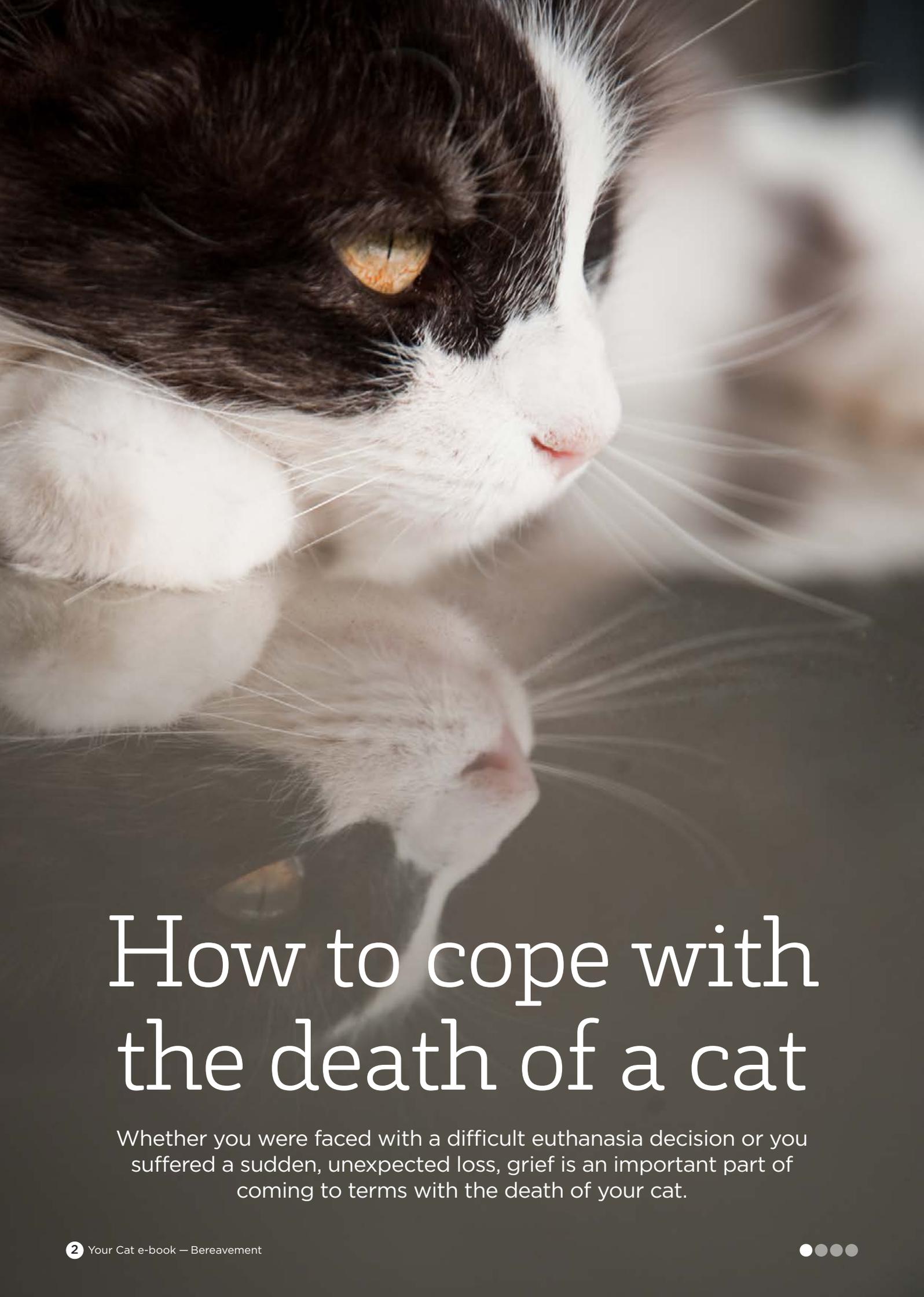


Free e-book from the publishers of [www.yourcat.co.uk](http://www.yourcat.co.uk)



The Your Cat Guide to  
**Bereavement**



# How to cope with the death of a cat

Whether you were faced with a difficult euthanasia decision or you suffered a sudden, unexpected loss, grief is an important part of coming to terms with the death of your cat.

Losing a pet can be profoundly upsetting, and yet the average lifespan of a pet means that we may experience many such losses in our lifetime. How are we supposed to cope?

The feelings you have may surprise you, and it could take longer than you might expect to come to terms with life without your cat, but the good news is that pet bereavement and the effect it has is being taken seriously. Veterinary professionals have accepted that some understanding of grief is essential in order to support their clients, and there are counsellors specifically trained to help those who are grieving over a pet, including Your Cat magazine's resident bereavement counsellor Sue Dawson.

Sometimes the loss of a pet can be a trigger for thinking back to other experiences in life and may bring feelings long forgotten back to the surface, perhaps even connected to human loss. Although it is a 'fact of life' and does sound like a cliché, it's one of the ways that Robin Grey, professional counsellor and author of 'Coping with Pet Loss' suggests we view the loss. He says it's about allowing time to grieve and to recognise that each of the different reactions are perfectly normal.

The reactions of those around you can be less than helpful and you may have to block out comments like: "It was only a cat" or "Why not just get another?" Accept that your feelings are perfectly real and valid and allow yourself to come to terms with what has happened.

## THE PHASES OF GRIEF

Robin says that loss is viewed as a process that has several phases, although not everyone's experiences are the same — or in the same order; life is never that neat! The upset does eventually give way though, and the experience can provide an understanding of what the relationship was all about. The stages of grief include shock, denial, bargaining, searching, anxiety, anger, guilt, depression, and finally, acceptance.

Denial can follow quickly on from shock, and is an instinctive way of blocking out reality. Bargaining may seem like a strange expression in this context, but it's about wishing: wishing your pet would get better, wishing you had done something differently, with an attached condition. For example, it can be an attempt to strike up a deal: "If there's some way of curing him, I

**Grieving for a lost pet is perfectly normal and natural.**



promise to spend more time with him."

Bargaining will help to keep some hope alive. The possibility of 'another chance' is a way of holding back the eventual loss. Robin says: "If you are supporting someone who is in the bargaining phase, it is important to recognise that hope is part of their eventual acceptance. To be confronted with too much truth about the inevitable too early on can be unnecessary and may interfere with the loss process."

Here's how one pet owner summed up her feelings: "I was trying to reconcile my wish to keep him with my wish to let him go in peace. My vet helped me to see that the illness he had was affecting his quality of life so much that letting him go was the best thing to do. I spent so much time hoping for a positive outcome; that he would get better or that the cancer would somehow disappear. But I had

**"I WAS TRYING TO RECONCILE MY WISH TO KEEP HIM WITH MY WISH TO LET HIM GO IN PEACE."**

so much weighing-up to do in my mind between keeping him and letting him go. In the end, letting him go was best for both of us, but it was hard to see it at the time."

## THE RIGHT TIME TO SAY GOODBYE TO YOUR CAT

"When people have to make a decision on euthanasia, it is a very tough decision to make," says Robin. "Vets will say, in many cases, that it is to alleviate pain and suffering. Yet although they can give advice, it is up to the owner to make the final decision. Some people keep their pets going for 'a bit longer' then have doubts about whether they should have done."

The chapter of Robin's book, 'Deciding when it is right to end a pet's life', is thought-provoking. There's no set formula to be passed on, but owners may find it useful to help them gather their thoughts and give them confidence to make what is a very personal decision based on unique circumstances.

Robin says: "It's a difficult decision because it goes right to the core of



the bond between you and the pet. Sometimes people prefer to make the decision on their own while others like to have the input and support from family.”

The message is be honest with yourself, take advice from your vet and approach this situation in the way that you feel most comfortable.

Robin sums up by saying: “It’s about love and life. The main point is that it is inevitable if you own a pet that this is going to happen. It is really important to recognise that it happens but not to let it colour the whole experience of having a pet. Accept it as a process; it’s part of life.

“People sometimes feel that their loss is too acute and hold the belief that they will not be able to face having another pet for fear of further loss at some time in the future. However, in time, many pet owners find that they can welcome another pet into their lives. This is not to suggest that their former pet is forgotten but more that they can eventually reach a state of acceptance around the loss, which allows new life to come in.”

Whatever your age or experience, you don’t have to suffer alone. Robin says: “It is important to get help if you feel it is getting too much for you.”

That can simply mean finding someone sympathetic to talk to — and often it is easier with someone outside of your family or circle of friends since they won’t offer up a judgement on how you are feeling. The Pet Bereavement Support Service is a telephone service in which you can talk or correspond with a trained counsellor. For details, see Useful Contacts on the next page.

