia

The word euthanasia comes to us from the Greek word meaning, “good or fortunate death.” However, when you choose to euthanise your pet, this will certainly not feel anything like “good” or “fortunate”.

The emotions will be those of conflicted feelings. The procedure may be done to end the suffering of an ill pet, but the grief associated with this loss may seem unbearable.

What Should I Do?

If you are making the decision to euthanise, your veterinarian can be your medical guide for you at this time. More than likely there will be quality of life discussions, financial discussions, and every other element of end-of-life care factors that will need to be a part of your thought process.

There will be another part of this decision you should also consider, you are the pet parent and you know your pet better than anyone else does.

As the guardian of your pet, you are intuitively aware of your pet's emotions, feelings, and communicative nature, all points of consideration during this emotional decision-making time.

If you have already chosen to have your pet euthanised, trust and accept that you have made the right decision with the information you have at this time.

Making Sense of My Emotions

While it may seem absolutely unbearable, having personal time with your pet before and during the euthanasia procedure will give you peace of mind knowing your beloved friend knew you were with them the whole time. Pets are intuitive and will certainly feel your presence and love.

We become deeply connected with our pets and this time together at the end will not be any different. It is important to work through all of your emotions surrounding the euthanasia. Not only the emotions of euthanising your pet but also the informational aspect of this process as well.

Some people feel it is important to consult with various sources to gain more information on euthanasia.

Other sources might be:

- A pet hospice group to assist with the pain management care at home for your pet
- Friends who understand
- Counsellors specialising in End-of-Life Pet Care
- Pet loss support groups

Managing the Guilt

The feeling of guilt will also be present. Guilt in the fact that you are faced with this decision, "playing God" as some view it, along with questioning the timing of the procedure.

As a pet parent, knowing your pet is suffering whether physically or mentally, will be part of the reflection you will do as you make the decision on euthanasia, as well as letting love be a part of your decision-making process.

As you prepare yourself in making the decision, establish parameters to assist in knowing when the timing is right:

- When my pet stops enjoying treats
- When my pet stops eating
- When he can no longer find his litter box
- When she can no longer find the door

These boundaries have to be right for you and your pet. Ask a pet-loving friend or family member to be your companion at this time and to assist you through this emotional journey. When you have found yourself in the place of considering euthanasia, your grief journey has already begun.

Be kind to yourself and find the support you need during this time.

Things to Remember

Making this decision for your pet will involve others who have been in your pet's life such as family members, friends, other pets and your vet. Understanding everyone's emotional connection to the relationship shared with your pet will aid in guiding you before, during and after the euthanasia.

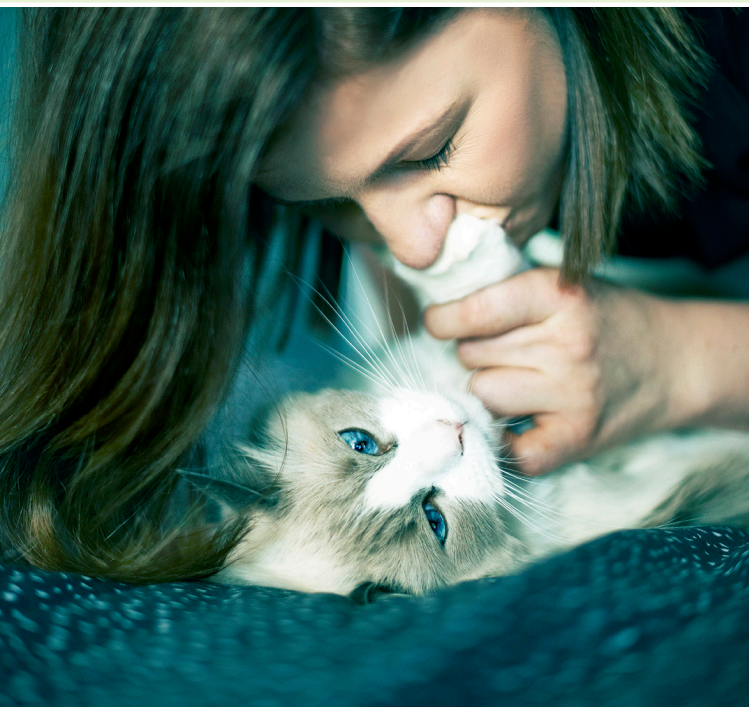
With everyone having their own relationship with your pet, it's important to know that everyone will have their own viewpoints regarding euthanasia. As a caregiver of the pet, managing all of these viewpoints can become overwhelming and add to the anxiety of the end-of-life decision.

