



Preparing for Life's Passing:

A Survivor's Guide

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It's not an age, it's an attitude!

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A final act of caring – Saying good-bye to your pet

by Jill Carlson

Pet owners know that one day they may have to make the decision to euthanize their beloved companion. While it's a difficult decision, it represents a final act of caring.

To help you make the decision to euthanize, your vet will ask about the pet's quality of life – are they eating, drinking water, sleeping, able to eliminate? If the animal is having more bad days than good days, your vet will likely advise euthanasia.

Fred and Carmella had to make the decision to euthanize their Lhasa Plato when she became ill with liver failure. They felt that Plato's quality of life had deteriorated so much that euthanasia was the kindest decision. Plato was blind from a genetic defect so her littermate Socrates led her throughout their home.

Linda Rasmussen, grief counselor at the Monroe Clinic Hospice, suggests taking a couple days before making the decision to euthanize. "I've encountered some individuals who did not feel it was their right to 'play God.' My role is to help the individual look at their options," Rasmussen explained.

Dr. Tammy Cherney of Middleton Veterinary Hospital explained that many vets make house calls to euthanize pets. Cherney says the majority of her clients prefer to stay with their pet to say good-bye. Some people invite a friend or family member to accompany them. Others prefer to be alone. This will be a very difficult day, and it's important to arrange your schedule to take some time off to honor your feelings.

Cremation is an aftercare option, as you can keep the ashes in a container or scatter them in a special place. Vets arrange for the cremation; owners can choose to have the body cremated individually or with other animals. You may choose to have a favorite toy or other items cremated with your pet. Burial at home in her cat cemetery garden is the option that Shirley chose when she put her three-year-old cat to sleep.

It's normal to cry and feel an emptiness and numbness after your pet dies. Guilt, disbelief, and anger are other emotions that you may experience. Share your feelings with friends and family. "The grieving process is different for each individual and it's important to allow yourself time to grieve," explained Jennifer Nehls, bereavement counselor for HospiceCare.

Julie Kaufman, a Madison animal chiropractor, has written *Crossing the Rubicon*. The book is a collection of stories and interviews that anyone coping with pet loss will find comforting. "I wanted people to know that they weren't alone in feeling such

deep grief from the loss of their companion," Kaufman explained, "and to help them through the grieving process."

"Older persons may have a more difficult time with their grief as their pet may be their real anchor," said Dr. Deb Schroeder from Citywide Pet Clinic. Schroeder follows-up with her senior clients to provide them with an opportunity to talk about their loss.

Socrates wandered the house crying in search of his companion, complicating Carmella and Fred's grieving process. They grieved for several months and gained support from a pet loss support group. They also wrote about their love for Plato and the joy she brought to their family. Eventually they were able to move through the grief into a place of celebration of Plato's life and Socrates unconditional love and devotion to her.

Shirley has put two cats to sleep since being widowed four years ago. She finds that her grief is more intense now than from past pet losses. Pet loss can also dredge up past human losses.

Currently, there is no pet loss support group in Madison. Most therapists are trained in bereavement counseling and can assist if your grief is overwhelming or if you have suicidal thoughts. Kaufman said that many people do experience suicidal thoughts as they want to be with their pet, but they don't act on them.

While getting another pet is an option, some prefer to wait. Some people never get another pet, feeling they will betray the lost pet. By opening your heart and your home to another pet, you honor your lost pet's memory. However, don't expect the new pet to be like your previous pet. "As with people, each pet has its own personality; no two pets are alike," Susan Krebsbach, D.V.M., owner of Creature Counseling, explained.

Memorializing and celebrating your pet are ways to heal from the grief. Hold a celebration service of your pet's life and have attendees share their memories of your pet. Write a poem or keep a journal of your pet remembrances. Assemble a book of pet photos, post an Internet dedication, volunteer at the humane society. Turn your grief into something that will help other animals.

Shortly before Michele Geiger-Bronsky's Scottie Shayna died, Michele started the Door County Scottie Rally. Over \$7,000 has been raised for Scottie Rescue and the Scottish Terrier Health Trust Fund over the past three years. Last year, 70 Scotties and 118 owners participated in the Scottie parade and other events.

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Pet loss resources

Books:

Grieving the Death of a Pet, by Betty J. Carmack
The Loss of a Pet, by Wallace Sife
Dog Heaven, by Cynthia Rylant

Websites:

www.chiropracticforanimals.net - order *Crossing the Rubicon*, includes links to pet bereavement sites
www.alln.org - chat rooms, counseling, books, memorials
www.rainbowbridge.com - a comforting poem, online grief counseling chat room, memorials
www.doorcountyscottierally.com - rally info., dedications