

FACING PET EUTHANASIA AS A FAMILY

by Rev. Michael Bausch

Euthanasia is the clinical term for putting your animal "to sleep." It comes from a Greek word meaning "good death." Your veterinarian administers euthanasia gently and humanely by means of injection. When you have decided that it is time to put your pet to sleep, you are deciding for various reasons that you will provide your pet with a dignified and good death.

It is never easy to make this decision. Like losing a trusted friend, the loss of a pet can be a terribly sad experience. For children, the death of a pet is often their first encounter with death. They are sad because of their attachment to the pet, and they are curious because of their inexperience with death.

Helping your entire family through the death of a pet can be a time of strengthening the ties that bind you together. It can be a rewarding experience for both children and adults, as you learn together about the mystery of life and death, how to be thankful for the life the pet shared with you, and how to approach future experiences of having to face the death of some of the people you love.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HANDLING YOUR PET'S DEATH AS A FAMILY

1. Prepare your children in advance. Before making the decision to put your pet to sleep, begin talking about it with the children. Tell them that the pet is getting old, or is too sick to live much longer. Ask them how they would feel if the pet were to die. Ask what they will miss about their pet. Gently encourage the children to talk about their pet and their happy experiences together.

2. Take photographs or video tapes of your pet so that you will have plenty of reminders of its life. After the pet's death, you will be able to look at those pictures or tapes as a family and remember some of the good times you had together.

3. There is no reason to involve your children in the decision to put the animal to sleep. This is an adult decision, and by making it yourself, your children will not have to feel any guilt associated with a decision of such magnitude.

4. Once you have decided that the time has come to see the veterinarian, plan the whole experience step-by-step. Call your veterinarian for the information you will need. Most veterinarians will give you and your family several choices:

- Some people take their pet to the veterinary office and leave it. The veterinarian will administer euthanasia and dispose of the body.

- You may decide to wait in the veterinary office while the euthanasia is administered, and then take the body back home with you for a family burial.

--You may elect to set an appointment with the veterinarian so that you and others in your family may be present while the euthanasia is administered, and then either have the clinic dispose of the body, or do so yourselves.

--You may be able to arrange a home visit by the veterinarian, have the euthanasia administered there, and then dispose of the body yourselves.

5. Plan the date, the time, who will go to the veterinary clinic, when the children will be informed, who will dispose of the body, and what you will do together to grieve the pet's death. There is great sadness at this time, and it is better to express your feelings and get them all out. This is good practice for the time when you must face the death of a friend or relative.

6. Decide how you will tell the children, and then sit together to allow feelings to be expressed, and stories shared. There is sadness and humor. Be sure to ask, after any initial tears, "what do you remember best about our pet?"

7. If you have decided to dispose of the body, encourage family members, especially children, to view the body and see the reality of the death. This may seem emotionally difficult to do, but you will be helping your children learn that death is a natural part of life. The more opportunities we provide children with this kind of death experience, the better they will handle those other times of death they will face.

8. If you are able to bury your pet in a suitable site (check your local ordinances on that), do it together. Dig the hole together (at least 3' deep). Carry your pet's coffin (the clinic can provide one, or you can make your own out of wood or cardboard) and lower it into the grave. Put in a flower, one of the pet's toys, a poem, or another sort of memento. Say some words over the grave like, "we'll miss you," or, if you're religious, give thanks to God for the gift of the pet and the joy you had together. Tell some stories. Then give shovels to those who'd like to put the earth over the body, and seal the grave. Put a marker on the grave if you like, or remember the spot for future visits.

When a beloved pet dies, we experience a deeply sad time in our life. By carefully living through the death and making sure that all family members are involved as much as possible in the goodbye process, we both honor our pet's memory and learn how to handle crisis as a family, becoming stronger and healthier people.

- ① Intro - *define*
- ② *entire* *entire* *as human*
- ③ *options*
 - a) *vet decide*
 - b) *vet + family* *vet* *from* *choice*
 - c) *vet + family* *family* *choice*
- ④ *Playing or* *Expression*
- ⑤ *Conclusion*

"good death"

WHEN A PET DIES: HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND

THE DEATH OF A BELOVED PET

Every pet owner has to face the death of a pet. Like losing a trusted friend, the loss of a pet can be a terribly sad experience. With children, the death of a pet often presents their first encounter with death. They are sad because of their attachment to the pet, and they are curious because of their inexperience with death.

Helping children through the death of a pet can be a very rewarding experience for both the child and the adult. When we help children through the sad time, we teach them about the mystery of life and death, how to be thankful for the life the pet shared with them, and how to approach future experiences of having to face the death of some of the people they love.

The story below is about the death of a pet which had grown very old. The suggestions for helping children (and ourselves) through the death experience can be helpful in time of sudden death as well.

ONE FAMILY'S EXPERIENCE

Our own cat died recently. At 15 1/2 years, Samantha was arthritic, prone to seizures, losing weight because of a possible tumor, and probably diabetic. We knew that we would have to "put her to sleep" one day, but the decision was hard because she was still able to function pretty well, and because my wife and I had her since our marriage engagement. It was also hard to consider the cat's death since we knew it would be hard on our young daughters, age 6 and 9, who had known the cat all their lives.