However, it's important to make sure everyone that has been involved in the pet's life has a voice. It's also important to give everyone the opportunity to say their "goodbyes" to the pet. Consider building in rituals and incorporating special items during this final end-of-life walk with your pet to create a truly meaningful and heartfelt goodbye.

The grief journey will be unique to each pet owner as everyone remembers their pet friend differently.

Pet Parents in Grief

To mourn and heal



What's Happening to Me?

Grief – “intense sorrow – as if by death; our internal feelings.”

Mourning – “the showing of sadness at somebody’s death; the external actions expressing grief.”

Bereaved – “to be deprived of something valuable.”

When something we love dies, we have a severing of a relationship causing us to feel grief and feelings of intense sorrow.

By physically showing our grief, we actively mourn the death of that beloved. This active mourning will move your bereaved heart on a journey through grief and to grief reconciliation.

What Can I Do?

Acknowledge the reality of the death

Acknowledging the full reality of the loss may take weeks or months but will be done in a time that is right for you. Be kind to yourself as you prepare for the “new normal” of a life without your beloved pet. As you had time to build the relationship with your pet it will take time to get used to them not being there.

Move toward the pain of the loss

Experiencing these emotional thoughts and feelings about the death of a pet is a difficult but important need. Moving towards this pain through active mourning versus trying to ignore it will create a healthier grief journey.

Continue the relationship with the pet that died through memory

Our memories allow our pets to live on in us. Embracing these memories, both happy and sad, can be a very slow and, at times, painful process that occurs in small steps. Take some time to look at past photos or write your pet a letter to recall your time together.

Adjust your self-identity

Part of our self-identity might come from being a pet parent. Others may also think of you in relation to your pet. You may be the person who always walked the little chihuahua around the neighbourhood or the friend whose cat always jumped on laps. Adjusting to this change is a central need of mourning.

Search for meaning

When a pet dies, we naturally question the meaning and purpose of pets in our lives. Coming to terms with these questions is another need we must meet if we are to progress in our grief journeys. Know that it is the asking, not the finding of concrete answers, that is important.

Continue to receive support from others

We need the love and support of others because we never “get over” grief. We just get through it. Talking or being with other pet owners who have experienced the death of a pet can be one important way to meet this need.

Things to Remember

The loss of your pet will come with some unexpected aspects as well.

The Deafening Silence – The silence in your home after the death of a pet can be excruciatingly loud. While the presence of even our smallest of animal friends takes up physical space, many times the presence is felt more with our senses.

When your pet is no longer there, the lack of their presence, the silence can be piercing. It becomes the reality of the “presence of the absence.” Merely being aware of this stark reality will assist in preparing you for the flood of emotions.

The Special Bond with Your Pet – The relationship shared with your pet is a special and unique bond, a connection that some might find difficult to understand.

There will be well-meaning friends and family members who will think that you should not mourn for your pet or who will tell you that you should not be grieving as hard as you are because “it’s just a cat.”

When a bond is broken grief will happen. Your grief is normal and the lost relationship you shared with your special friend needs to be mourned.



Children in Grief

Understanding their journey



What's My Role?

As an adult caregiver assisting a child, it will be important to allow the child to “lead” the journey through the grief process. Children are natural mourners and will, in all actuality, teach us what they need to mourn.

Children will mourn in doses and will have sadness spurts. They will mourn, then play, mourn some more, then play again.

While this may seem like they are being disrespectful to other's feelings of sadness, it is a very healthy way for youngsters to move themselves through to grief reconciliation.

Your role as an adult caregiver is to allow the child space to grieve in their own way. A child will not grieve in the same way as an adult and should not be expected to.

Your most important role is to model your grieving behaviour in a way that children will feel safe and comfortable to express their feelings. Adults are a barometer as to how children will grieve and will follow the lead they are given.

How to Help

Saying goodbye to a pet friend for a child will be hard. They will first want to be given a chance to remember their pet and to relive the life they shared. This process will be an integral part for them to move themselves through the grief journey to saying goodbye.

In assisting a child through these emotions, a child will guide you in what help they need. They will let you know when they are ready to talk, cry or show other emotions.

Forcing a child into talking about these feelings, or forcing a prescribed set of steps onto a child will create some resistance.

As a model of healthy grieving, you as the adult should allow the child to physically see a healthy way of grieving; therefore, creating the environment that they will need in mourning as well.

