

Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University



**CATNIP** 

The Newsletter for Caring Cat Owners

*GRIEF COPING TIPS  
& PET LOSS HOT LINE*



## **OUR EXPERTS OFFER 10 COPING TIPS TO HELP YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN RECOVER FROM THE DEATH OF A BELOVED PET:**

- *Give yourself permission to grieve. Denying these natural emotions can elevate stress and physical fatigue.*
- *Seek out friends and family members who share your compassion for animals. Focus more on their good intentions and not necessarily their words.*
- *Dismiss and ignore comments from those who may trivialize your loss. They may never have had a pet or recognized the closeness of your friendship with your cat.*
- *Recognize that your departed cat is one-of-a-kind who can never be replaced. When you are ready to adopt a new cat, embrace that new pet for his uniqueness and avoiding comparing him to your previous cat.*
- *Treat yourself well. Eat healthy meals and get ample sleep.*
- *Fight through sad or blue moods by exercising. Physical activity raises endorphins and other feel-good hormones in your body. Take longer walks or bike rides, for example, in scenic areas.*
- *Avoid declarations such as, "I will never get another cat." These statements hinder your healing process.*
- *Ritualize your cat's death through a ceremony or memorial service. The greatest way to honor the memory of a pet is to learn how to become a better person for having them in your life.*
- *Spend time recalling happy, silly, fond memories you shared with your cat.*
- *Consider writing a letter or poem to and from your departed pet. Getting words down on paper can sometimes help the grieving process.*

## **IN THE GRAY HOUSEHOLD, ELVIS COSTELLO THE CAT RULED FOR NEARLY 19 YEARS.**

*“Elvis has seen the arrival of our two daughters, plus every pet that has come into this house,” says DeeAnn Gray, of Costa Mesa, California. “Elvis truly was king of our house.”*

The night before Elvis died - late November last year - he spent individual time with DeeAnn, her husband, John, and daughters Paris, age 14, and Milan, age 12. The next day, this indoor cat somehow slipped out the front door unnoticed and his dead body was discovered by DeeAnn hours later.

*“I called my husband at work and we both cried,” says DeeAnn. “When our daughters came home from school, they saw our faces. We told them Elvis had died and we had him in a shoe box and asked if they wanted to see him. They said, yes, and tenderly pet him. We then spend that night reminiscing about how cute and silly he was.”*

### **LIKE LOSING AN OLDER SIBLING**

For Paris and Milan, Elvis was like an older sibling.

*“We grew up together,” says Paris, a high school sophomore. “He would sit on my lap when I was reading in my room and fall asleep and snore very loudly. It was hilarious.” As for Milan, Elvis tolerated being placed in a baby stroller and wheeled around the home during Milan’s younger days.*

*“We had lost some pets because they got old or sick, but Elvis was here before I was born,” says Milan, a sixth grader. “We all knew he would die at some point and we were a little ready, but it was still sad.”*

Children losing pets to disease, injury or other circumstance can take its toll - on the entire family. “Over the past 20 years, we have re-defined our notion of family,” says Ann Weber, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. *“Pets are more and more part of the family. They are often acquired as a companion for the child. There are a lot of development roles for a child and when the family pet dies, the child not only lost a friend, he or she may feel they lost a sibling of sorts, too, because everyone in the household answers to mom and dad.”*

At the Western Veterinary Conference held earlier this year in Las Vegas, family therapist Carolyn Butler, of Fort Collins, Colorado, led a workshop on children and pet loss. She works closely with veterinarians and families dealing with the death of a beloved family dog or cat or other pet. She regularly advises veterinary staff on the best way to explain to children at age-appropriate levels what happens during pet euthanasia. She urges parents to not hide their sadness.

*“If parents don’t show their sadness or grief, it sends the wrong message to children that grief is wrong,” says Butler. “It is appropriate for parents to tell their children, I’m sad today, or, I just don’t have as much energy today, because I miss our cat. But I still love you and you want to talk about [our cat], that’s fine with me. “*

The healthiest way to honor their memories is to recognize that you need to grieve before you can truly heal. Realize that sudden tear bursts or unshakeable blue moods and other emotion-ridden actions and attitudes are normal. As more regard cats as valued members of their families, their deaths take on a greater heart-tugging toll.

Based on the work by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., a Swiss psychiatrist in the late 1960s, most pet owners and their family members go through this five-step grieving process:

- \* Denial/shock
- \* Anger
- \* Bargaining
- \* Depression
- \* Acceptance

Keep in mind that it may take your children days, weeks or even months to go through this grief process. Also, recognize that not everyone goes through these steps in a linear fashion, says Dr. Weber.

During the grief process, avoid using euphemisms and go with honesty, recommends Dr. Weber. Use the word, “died,” rather than “put to sleep” when describing a pet’s death to children, particularly those under age 12.

A child may need an operation, for example, in the future and hearing the doctor tell him that he will “put him to sleep” to do the procedure may unduly frighten the child if you used that same phrase to describe the death of a family cat.

