





WHEN A *beloved* PET DIES

*How to process and get through
grief from this difficult loss.*

BY SASSAFRAS LOWREY

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hen a beloved cat passes away, your house and heart may seem a little **empty**. Grief looks and feels different for each person, and there is no wrong way to grieve. Ordained animal chaplain Kaleel Sakakeeny describes grieving as an active process, and his work is about supporting cat guardians “moving from grief to mourning.” Though the terms are often used interchangeably, Kaleel explains that “grief is for us an internal process and response to loss, and mourning is when we externalize” that loss. So although nothing will ever replace the loss of your cat, there is hope and support out there to help you through this grieving process.

Mourn your loss

Kaleel notes that one of the challenges of grieving a pet is that we often don’t have the same kind of culturally recognizable rituals for mourning animals, such as funerals and memorials, that we do for people. He advises creating rituals to mark the life of your cat who has passed and adds that even just talking about your cat can help process your grief.

Whether you choose to have your cat cremated or buried, there is a diverse range of commercially available markers, statues and urns. Memorial art and jewelry can also be made incorporating pawprints or even ashes. Having these kinds of tangible memorials can be helpful as you navigate the death of your cat. Journaling, art or other creative outlets like poetry can also be helpful for externalizing and processing mourning.

Find the right support

When dealing with the death of a beloved cat, it can be hard to talk about your loss, because people have a tendency to say the wrong thing or may seem to be unsup-



portive. Kaleel has made it his life's work to support pet guardians as they process grief around the death of a beloved pet. Kaleel came to this work as part of healing from the death of his own cat and encourages grieving guardians to reach out to supportive people but noted that, unfortunately, close friends and family may not always be able to be supportive.

Grieving cat owners may hear dismissive statements like: "Snap out of it." "Pull yourself together." "Thank God it's not a child." "Just get another cat." These people obviously don't understand the relationship we have with our cats.

"Sometime the least likely person is a tremendous support and compassionate human who can acknowledge and feel your pain," Kaleel explains. He encourages grieving cat guardians to not get discouraged if family or close friends aren't supportive at first and to think about who in your life might be supportive so you can lean into those relationships during this time of grieving.



Ann Rooney, a certified bereavement counselor at NorthStar Vets in New Jersey, says, "When a client relays that their friends or family tell them, 'It's just a cat,' I tell them that many people don't know what to say and end up saying the wrong thing."

Ann also coaches grieving cat guardians to disengage from those who unintentionally say hurtful things. "I coach them to handle those situations like this," she says, "put your hand over your heart, wave it gently and tell them, 'Thank you for being so concerned about me, but I will be OK.' Then change the subject."

Take it one day at a time

Sometimes, grieving the death of your cat can feel overwhelming. Thankfully, employers and human resource departments are becoming more understanding about the role that pets play in the lives and families of their employees. Talk with your employer's human resource department to find out if your job encourages people to take bereavement leave after the death of a pet.

Ann also offers five practical steps for grieving cat parents to take when navigating the mourning process:

1. **Take care of yourself.** Rest, eat and drink plenty of water.
2. **Change your routine.** Come in the front door instead of the back door, or vice versa. Sit in a different chair while watching TV or eating at the table. It's not to forget, but to function and heal.
3. **Do not rush into making big decisions.** You have just experienced a life-changing event, and we experience "grief brain." Wait until you can make decisions with a clear mind and heart.
4. **Dispose of possessions gradually.** When you decide to donate certain items, remember you are sharing that love with another.
5. **Find at least one person you can talk to,** or join a support group.

Get help

If you are finding yourself struggling, there is no shame in reaching out for professional support to animal chaplains, counselors and therapists. Many large veterinary hospitals like NorthStar, as well as local humane societies, now offer support groups for grieving pet parents. You can also find free (though usually unmoderated) online bereavement support groups on social media sites like Facebook.



Deal with a new normal

Kaleel explains that, for the most part, we live in a grief-avoidant society. Grieving makes most people uncomfortable, and so we shy away from it. It may feel strange, but Kaleel encourages people to “go toward the grief and toward the pain and not away from it.” He advises that in doing so, cat owners better process our grief and honor the role our cats have played in our lives.

Kaleel reframes the process of grieving in his individual sessions with cat guardians, “We never talk about closure or resolving,” he says. “We don’t want to close everything; there’s nothing you are resolving. We do talk about integration and over time reconciling the pain into your life.”

Instead of putting the emphasis on moving on or through the grief, it’s OK to name, own and accept your sadness. Having loved and lost changes you. After your cat dies, Kaleel says, “You are not the same person, your world is totally changed.” This creates a whole feeling of reinventing yourself, and

that gives you the opportunity to move forward. “You begin hopefully the possibility that you will love again and re-engage with life,” Kaleel says. Most importantly, grief and mourning is not a one-size-fits-all journey. What helps someone in their grieving might not work for you. Each person’s process will look different. So seek support when you need it, and be gentle with yourself during this difficult time. 🐾



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WHEN YOUR CAT GRIEVES, TOO

If you have multiple cats in your home, chances are when one dies it’s not just you who is grieving. Your surviving cat will likely also be missing her feline friend. Even cats who might not seem especially bonded often go through periods of loss or adjustment after a feline companion passes away. Some grieving cats may seem withdrawn, while others will be needier. Be gentle with yourself and your cats as you adjust to a new normal. During this time of grief and transition, it can be helpful to keep your surviving cat’s regular care routines intact as much as possible. If you notice changes in eating, drinking or behavior or your cat seems distressed, make an appointment with your vet.