### **A SPECIAL BOND**

As a background, Robin offers an insight into the bond between human and animal. “We put a lot of love across to them, together with time and effort, and it’s completely unconditional,” Robin explains. “I think that’s why it affects people so strongly.”

Robin was partly motivated to write his book by the experience of an elderly aunt who was devastated when her

“IT IS IMPORTANT  
TO GET HELP IF  
YOU FEEL IT IS  
GETTING TOO MUCH  
FOR YOU.”

**Owners will eventually accept a loss — but that doesn’t mean a cat is forgotten.**



**Your remaining cat may experience grief too.**



beloved cat died. “The feelings of grief may be intensified for a person who lives on their own and for whom the pet is the sole and constant companion,” he says. “It is easy to see how she could have felt so completely bereft.”

Older people and children can have particularly strong attachments to their pets and the loss of an animal that has been viewed as a close companion can acutely affect both age groups. For parents, Robin’s book explores the importance of taking care when explaining pet loss to children, while being open and supportive.

The older generation have other perspectives on their pet’s death, the memories that it triggers, and may force them to face the future. It may even mean coming to terms with the fact that this may be their last pet. The financial costs associated with their pet’s last days may also add to the toll on the individual.

## THOSE LEFT BEHIND

Closely-bonded cats may grieve the loss of a feline companion, and it has been recognised that cats often show three distinct stages of grief — these can last for just a few days to weeks or even months. The first is relatively short-term and can involve excessive vocalisation, roaming, searching and pacing from room to room. This appears to be an active phase in feline grief, where the cat is actually trying to search out their missing friend.

The second stage is often spotted in cats with a sensitive disposition, and might include a lack of appetite, loss

of energy, and withdrawn behaviours. These signs might be confused with illness, so it’s best to get your cat checked at the vet if you have any concerns, particularly if a lack of appetite lasts for more than a few days.

The third, and final, stage of feline grief, like ours, is acceptance — this is the point that your cat seems to have stopped searching for his friend and resumes his old routine and behaviours. Many owners report that their cat’s behaviour changes after the loss of a companion — some will become more withdrawn while others seem to ‘blossom’ when they become the only cat in the house.

In order to help your cat through the grieving process, try to maintain his usual routine and remove your deceased cat’s belongings from your home gradually — a slowly diminishing scent will be much easier to deal with for the remaining cat. Without the back-up of their feline friend, some cats may become reluctant to go outdoors in fear of neighbourhood cats encroaching on their territory — provide a litter tray indoors and ensure you have a microchip cat flap to stop any intruders coming inside. Although you’ll want to show your remaining cat lots of fuss, it’s also important to maintain the level of attention your cat is used to and comfortable with — the sudden onset of attention, cuddles and fuss could prove stressful to a hands-off cat. Allow your cat to initiate contact on his terms — rest assured, he will seek you out when he needs you to show him some love. ■

## PRACTICAL COPING TECHNIQUES:

- 1** Share your feelings — Talking about what has happened and expressing how you are feeling to someone who understands the impact of your loss, and who appreciates the importance of the human-cat relationship, may help to externalise some of the difficult and painful feelings you are going through
- 2** Create a focal point — planting a bush, tree or some forget-me-not seeds can provide a living memorial to a deceased cat
- 3** Make a memory book or box containing special memories and items such as your cat’s favourite toys and collar
- 4** Write a letter to your cat and tell him/her how much you’re missing them, explaining any guilt you might be feeling, and how much you love them
- 5** Make a donation to a cat welfare charity in your cat’s name — owners often find it healing to help other cats in need
- 6** Light a candle for your cat at [www.yourcat.co.uk](http://www.yourcat.co.uk)

## USEFUL CONTACTS

Blue Cross offer a Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) which is open from 8.30am to 8.30pm every day. Calls are free from UK landlines, completely confidential, and taken by trained, experienced volunteers. To contact the PBSS, tel. 0800 096 6606 or email [pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk)

Your Cat magazine has a resident pet bereavement counsellor, Sue Dawson. You can write to Sue and receive a free, personal reply. Write to: Catcare, Your Cat magazine, BPG Media, 1-6 Buckminster Yard, Main Street, Buckminster Yard, Grantham, Lincs. NG33 5SB or email Sue at [catcare@yourcat.co.uk](mailto:catcare@yourcat.co.uk)





# Q What happens when a cat is put to sleep?

It's a heartbreaking thought, but putting a cat to sleep (or euthanasia) is something that every cat owner may have to consider towards the end of their cat's life.

Unless your cat has been involved in a serious accident, you'll probably

have time to think through all of your options, and speak to family, friends and your vet about the kindest thing to do for your cat. Most vets would agree it's not the length of a cat's life that matters most, but the quality of his life.

However, there is no need to put a cat to sleep simply because a terminal condition

such as cancer has been diagnosed — the cat may well be able to live several more happy months.

However, when your cat is suffering from extreme pain which is difficult to control, your vet may suggest that euthanasia is the kindest option. When there is no reasonable alternative,

to enable a cat to die in peace and dignity can be a tremendous relief.

If your cat is showing continual signs of pain, has stopped eating or drinking, has changed his usual pattern of behaviour and has stopped showing signs of contentment, it may be the right time for your cat.

“YOU WILL PROBABLY HAVE TIME TO THINK THROUGH ALL OF YOUR OPTIONS, AND SPEAK TO FAMILY, FRIENDS AND YOUR VET ABOUT THE KINDEST THING TO DO FOR YOUR CAT.”

### WHAT HAPPENS?

Euthanasia is usually quick, very straightforward and, most importantly, painless. If your cat is distressed or upset, the vet may choose to administer a mild sedative before giving a large overdose of an agent that will simply cause the cat to lose consciousness and pass away very rapidly. This is usually given by intravenous injection using a vein in the front leg.

Unconsciousness and death usually occur within a matter of seconds — some cats may gasp, exhale or

twitch involuntarily, but this isn't a sign of life.

Depending on your circumstances, your vet may be able to come to your home to perform the procedure, and you are usually allowed to stroke your cat throughout. If you're going to the vets, it may be a good idea to ask for an appointment at a quiet time when the practice won't be busy — this will mean you are given enough time to say goodbye at your own pace.

It is the owner's choice as to whether or not they stay with their pet for the

procedure. It's important to not feel guilty if the situation is too distressing — this is a completely understandable reaction. If you choose to stay with your cat, try not to get too upset at first, as this could be picked up by your pet.

### AND AFTERWARDS?

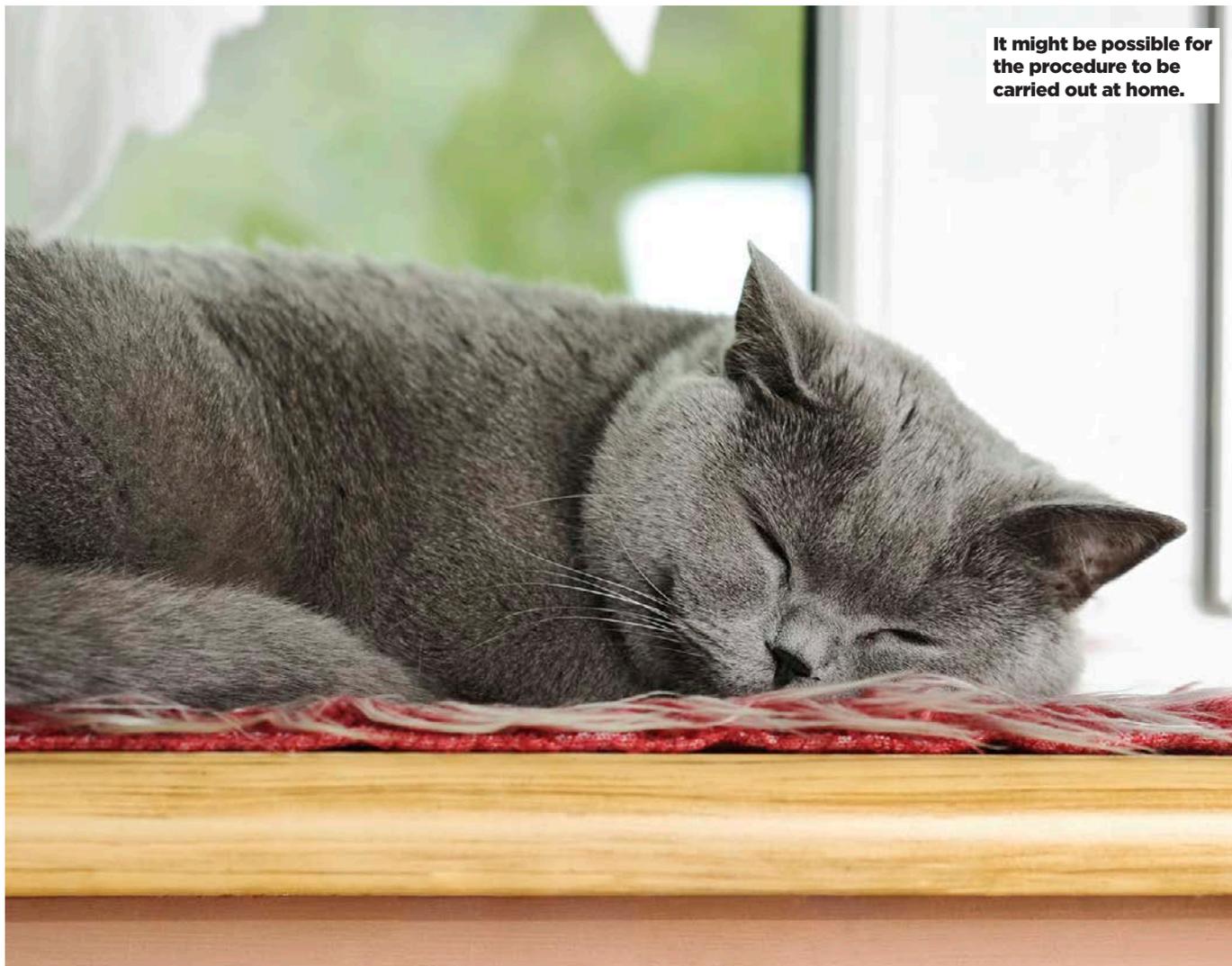
There are several options that your vet will be able to arrange depending on your wishes:

- You may choose cremation and leave the cat with the vet to undertake
- You can take your cat for burial at home in your garden
- You may choose burial in a pet cemetery — your vet can help to arrange this
- Your vet can arrange for an individual cremation with return of the ashes — although relatively expensive,

this is another service that your vet can organise.

Owners also need to take the time to come to the terms with the death of their cat. The aftermath of having a pet put to sleep can be a very difficult time, and some non-pet owners may not understand. It's important to talk your feelings through with someone who understand pet loss — Blue Cross offer a free and confidential pet bereavement support service run by volunteers who have been through pet loss themselves. Call the PBSS on tel. **0800 096 6606** or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk/2083/pet-bereavement-support-service.html](http://www.bluecross.org.uk/2083/pet-bereavement-support-service.html)

For more advice on how to cope with the death of a cat, visit [www.yourcat.co.uk/cat-advice](http://www.yourcat.co.uk/cat-advice) ■



**It might be possible for the procedure to be carried out at home.**

# Time to say goodbye

Demand is growing for pet home-hospice care and euthanasia at home, yet only a few vets in the UK provide this specialised service. Melanie Whitehouse investigates.



**Vet Susan Gregersen with her favourite cat.**

**W**hen the end finally came for Kruger, a smoky tortoiseshell rescue cat, her owners had no doubt who to turn to. Vets2Home — recently relaunched by vet Susan Gregersen as a 24/7 end-of-life home-hospice and euthanasia service — had previously helped 19-year-old Kruger through thyroid and liver problems. But 18 months later, the elderly cat was refusing to eat food containing her thyroid tablets, and the sad decision was made by her owners, after discussing the situation with Susan, not to force her to take further medication.

“Kruger had always loved her food, so when she stopped eating, we knew it was serious,” says owner Jay Parmar, from Saltdean, East Sussex. “My wife Bindi and I could see she was slowing down. By October she was very thin, but we were about to go away to America for two weeks so we called Susan for advice. She said, very gently, that if anything happened to Kruger while we were away, it’d be traumatic for both her and for us, and it might be better to say goodbye before we went.

“As soon as we booked the appointment, it was as if Kruger breathed a big sigh of relief. In our last

week together, her body started to pack up but we felt she was thanking us for saying she could go. On the last night, we slept with Kruger, taking it in turns to look after her.

“Usually she would hide from Susan but that final day — October 25, 2013 — she greeted her and then walked round the room looking at all her favourite places before settling down in the corner of the window sill. Susan then administered the final injection straight into her side — Kruger was so bony that to try to inject into a leg would have hurt her. It was painless and quick — she had passed in 15 seconds.



**Jay with his beloved cat Kruger.**



**Kruger with his owner Bindi.**

**“AS SOON AS WE BOOKED THE APPOINTMENT, IT WAS AS IF KRUGER BREATHED A BIG SIGH OF RELIEF.”**

“There was no trauma and it was all so calm, and very beautiful, actually. We put her in a little box that we’d decorated, but before we took her to the crematorium, and after consulting Susan, we brought in our tabby, Samson, so he had closure too. He sniffed her and Susan said: ‘He knows’.

“Vets2Home offers a fantastic service on many, many levels. We were so grateful that we’d had a chance to give Kruger a great life but she also had a very beautiful final journey, without pain and in peace, at home with the people who loved her.”

### **PET-FRIENDLY ALTERNATIVE**

Vet Susan Gregersen and veterinary nurse Alex Gravett started Vets2Home in Sussex in 2005. It began as a mobile veterinary service, but after more than 6,000 home visits, Susan decided to dedicate her practice to end-of-life home-hospice care and euthanasia.

“We decided to specialise because we had learned from seven years of home visits that the often intense care and unhurried attention needed at the end of life is best given at home

by a personal vet available 24/7,” she explains.

“Cats can often be upset by being moved or having to travel in a car, particularly if they are in pain or have a nervous disposition. We aim to ensure that the last transition is completely calm and free from worry and pain for both owners and pet.”

Vets2Home’s end-of-life palliative care includes treatment and tailor-made medication plans, plus advice and guidance by phone, email or home visit, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Prices start at £125 for a visit and consultation, and the two-step euthanasia programme, which usually includes a gentle, pain-free sedative prior to the final injection, is £150. Vets2Home also transport pets to an accredited pet crematorium and collect and return the ashes.

### **HOSPICE CARE**

Animal home-hospice care is an old idea that has recently been revived in the United States. “It is the best way to give a pet individual treatment in a comfortable setting and familiar environment,” Susan explains. “Owners play an important part in a pet hospice situation, and care focuses on pain control and comfort for the animal, as well as 24-hour advice and support for the family. It’s a pet-friendly, stay-at-

home alternative to hospital procedures, investigations and further tests.”

Sadly, Susan has had many requests to put down a pet that still enjoys life. “Fear and worry are the number one reasons people choose euthanasia too early, but they may miss out on the intimate and emotionally healing process of final-stage care for their pets, which is something Jay and Bindi really treasured,” adds Susan.

“Although owners may hope their cat will go in his or her sleep, this almost never happens. I believe the right time is when your cat — and you — lose the joy in your life together. Those reasons may vary, from not eating, or eating excessively but with severe weight loss, to vocalising, pain, hiding, soiling inappropriately, and sleeping a lot or not at all. These are all various versions of what I call ‘catzheimers’, which make your cat a completely different ‘person’.

“The one last gesture of love we should show our cats is a calm, respectful end, without stress, pain or suffering, when it is most needed — but not before. That goodbye should be at home, surrounded by loved ones, familiar smells and sounds — and in that favourite warm spot.” ■