In addition, Dr. Weber advises to avoid saying, ““God loved Fluffy so much that He had to bring him to heaven.” The reason? Your child may wonder why God doesn’t love him enough to bring him to heaven, too.”

## **TIPS FOR DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS**

Keeping in mind that a child’s level of maturity may be less or more, therapists offer this general guideline to help parents discuss the dying and death of family pets by these age breakdowns:

- Under age two: Babies and toddlers may sense the pet’s death, based on feeling the stress and emotions expressed by other members of the family.
- Between two and five: Children may be sad because they miss the family cat as a play pal. They may also not recognize that death is permanent and due to the heightened stress in the family, may regress to thumb sucking, tantrums and other childish behaviors.

- Between age five and nine: Children start to recognize that death is permanent, but may fantasize that death can be defied. During this age, some children may harbor resentment for having to feed or care for the family cat and may secretly wish at times that the cat would die. When the cat slips out of the house and gets hit by a car and dies, for instance, these children may be filled with guilt and it is important for parents to let them know that accidents happen and that they did not cause the family cat to die.
- Ages 10 and older: Children understand that cats and other living things eventually die, but some may have difficulty accepting that death is permanent. They may express anger or guilt or become curious about death.

Dr. Weber encourages parents and children to reach out to friends and other family members who can listen and who recognize just how sad they are about the death of their pets. She also sees the value in pet loss hotlines or pet loss therapy groups.

*“Grieving for a pet is distinct from other forms of mourning,”* says Dr. Weber.

## **HONOR PET WITH A CEREMONY**

*“There are no traditional ceremonies or social rituals for honoring a funny cat, a sweet bird, or a loyal dog,”* she adds. *“But a pet’s presence punctuates daily life. After the loss, the household is stunned by absence. Morning treats and night time rituals of cuddling on the couch with a purring cat are gone. The routine is shattered; the home feels empty.”*

Alice Moon-Fanelli, PhD, a certified applied animal behaviorist who counsels pet owners at the Animal Behavior Clinic at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, says despite the loss they will face, people of all ages who share their lives with pets are fortunate.

*“I feel sorry for people who have never had that kind of bond with an animal,”* says Dr. Moon-Fanelli. *“Each companion animal brings a special connection. They are part of your life in different experiences and different ages. They simply cannot be replaced. You will never go through the same experiences with the same pet at that same age again.”*

Although there are more pet loss hotlines and therapy groups surfacing, Colorado State University’s School of Veterinary Medicine created what is believed to be the nation’s first pet hospice program in early 2004 at its Argus Institute. Director Gail Bishop and her team of veterinary student volunteers help families care for their terminally-ill pets.

*“I’ve been in the human hospice field for 20 years, and this seemed like a natural extension of services,”* says Bishop. *“Often, the death of a family pet tends to be a child’s first experience with death and loss. This is an opportunity to teach healthy coping mechanisms. We all deal with losses in our lives, but not often, are we given the opportunity to create a healthy foundation to deal with our grief.”*

## STUDENTS COMFORT FAMILIES

Student volunteers travel within a 30-mile radius of the institute to meet with families of dying pets. They explain what is happening physically to the pet and provide necessary care, such as pain medications, for the pets.

For our veterinary students, this gives them an opportunity to work with end-of-life experiences," says Bishop. *"They have the opportunity to learn to develop excellent communication skills in a very vulnerable time with families."*

To learn more about the Argus Institute's pet hospice program, please visit their Web site: [www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu](http://www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu) or call 970-297-4578.

As for the Gray family, they shared tears when Elvis, their black and- white cat died. The daughters also reached out to pet-loving friends to express their grief.

## PET LOSS HOT LINE

*"When Elvis died, I called my very best friend, McKenzie, who now lives in San Diego,"* says Milan Gray. *"She helped me a lot with the pain and helped cheer me up. It was nice having someone my own age to talk to about this. Elvis was a really good cat."*

Veterinary student Anna Ludi knows that in order to be a successful veterinarian, she needs to know more than the medical side of this profession. That's why she elected to work at the pet loss hotline at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

*"This gives me the opportunity to sharpen my counseling skills and learn how to deal with people who are grieving about an injured or dying pet,"* says Ludi, of Sherburne, Massachusetts.

Ludi and other student volunteers devote time to speak with parents and their children. They also offer educational packets and suggest a list of ageappropriate books on coping with death. These books given children the tools they need to handle their grief.

Among the titles of books that help families deal with their sadness over losing a pet include **Cat Heaven** by Cynthia Rylant (*Scholastic Press*), **Barn Kitty** by June Kirkpatrick (*Azro Press*), **For Every Cat An Angel** by Christine Davis (*Lighthearted Press*), **The Loss of a Pet** by William Sife, PhD (*Howell Book House*), and **When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide for Understanding Death** by Laurie Krasny Brown (*Little and Brown*).

*"We're here to help the parents as well as their kids during this sad time,"* says Ludi.

To learn more about the Tufts pet loss hotline, you can visit the Web site: [www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss](http://www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss) or call 508 839-7966.