



HEALTHY PAWS NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2003

GRIEVING FOR YOUR PETS

We recently lost one of our cats – Truffle, age 9 passed away after being ill for about a month. Although it was a stressful month (force feeding, giving her medication and supplements, giving her subcutaneous intravenous fluids), it was very peaceful at the end - she died in her sleep. We are very sad and miss her daily, so we have decided to dedicate this month's newsletter to Truffle (and our other departed pets) and the issue of the loss of our pets.

Pets are increasingly becoming a more important part of our lives and in a survey of pet owners in the United States and Canada, 83% of pet owners refer to themselves as their pet's "mom or dad". Sixty three percent admitted saying "I love you" to their pets on a daily basis.

The issue of grieving for pets is a touchy one – some people think it is silly to be upset over the loss of a pet, or to grieve over a period of time. In general, society doesn't see the death of a pet worth grieving over. But for a lot of us (and probably most of you reading this newsletter), pets are a part of our family and for some of us who don't have children, they are our "children".

Mourning for our pets used to be something that we had to do in quiet, but more and more, society is recognizing the need to pay tribute to our pets when they are gone. There was an article recently in the Saturday Post (February 15th) that described chapels and cemeteries dedicated entirely to animals. There was a story of a woman in Ontario who pulled up to the pet chapel in a limousine with a 5 foot cherry coffin worth about \$10,000 containing her pet Siamese cat.

Regardless of what extent we go to after our pet's death, the grief is real and it is o.k. to feel a loss. With humans, there is a religious service and the ritual of the burial, and usually a gathering after that all signify the recognition of the loss of someone we love. People are sometimes embarrassed by the level of their grief for their pet and for not being able to get over it.

Whether your pet dies naturally, or was euthanized, the manifestation of grief can take many forms – crying, loss of sleep, loss of appetite, feeling “spacey” or disconnected from everyday life, guilt, anxiety and other symptoms felt by those facing any loss. Bach Flower remedies can be helpful for dealing with the pain of loss and moving on.

Be aware that your other pets may also grieve and may seem depressed, walk around the house and meow for the other pet, refuse to eat for a few days, etc. We have heard this from homes where there were two pets and one died, leaving the other to mourn. Bach Flower remedies can be very helpful in this situation to help your remaining pet(s) cope. In our multi-pet household, the “pecking order” seems to change when we lose a pet and different aspects of their personalities evolve. When a pet has died in our home, we always let the other animals see the deceased pet so they know what has happened (I am sure they know already!!).

The last three cats we have lost have died peacefully in their sleep or in an unconscious state. It was apparent the day of their death that they were slowing down and preparing to make their transition. One of our cats ate voraciously that day, the other two refused food all together. They all seemed to know when they had to use the litter box and would suddenly get up and head off somewhere they thought the litter box might be. But the final few hours were spent in a peaceful state of sleep or unconsciousness. A few times, they let out loud meows and then re-settled. People who communicate with animals have said that this might be a sign that the animal is calling out to those who have passed on before them to let them know they are coming. Two of our cats “shuddered” at the time of their death – this has been thought to be the passing of their soul out of their physical body.

There is sometimes guilt if the pet owner has had to make the decision to euthanize their pet. Some pet owners will describe having panic attacks for a period of time after having to make that decision. It is never an easy decision, but is sometimes the best option when you weigh quality of life vs. quantity of life.

How do you know if the time has come to euthanize your pet –that is a question that we are asked often. Most people know – their pet is experiencing pain, is unable to control their bladder or bowels, is staggering and falling down, etc. Talk to your pet and ask them to let you know when it is time. Some pets will give you a sign. Regardless, it is a difficult decision and one that causes a lot of anxiety for many people. For me, it has been the uncertainty of knowing if it is too soon and am I interfering with Mother Nature's plan.

When we know that one of our pets is ill and maybe not going to live, we talk to them and let them know that we love them and want what is best for them. Although we never want to lose them, we always let them know that it is okay for them to let go and pass on if that is what they need to do. What we want (to keep them forever) and what is best for them may not be the same thing.

There are grief counselling and pet support groups available to help you before your pet passes and to deal with the feelings afterward. Talking to someone who has lost a pet can be helpful. Some people consult with animal communicators (see our web-site for a recommendation) to contact their pet after its passing. Talking with a compassionate veterinarian may be helpful.

There are books dedicated to the issue of pet loss and grieving – “When Only the Love Remains – The Pain of Pet Loss” by Emily Stuparyk, and “The Dog Chapel” by Stephen Huneck are two mentioned in the Saturday Post article. I recently read a book on grieving by James Van Praagh, “Healing Grief – Reclaiming Life After Any Loss”, and he

dedicated a chapter to the issue of loss of our pets. He says "For many of us, animals play a major roles in our families. Many find this member a lot easier to deal with than human members! For our animals never judge, criticize, or talk back to us. They have no hidden agenda or belief systems that can agitate or depress us. They are loyal to a fault".

However you need to grieve after the loss of a pet, know that is okay and there is no right or wrong way to deal with your feelings. For some, it will be a short process and for others, it takes longer. Do what you need to do to honour your pet and yourself during this difficult time.

If you haven't already checked out our web-sites, please do so at www.healthypaws.on.ca and www.naturespetherbs.com.

**In good health,
MIKE & LEE
(also Ilsa, Hershey, and Moxy)**

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