### **SOURCING A SIMILAR SERVICE**

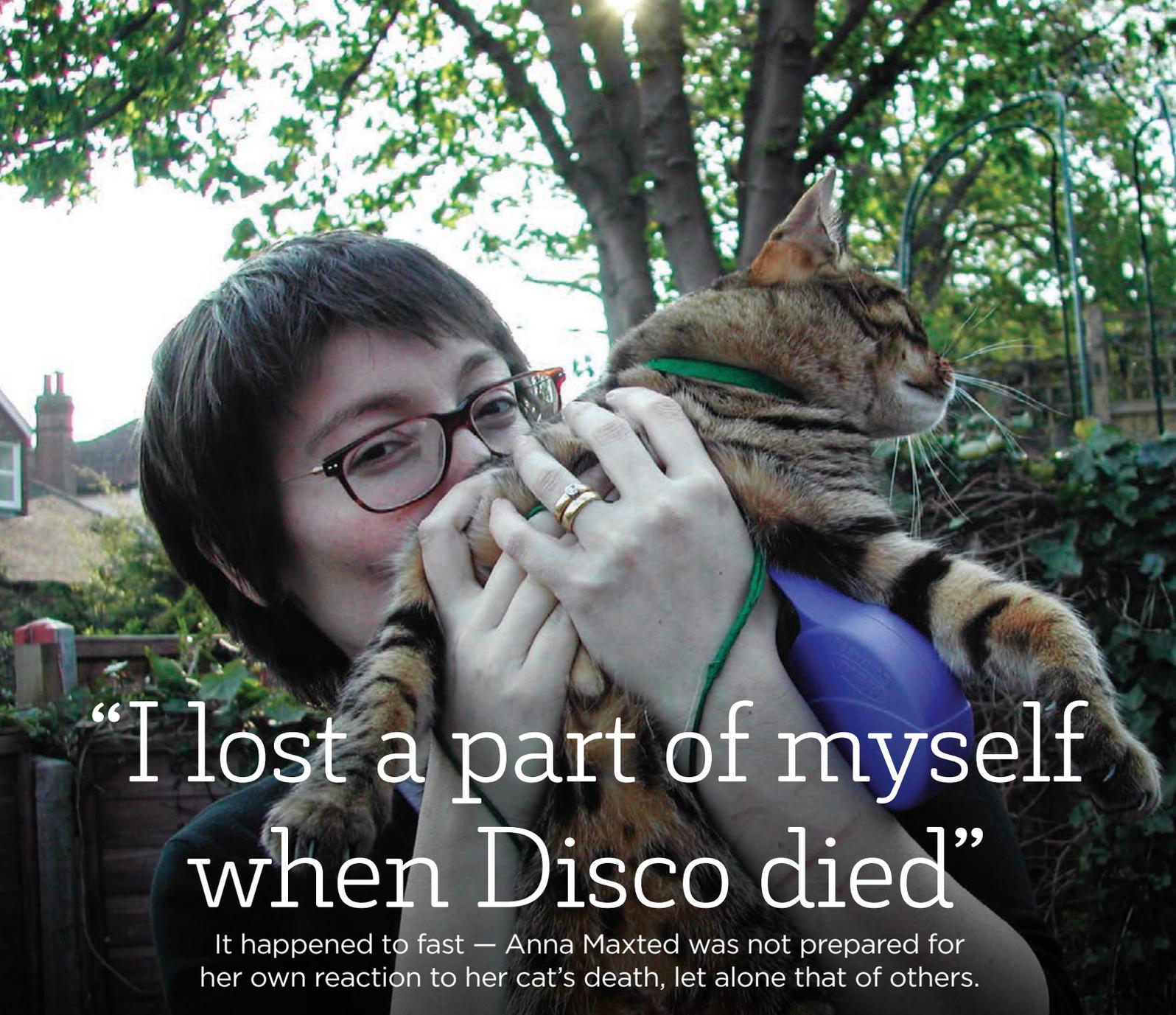
● Vets2Home offers 24/7 end-of-life home-hospice care, at-home euthanasia and phone advice (plus out-of-hours emergency care) in Sussex, Surrey and Kent borders — visit [www.vets2home.co.uk](http://www.vets2home.co.uk) or tel. **07962 423567**

● Services such as Dignified Departures ([www.dignified-departures.co.uk](http://www.dignified-departures.co.uk)), [www.any-uk-vet.com](http://www.any-uk-vet.com) and [www.vets-now.com](http://www.vets-now.com) will help you find your nearest emergency vet and may offer free phone advice if euthanasia is suddenly needed and your own practice is shut

● Home Visit Vet ([www.homevisitvet.co.uk](http://www.homevisitvet.co.uk)) covers London and specialises in senior, geriatric, end-of-life care and in-home compassionate euthanasia.

● Blue Cross ([www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)) has a useful page on euthanasia and offers a Pet Bereavement Support Service, as does Animal Samaritans ([www.animalsamaritans.org.uk](http://www.animalsamaritans.org.uk)).





# “I lost a part of myself when Disco died”

It happened to fast — Anna Maxted was not prepared for her own reaction to her cat’s death, let alone that of others.

**T**here’s an old photo of me, awkwardly holding a cat in mid-air to the camera. The sort of clumsy grasp that no self-respecting feline would tolerate. I look closely: this cat is splaying his paws, kneading the air; a sign of relaxation and pleasure. I hunt feverishly for more photos. I find another: I’m sprawled on a sofa, grinning, and there is the cat, elegantly arranged on a chest of drawers, narrowing his green eyes at me, benign, adoring.

Every picture of my beloved Bengal, Disco — who died last year aged 15 — is a reminder of his beautiful, affectionate personality. He loved my family, he loved me; short of speaking English, he engaged with us more fully than some people. As my husband said: “He wasn’t really a cat — he was a person disguised as a cat.” I’d stroke him before letting him out of the front door, and even if his situation required urgency, he’d

politely arch his back with a little ‘prrr’ of appreciation.

I feel as if I have lost a part of myself. The world is a little greyer. A piece of goodness is gone. “Now I have nothing,” I said to my husband — rudely, considering the blessing of him and our three lovely children.

Disco and I understood each other. That cat was determined and obstinate, yet had the softest nature. He would seek out my boys (now aged six, eight and 10), and watch over them, as if they were large unruly kittens — he was untroubled by a toy helicopter

“I FEEL AS IF I HAVE LOST A PART OF MYSELF. THE WORLD IS A LITTLE GREYER. A PIECE OF GOODNESS IS GONE.”

buzzing about his head, or cricket ball spinning past his ear. Disco was accosted, cuddled, hauled around like a concertina; he adored them. My children were stricken when he died. On hearing the terrible news, which I was afraid to give, my eight-year-old collapsed on the pavement with a primal wail. Six months on, my six-year-old still bursts into tears, wanting Disco, sobbing: “I wish there was no such thing as dying!”

I feel the same way. That furry fellow gave me such peace, purring on my lap as if to retune my soul after a jarring day. As my husband said: “Disco made all the bad stuff go away.” Every day, his presence was a gift.

I bought him and his sister Natasha shortly after my father died. Disco could have been a show cat, with his apricot tummy, black stripes and spots, and pale green eyes. “I don’t like cats,” said a neighbour once, “but even I can see that he’s beautiful.”



**The gorgeous Bengal.**



see him struggle for breath, and agreed that she should put him to sleep — but it all happened so fast that afterwards I sat in the car, gasping to myself, “What just happened? What did I do?”

What did I do? Did I give him a dignified death with minimal suffering or might he have had five more happy years — basking in the sun, eating prawns on the kitchen side, receiving kisses on his nose — if I’d let the vet try to treat him? I just couldn’t take the chance that he might deteriorate and die alone, terrified, in a cage. The vet reassured me that I’d done the right thing, but I still feel guilty. I feel as guilty as if I killed him myself, and my grief feels like punishment.

Rationally, I understand that cats have shorter lives, but emotionally, it’s hard to process that such a terrible thing can happen — it feels a hugely significant loss.

And yet, how tactless to confess to such intensity of grief over an animal when other people are mourning mothers, fathers, husbands, wives. If you hint at your sadness, they take offence — as if the fact of your agony lessens the intensity of theirs. As psychologist Dr Sue Dawson says: “Pet bereavement is a disenfranchised loss unrecognised by society. Many people do not understand the depth of pain felt.”

When I wrote in a national newspaper about this, I was defensive. I wasn’t gate-crashing funerals in a black veil. It wasn’t a competition. How presumptuous to claim the monopoly on pain. But certain friends were dismissive. To them, the death of a cat merited the sympathy one offers to a person who’s stubbed their toe. One close relative knew, but said not a word. The best a psychologist friend could suggest was: “This brings up other losses.” (No, no — really — right now I’m mourning my beloved companion of 15 years; a precious family member — why is that not enough for you?)

I expected condemnation — instead, readers rushed to share such poignant, heart-warming stories of their wonderful cats — ‘I felt a thrill of joy, whenever I saw her,’ wrote one woman of her treasured Siamese. I was no anomaly. If I was a mad cat person, so, it turned out, was half of the UK.

It was so deeply gratifying to realise that I don’t have to belittle what Disco meant to me. That cat was one of the great loves of my life. I will mourn him as he deserves. ■

Pam Burne-Jones of the Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) says: “Talk to someone who understands; the free PBSS service is staffed only by those who’ve lost a pet themselves (tel. 0800 096 6606 from 8.30am to 8.30pm).

“Some people won’t get it. Don’t waste your time; just remember a lot of people do feel the same intense grief as you — 7,000 people called the PBSS last year.

“However extreme your grief, it’s perfectly normal; you’ve lost a much-loved family member

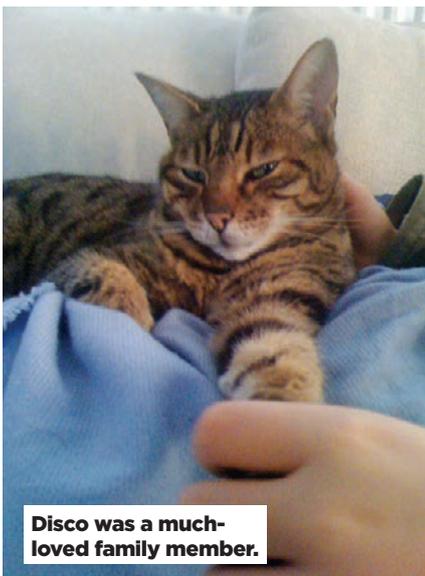
“Everybody is unique in their grief. Some people will need to go and get another pet straight away. Some people never have another pet again.