In this process of reliving the life that was shared, these are some things that you can do to assist the child:

- Allow the child to see you when you cry and to be sad. While many people believe that not allowing a child to see this is showing a sign of strength, it is actually showing a sign of weakness in not being able to show emotions. A child will want to see these emotions.
- Set up a table in your home to display items symbolic of your pet. The “Tribute Table” will provide an active place for your child to place items special to their deceased pet and to the life shared with the family. Guide the child with items such as toys, treats, photos and personalised artwork for the tribute table.

- At a designated period following the death of their pet, assist the child in arranging a memorial service to pay tribute to the pet. Let the child assist you in deciding on the readings, poems, letters or music to play at the service.
- Create a personalised marker to place in the backyard, complete with the child's nickname for the pet.
- Assist the child in creating a journal, scrapbook or photo album.
- As a family, organise a donation for your local pet shelter in memory of your pet.

Things to Remember

In talking to a child about the death of their beloved pet, it is important to use the correct terminology to describe what has happened.

The use of the words “death”, “dead” and “die” will not confuse the child to the actuality of the event. Use of the words “sleeping”, “gone to the farm” and “adopted by another family” will only create confusion and unresolved grief feelings for a child.





What's Happening with My Other Pets?

Animals, like human beings, may experience feelings of grief when they lose a pet friend. As with people, the other pets in the household will handle their grief differently, some to the point of extreme visibility while others may not show any signs at all.

Differences in these feelings may depend on the relationship the pets had, time together, age and other factors.

What is important at this time is, as a pet parent, you are aware of the fact your pet might be grieving the loss of a pet friend, or even a human friend.

Being aware of your pet's feelings will help you in being able to give your pet what they will need as they mourn their loss as well.

Signs of Their Mourning

Your pet may visibly show signs of their mourning:

- Loss of appetite
- Restless in their sleep

- Wandering aimlessly
- “Quieter” than normal in their barking or meowing and communication
- Or to the opposite extreme, more vocal in their barking or meowing
- Constant searching for their pet friend
- Demanding more attention than normal
- No desire to be social

As with people, pets should be given the opportunity to say “goodbye” to their pet-friend as well. It is distressing to a pet to see another member of the household leave and never return.

Many pets will search the house incessantly, trying to find their friend, waiting by the door for the day they will return, and then finally exhibit signs of depression.

If it is not feasible to have the remaining pets at home to say “goodbye” to their friend before burial or cremation, after their death, snip a locket of fur so that they will have something to smell.

Smelling may assist them in confirming their friend has died. This locket of fur can then also be used as something the surviving pets can “hold” onto during their grieving process.

Many different things may happen during the time of allowing the surviving pets to say “goodbye” to their deceased friends:

- Sniffing of the deceased friend’s body to confirm the death
- Laying beside the deceased pet
- Trying to “bury” the deceased pet by “moving” dirt with their nose or by pulling a blanket over the body
- Howling or whimpering
- Pawing at the body as if to try to “wake” them up
- Bringing a favourite toy over to the deceased pet for “play”
- Or, possibly, nothing at all

To Assist Your Pet with Their Grief Journey

- While it is important to keep their routine the same, give them the extra care and attention they may be craving. It will be good for you, too.
- Give your pet something with the deceased pet's scent on it for comfort.
- If a treat is a car ride, take your pet with you for more time together.
- Take longer or more walks together so your pet will not have to be alone.
- Allow the pet to sleep in areas he or she possibly would not have slept in the past – the deceased pet's chair or bed.
- Talk to your pet about the deceased pet – tell them how you are grieving too and give them “permission” to grieve as well.
- If the deceased pet was the “Alpha” leader of the house, know the remaining pets will now have to re-establish the order in the home.

You and your pet are grieving the loss of a love you both had. Allow yourself the time and patience to pay tribute, to grieve, and to mourn the special bond that has been broken.



Memorialisation

To honour and pay tribute

A Sentimental Choice

There is no wrong answer when it comes to the right way to memorialise a beloved pet. What you and/or your family decide to do to pay tribute to a deceased pet should be what is fitting for you and should be reflective of the life you shared.

As many families ponder the perfect memorialisation pieces, the maze can be vast and confusing. However, there are a few questions you can ask yourself to guide you in this beautiful tribute to your furry friend.

Options to Consider

The first part of your memorialisation decision will be the final arrangements for your pet's body: cremation or burial? Many factors will play a role in this decision, factors such as religion, living arrangements, council regulations etc.



For instance, consider your future living situation. For instance, if you are not going to live in this particular area for the rest of your life, are you comfortable burying your pet at this location? Or, as you move throughout your career and life, will it be more important to have your deceased pet's ashes with you?