“If we decided to put an animal to sleep, there’s guilt. It’s about feeling responsible. The guilt is part of the grief. But most people act in their pet’s best interest. We don’t have to see them linger and suffer. We’ve got the option to stop that. We might say: “I’ve killed my cat,” but we actually acted in a caring manner. It’s our final act of love.

“Make a memory book, write a letter or poem to your pet, or make a donation to an animal charity in your pet’s memory — there are ways to be positive.”

For more advice on how to deal with pet bereavement go to our website [www.yourcat.co.uk](http://www.yourcat.co.uk)

**Disco was a much-loved family member.**



Recently, I found a neat list of my kitten preparations in a 16-year-old notebook: ‘little house/basket, two small bowls, cat tree, cat carrier, cat’s cradle, toys, catnip, water bowl...’ and I am glad that Disco was worshipped. I am glad that I got him. He was appreciated every day of his life.

Natasha is a loyal, affectionate lady, but our relationship is different: she prefers a little distance. Disco never tired of human contact. He’d perch on shoulders, sprawl on any lap: he wanted the physical and emotional connection, thrived on it as much as we did. There was such profound contentment in that quiet, loving relationship.

He became ill very suddenly, and when I took him to the vet she found his kidneys were failing. I couldn’t stand to



**Disco was put to sleep after falling ill.**

# Choosing a crematorium

When we opt for a cremation service for our pets, we expect them to be handled carefully and shown the respect they deserve. The APPCC is here to make sure that is the case.

## The Code of Practice Summary

Governing The Work Of Our Members Worldwide

THE ASSOCIATION OF PRIVATE PET CEMETERIES & CREMATORIA  
WORLDWIDE MEMBERSHIP

APPCC vice chairman, Stephen Mayles.



- Every stage of the burial or cremation of your pet (from collection to burial/scattering of ashes) is carried out in a dignified, caring and respectful manner. All our members with pet crematoriums provide you with an

It is a sad fact that regulation and control over the pet cremation industry is virtually non-existent and your pet may not always get the cremation service you'd expect. It is very much a case of being 'buyer beware' and you should take a cautious approach to trusting the person who is selling you the cremation.

Legal requirements ensure pet crematoria operate under licensing, but only as waste or animal disposal sites. There are no requirements to carry out cremations in a dignified manner or even to ensure individual cremations are carried out on their own.

The guidelines for the regulations allow pet owners to have the ashes of their pet back and infer they should only be that pet's ashes. However, this is not investigated or confirmed by the inspectors that visit the sites.

Founded in 1993, the Association of Private Pet Cemeteries & Crematoria (APPCC) has set a standard

of service to protect the pet owner from disreputable operators — visit [appccmembers.eu](http://appccmembers.eu) or call the helpline on tel. **01252 844478** to confirm the crematorium you are thinking of using is a member. Members of the APPCC operate independent businesses but are all committed to the same high standards of professional conduct and client care.

If you feel there is a problem with one of the members, contact the APPCC and they will investigate. It is in their interests to ensure all members operate properly — one bad firm can bring down the reputations of everyone.

Most of you will arrange the cremation through your veterinary surgery and it is here that most confusion arises. Veterinary practices are quite rightly concerned with keeping your pets healthy and alive with the best possible quality of life — they are our trusted professionals in that respect. In general, they are not trained in carrying out

cremations or in knowing how those cremations should be carried out.

The surgery has a duty to dispose of any animals that are left on their premises. In some countries, it is normal for vets to simply provide a list of companies owners may take their pets to. Unfortunately, it is common in the UK for vets to arrange cremations on behalf of their clients. Some practices may assume that all pet crematoria are the same and choose the best deal that will not only give them a good profit from selling the cremation service but also enable them to have their veterinary waste taken away at the same time. Pets and waste — not the sort of combination you would want for your loved one.

If you want to ensure your pet gets the cremation he deserves, make sure you use a member of the APPCC. Visit [appccmembers.eu](http://appccmembers.eu) to check the validity of the member. Make the arrangements directly with the crematorium and never be afraid to question their procedures. ■

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Pet Bereavement Support Service

# Coping with the loss of a pet?



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Blue Cross is a charity registered in England and Wales (224392) and in Scotland (SC040154)

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**WOODLAND TRUST**

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# A sympathetic ear

For over two decades, the Pet Bereavement Support Service has helped owners through difficult times after losing a pet.

The death of a loved one is a devastating experience and can often leave you struggling to cope. When that loved one is a pet, the grieving process becomes all the more difficult: some owners may feel that they don't have the sympathy or support they'd hope for from other people, whilst others may feel embarrassed for being so upset over the passing of 'just an animal'.

Since 1994, the Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) from animal charity Blue Cross has offered emotional support to people who have lost a pet, whether by phone, email or post. Manned by a shifting rota of 100 volunteers — all personally experienced in the loss of a pet — the PBSS provides a free and confidential listening ear from 8.30am to 8.30pm, every single day of the year.

"We recruit those who have lost pets and are good listeners," explains training officer Diane James. "All of our volunteers are interviewed and trained on a seven-week accredited course on pet bereavement. We don't offer counselling; it's more emotional support and listening.

"We cover any type of loss, not just bereavement. It could be when a pet has been rehomed or when they're lost or stolen, for example. We get calls from people who have mental health issues and are struggling, and we have mentors for our volunteers too — it's not the easiest job so they can take a time-out whenever they need one."



**The service is manned by those who have suffered loss.**

**"IT'S BECOMING MORE RECOGNISED NOW THAT IT'S NORMAL TO GRIEVE FOR A FAMILY LOSS, AND PETS ARE INCLUDED IN THAT."**

### ACCEPTING GRIEF

With over 1,000 emails and 7,000 calls a year (that's almost 20 a day) and counting, the PBSS is evidently a vital service in which more and more pet owners are taking comfort.

Diane says: "We do get lots of calls about bereavement with different reasons for the pet's passing as well: they may have been put to sleep, it could have been an accident, or it could just have been old age.

"But we are starting to hear more from owners of missing pets or those who are going to be put to sleep. People like to talk about the responsibility of it. It's not just cats and dogs that we're called about either — we offer support for the loss of all sorts of animals, even chickens and ducks.

"People want someone to listen and to be discreet about it. We've had an increase in men using the service too — they often feel they have no one to talk to. Thankfully, it's becoming more recognised now that it's normal to grieve for a family loss, and pets are included in that."

Just like many owners, Blue Cross recognises the significance and impact of the human-animal bond and the unconditional love it can result in. The charity even allows bereavement leave for its employees when they lose a pet.

Diane adds: "Grief is unique; whatever you're feeling when you're grieving is normal. Sometimes you can't fix everything, but you might find it easier to normalise the idea of losing your pet beforehand if you can."

As well as providing a comforting ear, the PBSS often gives owners tips on how to overcome their grief. This includes an online memorial in honour of the lost pet, a memory box for precious keepsakes, or even bucket lists for a pet whose time is coming to an end.

The service also offers advice on helping other pets deal with losing their companion, and on how to approach the idea of death with children — after all, losing a family pet may be their first experience of losing someone they love and it can be a

### VOLUNTEER

If you've suffered the loss of a pet before and think you could offer understanding, emotional support to others as a PBSS volunteer, get in touch with the team on [pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk)



**The PBSS helps owners to cope at all stages of pet loss.**

difficult idea to comprehend.

Not everyone will feel the loss of a pet in the same way, but, whatever you're experiencing, the PBSS aims to help anybody struggling to move on. ■

### CONTACT THE PBSS

If you have lost a pet and need somebody to talk to, please call the PBSS on tel. 0800 096 6606 or email [pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk)

# Readers' Q&As

## Words of comfort



### BEREAVEMENT

**DR SUE DAWSON** is a counselling psychologist specialising in human-companion animal relationships and pet bereavement.

## I couldn't save him

I lost my cat to hypertrophic cardiomyopathy recently. I tried my best to save him, as I am a doctor myself, but it didn't work — and now I feel like I should have done more. I've suffered with bipolar over the past six years and my cat helped me through — I'm not sure what to do without him. Can you help?

#### SUE SAYS:

**A** I am so sorry to learn of the traumatic loss of your lovely cat. I am left wondering if your professional role as a doctor

in human medicine has left you with an amplified sense of responsibility and guilt for what happened. I do not believe these unfounded feelings of guilt arise from any fault of yours, but purely from your perspective as a human doctor. You are being very critical of yourself in your efforts to make sense of what has happened. It is very clear how much you loved your cat and the lengths that you went to in your efforts to help him. Please do not lose sight of this.

Perhaps, understandably,

your pre-existing emotional health difficulties have been possibly destabilised by the intensity of your grief. It is important that you recognise this and see your psychiatrist as soon as possible to discuss what has happened with your bi-polar and seek a medication review. It may help you to write down your feelings — perhaps you could even write to your cat and tell him how you feel and describe how much you did to help save his life. You are in my thoughts at this sad and difficult time. ■



Owners may experience guilt.

## I'm still heartbroken

**Q** My wonderful cat Noshlot died a few years ago, aged 18, and I am still heartbroken. When I think of her I can only remember the moment of death, as it was very traumatic. I cannot get over that she died in pain and terror.

Noshlot meant so much to me; she was my soul mate and helped me through depression. I now have another cat and even though I love her, the grief I feel for Nosh is as great as the day it happened. I have her buried in the back garden with a lovely bush marking her grave, and I have a tattoo in her memory, but I am still struggling to cope with her loss. Will I ever get over this?

#### SUE REPLIES:

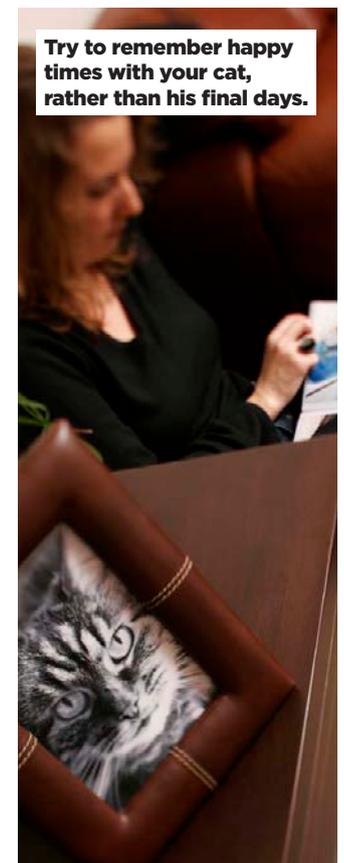
**A** Grief can distort perception and memory, making the

last few hours or days of life seem bigger and more expansive in our minds than all the years that came before. This no doubt is grounded in the traumatic nature of witnessing the dying process. It is not easy. Seeing all of this, however natural, is difficult for us. Just as with people, cats are usually not aware of any of this happening in end-of-life; it is most difficult for those of us observing what is happening. The chances are that Nosh passed away very peacefully.

Nosh played a pivotal role in your depression management and helped you create coping skills. There is help and support available from other sources if you are finding things too tough; your GP can refer you for counselling or other psychological

support to help with your grief and also any difficulties you may be having with depression.

Making a memory book could help you connect with the 18 years that came before you lost Nosh. It is vital to allow yourself permission to remember the happy times, which, whilst a source of emotional distress, will also bring you much comfort too. You already have a focal point for remembrance — her grave in your garden, as well as your tattoo — and these are powerful symbols of your bond with her. It may be helpful to make a donation to a cat welfare charity in her memory. Nobody can replace Nosh but the memories you have of the special relationship you shared will remain with you always. ■



Try to remember happy times with your cat, rather than his final days.



# He was killed by a car

**Q** My cat Billy was killed by a car six weeks ago. I found his body at the side of the road and he was very damaged. I can't stop crying and keep expecting him to come through the cat flap. We have another cat, Monkey, who is Billy's brother, and I keep calling him by Billy's name. I feel like the big empty space he left will never go away and that I will never get over this. Any advice?

## SUE SAYS:

**A** I am sorry for the traumatic loss of your cat Billy. It is understandable you are experiencing such an intense grief reaction. You describe finding his body by the side of the road, which no doubt has generated a distressing image that may well keep invading your thoughts as you try to process what has happened. What you are experiencing are the natural, albeit very upsetting, stages of grief.

Grief is an adjustment process. It involves psychological, social, spiritual and physical dimensions of our being and at times its intensity can feel utterly overwhelming. Billy was an

important part of your life; your relationship with him was unique, and whilst Monkey is a constant reminder of Billy, he is not Billy. Searching for a lost loved one is integral within the grieving process for most of us. This is our mind attempting to relocate the deceased and restructure our post-death relationship. It was thought that the purpose of grieving was disconnection from the deceased, but current-day psychologists understand the function of grief as involving a continuing bond.

It may feel very difficult right now for you to be with Monkey, but if you are able to spend time with him and remind yourself of his personality and role as a link to Billy, this could be helpful in lessening any difficult feelings you may be experiencing with regard to showing him affection. Accidental death raises bigger existential questions in terms of finding meaning in what happened. You may find you are questioning aspects of life that on a day-to-day basis; it is important to keep in mind this is normal, as bereavement can affect us very deeply. I am thinking of you at this difficult time. ■

# I can't accept my cat's death

**Q** I just lost my beloved Pasha to a horrific accident. My husband started the dryer without checking, and when I found him later, it was too late. I am having trouble accepting his death — he was only four. I don't want my other cats because they are a reminder of his absence. Please help!

## SUE ANSWERS:

**A** I am so sorry to learn of Pasha's accidental death. It's understandable that you are struggling to come to terms with his passing.

Traumatic loss can construct complexities within the grieving process. These deaths can intensify grief; as Pasha's death was so sudden and unexpected, there was no opportunity for you to prepare or say goodbye to him. A tragic event can shatter our sense of order in the world and challenge our sense of safety. This type of loss generates shock, anger, guilt, depression, despair and hopelessness.

It is not uncommon to become preoccupied by thoughts of what happened or to experience unwelcomed flashbacks. You may also

experience heightened anxiety as you attempt to process what has happened. It is important to prioritise self-care right now for you and your husband, as you will both likely feel exhausted by this bereavement.

Pasha was young, but you will have so many memories. It is vital these are preserved. Talking about Pasha's personality and character will help construct your continuing bond with him and memorise your relationship. It may help to write a letter to Pasha expressing your feelings of regret about what has happened. Creating a memory box or book could also provide an opportunity for you and your husband to talk together about Pasha and about how important he was and remains in your life.

If you are unable to talk to your husband or a close friend or family member, you may find it helpful to speak to one of the pet bereavement support volunteers from the Blue Cross on tel. 0800 096 6606 (8.30am – 8.30pm seven days a week) or by email at [pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk)

You and your husband are in my thoughts. ■



Road deaths can cause distressing memories and images.

# Q Do pets go to heaven?

**My 14-year-old cat passed away recently from cancer and I am just heartbroken. I miss him so very much. Do you think pets go to heaven? I can't imagine the thought of never seeing him again.**

## **SUE ANSWERS:**

**A** I am so sorry for your loss. It is understandable that losing someone you love and who has been in your life for 14 years has generated

considerable grief.