After you have made this particular final arrangement decision, you will then want to decide on what types of physical pieces you will want to honour your pet's life. Items such as:

- Urn
- Jewellery
- Burial Markers

Many families also want to memorialise their pet's life with a service or a Celebration of Life event. You can do many things in the privacy of your own home, or with other friends and family members joining in the tribute.

However, there may also be rituals you will want to do privately to pay tribute to the times you shared with your pet and the special memories you want to preserve. These events might look like the following:

- Continue to take the daily walks you did with your friend – use this time to reflect and remember
- Light a candle at a special time daily in remembrance of your pet
- Journal
- Cuddle with the blanket your pet liked to use

In a more public forum, there are rituals you can do with your family and friends to ceremonially acknowledge the life of your pet and the significance this pet had in other's lives as well. Some questions to ask yourself as you are planning this gathering are:

- What are the things my pet liked to do?
Be outside? Curled up by the fire? Running on the beach? It is important to incorporate these surroundings or activities into the gathering.

- Create a special book for your pet where others can record their favourite memories and leave a tribute.
- Was there a certain food or treat my pet especially liked? Should I include this as part of the tribute?
- As you invite others to the Celebration of Life, encourage them to bring their own pet and bring a contribution for a local pet shelter in honour of your pet.
- Blowing bubbles can help symbolically release your pet's spirit.
- The planting of a tree, bush or flower in honour of your pet is a lovely testimony to the Circle of Life.

Things to Remember

What you choose to do to memorialise your beloved pet will be what is right for you. While other individuals may have an opinion regarding a tribute for your pet, the rituals or memorialisation items you choose are yours and should signify the love and the life you shared together.

Rituals, ceremonies and memorial pieces are unique to every individual. Friends and family members may or may not understand this need. However, these pieces are all a part of the rituals of the mourning process meant to assist your grieving heart.



A Guide to Planning Ahead

The final arrangement wish for my pet is:

- ☐ Cremation ☐ Burial

If cremation, will you want the ashes returned?

- ☐ Yes - Individual Cremation; your pet's body will be cremated solely, ensuring the returned ashes are only your pet.
- ☐ No – Alternate Arrangement; please discuss other local options with your vet.

If burial, where?

- ☐ Home ☐ Pet Cemetery

Areas of consideration with this decision are:

- Does my suburb / council allow pet burials?
- Will I always live at this home?
- Will my religious preferences help guide you?
- Did my pet like the outside or the inside? Will that influence my pet's final resting place?

For burial, will you want a casket?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No



Service Options

Many families may want to have one last time to be with their pet after they pass.

This offers a time to see your pet at peace, a time for your children to pay tribute by bringing in items special to your pet and a time to begin the grief journey, and to say that final goodbye.

Sometimes, friends, family members and other family pets will want to have their final goodbye with your pet too.

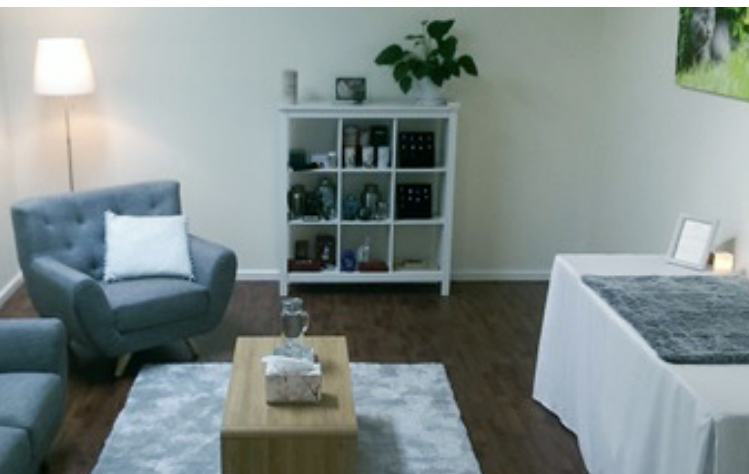
Pets touch so many people during their short lives with us. Allow those around you the opportunity to come together, pay their respects and support each other.

My family and I will want a final goodbye time:

☐ Yes ☐ No

Occasionally families will take this final goodbye time to incorporate their important family / religious rituals. Rituals may look like:

- Special readings
- Rituals you and your pet did to say “I love you”
- A candle lighting tribute
- Reading of special poems and remembrance
- Sharing photos and videos of your pet and family



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If you or a family member are finding it difficult to deal with your emotions, you may wish to attend one of our upcoming Pet Loss and Grief Support Groups.

Alternatively, we also provide the option of individual counselling.

For further information associated with upcoming Grief Support Group dates or any other queries you may have, please visit our website, contact our friendly team on **9248 6464** or email us at **care@lawnswood.com.au**