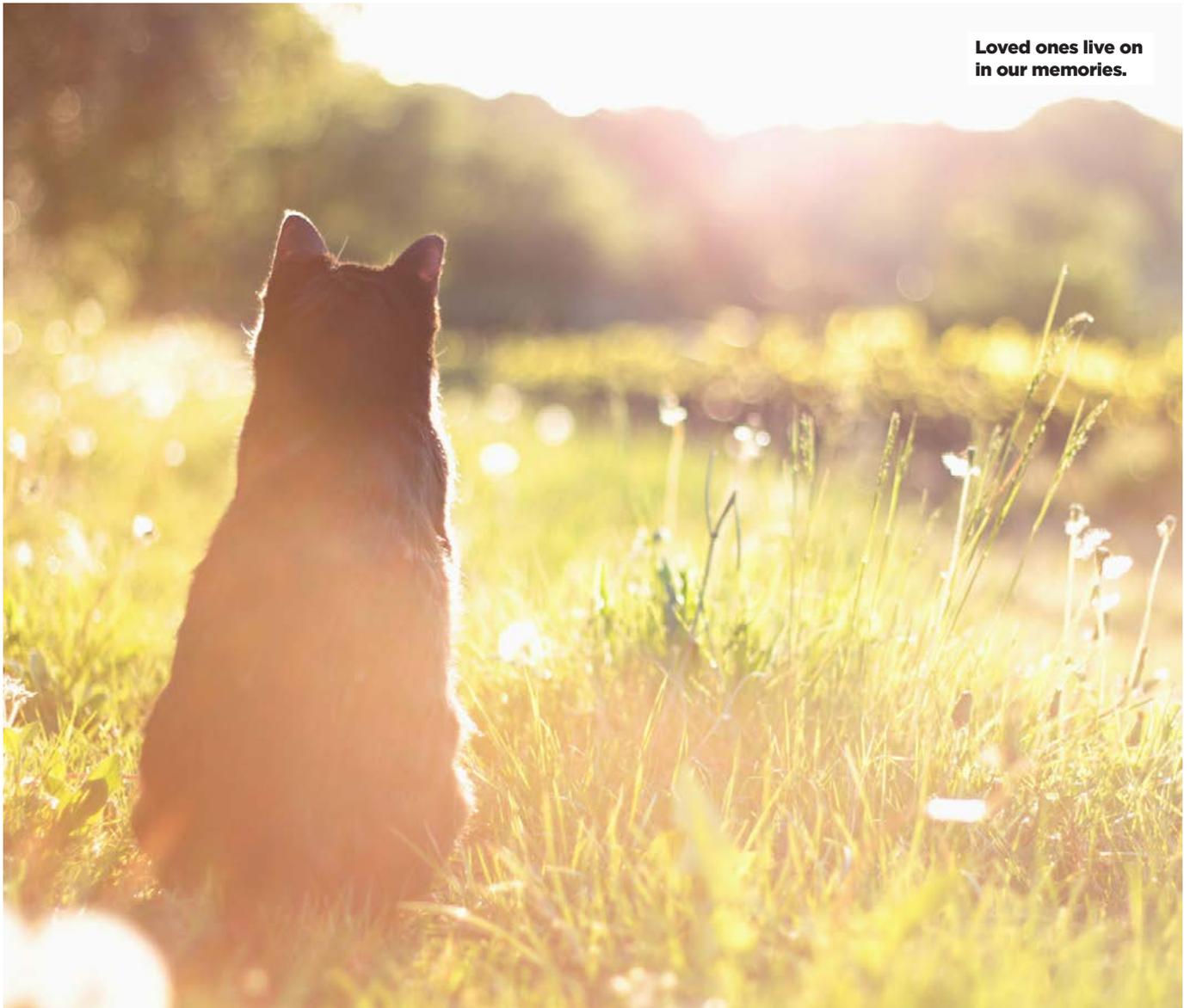
Different faith traditions provide possibilities for understanding where our spirits go, but ultimately I think it is impossible to know; what I do believe is that through our memories and our love, the essence of those we love and have lost lingers throughout the rest of our lives. Grief theorists and therapists used to believe that the purpose of grief was disconnecting from our relationship with

deceased loved ones, but our understanding today has changed to recognise the continuing bonds we forge.

Grief is our reaction to a significant loss. It can be understood as an adjustment process involving emotional, spiritual, physical and social aspects of our being as we try to come to terms with our world without our loved one's physical presence. Questioning and searching for meaning in the loss are

important facets of grieving. Sometimes it can be helpful to talk to others who have similar experiences and who can be there to listen non-judgementally to our experience. Blue Cross offers a confidential pet bereavement support service run by volunteers who have all experienced pet loss (tel. **0800 096 6606** or email **pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk**). You are in my thoughts at this difficult time. ■

**Loved ones live on  
in our memories.**



# I couldn't afford to save her

**Q** I have recently made the decision to put my cat Mya down and am having trouble coping. I feel really guilty — it happened so quickly, and it was a case of either paying a huge amount of money to perform surgery or let her go. I did not have the finances and that is where most of my guilt comes from. I need help coming to terms with my decision.

## SUE SAYS:

**A** I am so sorry and sad to hear that you are struggling to come to terms with your decision to help Mya die peacefully. Making a euthanasia decision is one of the most difficult

responsibilities of caring for a pet. Your grieving process seems to be complicated by doubt and feelings of guilt related to questioning if surgery could have worked and been a possible way of avoiding losing your cat. There are certainly no guarantees with surgery and it feels that you made this difficult and distressing decision with your cat's best interests at heart.

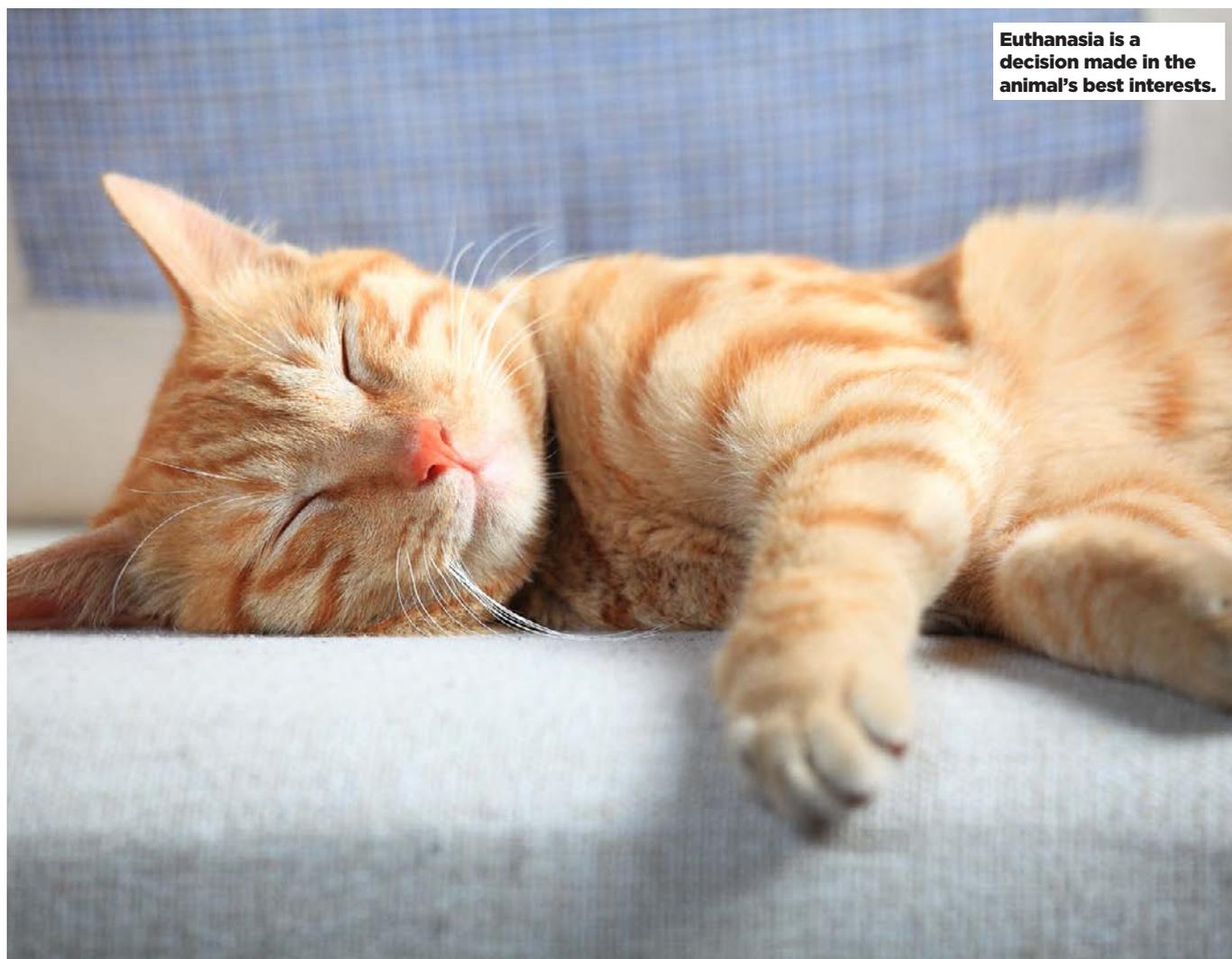
You wanted to prevent Mya from suffering and could not afford to pay for expensive surgery. All of us have limitations, be they moral, financial, practical, social or psychological. We make choices from a basis of

what is realistically available to us given these unavoidable limitations. Your decision was one born from love and selflessness; please do not lose sight of this.

Euthanasia-related grief is distinct and known as 'responsibility grief', in recognition of the difficulties and complexities involved in accommodating and accepting your personal responsibility for the death. But you must remember that this is a shared responsibility, a decision made with your vet. Both yourself and your cat's veterinary team had Mya's welfare and best interests at the heart of the decision-making process.

If you feel able to talk to a friend or family member about Mya and your feelings in relation to her death, this may reduce your sense of isolation. Writing a letter or sending a card to Mya may be helpful in enabling you to articulate and express the contradictory and complicated emotions you are experiencing; it could also provide an opportunity for you to tell her how important she was and always will be in your life.

You made the most difficult decision any of us make for our cats; please make sure you take time out for yourself and to self-care during this difficult time. ■



**Euthanasia is a decision made in the animal's best interests.**

# Did I make the right decision?

**Q** My 15-year-old cat hadn't been well for months — she lost lots of weight and didn't seem like she was enjoying life like she used to. The vet put her to sleep, but I'm ridden with guilt as I feel I should have asked for other options. She seemed more herself just half-an-hour before the vet came — I'm devastated and feel I've done the wrong thing. I did ask the vet if she felt that was the right thing and she said yes, if she hasn't been herself. How can I stop feeling this way?

## SUE REPLIES:

**A** Thank you for feeling able to share your feelings of grief in relation to the euthanasia of your deeply loved 15-year-

old cat. Euthanasia-related grief has been identified as different in its complexity and presentation to other forms of grief, in that we have some responsibility for the euthanasia decision itself. This is a massive decision for any of us to make, but it is also integral within our responsibility as pet owners.

It is a blessing to have the choice of helping our cat die peacefully, but also a nightmare because of the inevitable feelings of doubt that follow. Just because we experience doubt does not mean the decision was wrong; it simply means we are human and the gravity of choosing this option weighs heavily on us. It is essential to remember this decision was not yours alone; your vet has professional responsibility for

the euthanasia decision and the process itself. Knowing this may help to give you confidence that your decision was the only option and the ethical one. You mentioned your cat seeming to be more herself just before the vet came; this is a phenomenon well-known both in veterinary and human medicine — most usually, the pet or person dies not long after seeming to 'miraculously pick up'.

When we make a euthanasia decision, we do this from love and from wanting to prevent suffering, fear and distress. Your decision, supported by your vet, was grounded in this protection and the welfare of your cat. Talking about your decision and feelings can be healing; it is important to talk with someone you

feel you can trust and who understands the depth of your love for your cat. If you have a friend or family member you feel able to talk to, this may be really helpful in processing your loss and sense of responsibility, enabling you to see the rightness of your decision. Blue Cross offers confidential bereavement support seven days a week (between 8.30am and 8.30pm on tel. 0800 096 6606 or by email [pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk](mailto:pbssmail@bluecross.org.uk)).

Your decision to put your cat to sleep was the right one; she was losing weight and her quality of life was compromised. To protect her from suffering, on the advice of your vet, you helped her to have the death all of us hope for — a peaceful one with those who love us. ■

# I'm overcome with grief

**Q** I had to have my cat put to sleep and I am devastated. I can't stop crying and also feel very anxious. I was with my cat in his final moments and now the image is haunting me. Any advice would be appreciated.

## SUE ANSWERS:

**A** I am so sorry to learn of the death of your much-loved cat. Witnessing euthanasia can be harrowing, even though the process itself for your cat would be pain-free. Helping our cats to have a peaceful death without suffering is an important part of our responsibility as cat owners. It's important to remember this decision was made to prevent suffering and is usually made only after veterinary advice. Sometimes it can be helpful to speak with your vet on the phone if you

still have any questions about what happened or why this decision needed to be made.

Euthanasia-related grief is identified as distinct in that we have personal responsibility for the euthanasia decision; this responsibility weighs heavily on us because it is a big decision we have made for our cat and their best interest to prevent suffering. Responsibility grief creates a dynamic thought process involving repetitive revisiting of the euthanasia and questioning if the decision was right. Feelings of doubt do not mean the decision was wrong; it simply means you are moving through the process of acceptance. The decision you had to make for your cat was incredibly difficult, but please remember this was the right decision at that time to prevent your cat from suffering. You are in my thoughts at this sad time. ■



**Witnessing euthanasia can be harrowing.**



## LOOKING FOR ADVICE?

If you're struggling to come to terms with the loss of your cat, email Sue at [catcare@yourcat.co.uk](mailto:catcare@yourcat.co.uk) for free, tailored advice.





# Learning to love again

Getting a new cat can sometimes feel wrong after losing another.

Is it possible to work through the grief and learn to love again? Claire Newton investigates.

**A**s cat owners, words cannot describe how distressing it is when a beloved cat passes away. Although grief is a completely natural reaction to loss, sometimes the pain can make us fearful of ever loving a cat again. The heartache can seem so overwhelming and the devotion to our cat's memory so strong, that people are sometimes faced with feelings of fear or disloyalty if they consider getting a new cat.

In order to understand where these conflicting feelings may be coming from, it is important to accept how intense grief can be. When a cat passes away, owners can go through the same grieving process as they would for any other family member — only pet-related grief

is still not widely recognised in society, and we are often expected to 'just get on with it'.

Sadder still, owners are sometimes faced with having to make a decision about when it is best to let their cats go, and that in itself can feel an unfair responsibility. Similarly, death can occur suddenly as a result of tragic circumstances. Is it therefore any wonder that we may have trouble processing our bereavement?

## DEALING WITH GRIEF

Cathy Payne, from Devon, lost her six-year-old tortie, Rosie, in a road accident three years ago. "I remember the last time I saw her," explains Cathy. "I was playing with my son when she trotted by and miaowed to go out. I opened the window as I had many times before; she sat there for a moment looking back at us, and then hopped off as usual to have an adventure.

"The next morning, the phone rang and I could hear my husband asking: 'Is she dead?' My blood ran cold as

I rushed downstairs. He said simply: 'It's Rosie, she's been hit by a car'. The following days were devastating. Not only did I have to carry on with work, but I had to explain to my three-year-old daughter why Mummy and Daddy were crying, and why Rosie wasn't coming home for her breakfast."

A logical reaction to such pain is to avoid whatever caused it in the first place, and sadly for Cathy and many other cat lovers, the idea of going through the grief again is too much, even if years of love came before.

"Three years on, and we are still sad about losing Rosie in such a devastating way," says Cathy. "We will never get another cat. If the same thing happened again, I wouldn't forgive myself."

Interestingly, Cathy now has two Labradors. "I don't worry about the dogs as they are walked on the lead, but I dread the day they will naturally die. Losing Rosie has reminded us to treasure every day with them."

But what if we desperately miss having a cat in our lives, yet feel as if we are disloyal if we look for another one?



Ragamuffin.



Daniel with rescue cat Toby.

**Giving another cat a home shouldn't be viewed as 'disloyal'.**



**"NEVER FEEL GUILTY. I ALWAYS SAY THAT OWNING AGAIN IS THE BIGGEST COMPLIMENT THAT YOU COULD EVER PAY YOUR CAT."**

#### **DON'T FEEL GUILTY**

Daniel Ransom, from London, recalls this dilemma when he and his girlfriend suddenly lost their eight-year-old cat, Ragamuffin, to cancer last year.

"Ragamuffin's death shocked us and we were left completely heartbroken," Daniel explains. "Our home felt empty without a cat, but whenever we considered getting a new cat, we felt as if we were replacing her.

"We eventually went to our local rehoming shelter and asked to see the cat who had been there the longest. By bringing home a really deserving cat, we somehow felt that we could justify the decision. We came home with Toby, a black and white moggy, who had been waiting for a home for over a year."

Of course, this suggests that it is not just us who may

miss out on cat ownership as a consequence of grief, but also cats themselves. Celia Hammond, founder of the Celia Hammond Animal Trust which rescues and rehomes thousands of cats every year, believes that pet bereavement can negatively affect the rate of rehoming.

"We experience grief-associated guilt from prospective owners all the time. Someone may come in with good intentions of homing a cat, but it can quickly become too much and they'll end up in tears over how they can't take another one," explains Celia. "We could fill our shelters six times over with rescued cats. We're so overcrowded; we simply cannot keep up with the slow rate of rehoming."

Perhaps our focus, therefore, should be on using our ingrained love for cats for further good, and view owning a new cat as an opportunity to provide a loving home. Celia agrees, and explains how guilt, although natural, is not

necessary: "Never feel guilty. I always say that owning again is the biggest compliment that you could ever pay your cat."

#### **CHOOSING ANOTHER**

Yet, what sort of cat should we bring home? Should we try to find one that reminds us of our old friend?

"Go for one completely different," Celia recommends. "Otherwise, the similarity will never match up."

Daniel agrees with this sentiment: "I'd be lying if I said that it didn't feel strange when we first brought Toby home. He's so different to Ragamuffin that he almost seemed like an intruder! But, two months on, we now utterly love Toby for the individual cat that he is."

So how has Daniel learnt to love a new cat and preserve Ragamuffin's memory? "Toby has become so warm and affectionate, and it may sound silly, but he just seems really grateful to have a home! I think that Ragamuffin would approve." ■

Claire Newton is a cat owner and freelance writer, and has worked in specialist veterinary customer care both in the UK and abroad.

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