After weeks of discussions and comments to the children, like, "Samantha is getting very old, and we will have to take her to the vet some day," we finally decided to set a date with the vet.

My wife called the vet and made arrangements for the vet to come to the house one morning while the children were in school. We would then keep the cat's body in a box until the children returned, break the news, and then bury her.

For three nights I said my goodbyes to Samantha. She was curled under the writing desk in the living room at midnight the night before the appointment, and as I looked into her eyes and said my farewell, she gently curved her tail towards her eyes and covered them. I guess she didn't want to look at me at that hour. Later I watched as she drank from her bowl, noisily lapping the water into her mouth. Her body was in relief against the dim kitchen light, and I could see the jagged edges of her fur sticking up, a continual reminder of her unhealthy condition.

As I looked at her skinny body arched over the water bowl, I remembered the time she was so fat that one night someone mistook her for a roaming racoon. I thought she looked like a large sausage. There were days when she roamed our yard freely, stalking mice and large flies, munching on chipmunks, or prancing as a proud huntress with a squeaking young rabbit held by her sharp cat's teeth at the nape of its neck.

Sired by an orange and white father and a black mother, her brownish-orange coat always attracted the attention of our visitors. The Siamese in her prompted a high and conversant "meow" that responded to any attention. Before her arthritis, she affectionately settled into any friendly lap. She loved to cuddle with the girls while they watched television, or read, and they would gently stroke her soft fur. On summer's nights she'd lie in a bedroom's open window, nestled against the screen and soothed by the crickets' lullabies. She'd often curl on the bed next to the girls' pillows, and breathe her gentle rhythm and emit her sweet and clean, furry scent.

I awoke in the morning with a headache. I don't often get headaches, but when I do, I know they are attributable to some stress in my life. I knew that this headache was related to the planned visit from the vet, and the fact that Samantha would die.

After the girls went off to school, I said goodbye to Samantha and stroked her behind her ears.

As soon as the vet came, we wrote out our check. We didn't want to have to do it later. The cat came in for some food and water, and the vet picked her up and wrapped her in a towel. The first injection was a tranquilizer, and after hissing and showing great discomfort and disgust at having been medicated again, she began to get comfortable, and lay down on the towel. The second injection worked its lethal dose within seconds, and being an old cat, Samantha's heart stopped in about fifteen seconds.

When the vet left, we placed a towel in a small box and gently lowered Samantha's furry body into it. By then both of us had splitting tension headaches. We sat on the couch, crying. We reminisced and laughed together about some of Samantha's antics, and then I went to work. My headache was still there, and I decided I had it because I dreaded the children's reactions later that day.

Later that afternoon, when both children were home, we sat them down and broke the news. Expecting hysteria, I was surprised by their composure. They had expected the news, they said, and were glad it was over with, because they had been dreading this final day. After more parental tears, we decided to go to the garage and see the body. I thought, "some day when they do this in a funeral home, it might be easier for this experience."

We asked if the girls wanted to touch the cat's body, but neither of the girls wished to do so. They did look at her, and when I asked if they wanted to put anything in the box with her, they found two pieces of blue yarn, and gently laid them on her fur. They remembered how Samantha loved to play with strings and balls of yarn.

We took shovels to the woods behind our house, and after looking at four possible gravesites, selected the right spot. We took turns digging, and then the girls went to the garage to bring the box containing Samantha's remains. I remembered the times I carried various relatives to their graves, and cried in the gentle beauty of two young girls carrying a beloved pet to its grave, participants in the normal and inevitable cycles of living and dying, burying and remembering.

We turned the towel covering the cat and looked at Samantha one last time, my wife and I bending down to stroke that soft, thick fur once more. The girls each began to cry, comprehending the magnitude of what was happening. We snuggled and caressed as the tears fell. Each daughter was able to mention something humorous about what was happening, like, "I'm glad this isn't one of us." As we lifted the box to gently lower it in the grave, a line of geese honked overhead. "A twenty-one goose salute," I suggested, marveling at the beauty of nature's timing.

We each grabbed a shovel and started burying the box, taking time out to jump on the wet earth to tampen it down. Three rocks were placed upon the grave to mark the spot, and our oldest daughter added some dried corn as decoration. Later she would say, "This is the first time anyone really close to me has died."

At bedtime our youngest reminisced about Samantha, and then began to weep and weep. I had heard this six-year old cry many times, but this time was different. This was not the kind of crying associated with a skinned knee or hurt feelings; no, these tears sounded more like she had passed a threshold into a new world where death separates us from our loved ones. These tears were washing away infantile innocence, and she was growing into the world as it is, full of living and dying, joy and mystery.

Samantha was dead, and her presence was already missed. Our family faced this experience together, each step taken in its own time. Our bonds were strengthened as we talked, grieved, viewed, made decisions, and buried our cat. We shared our feelings, faced death's mystery head-on, and are buoyed into the present by sweet memory.

There are times when we expect to see the cat around the house. We can almost hear her meow and feel her presence. We are not rushing to get another pet to replace Samantha, for she will never be replaced. But one day we will get another pet, and probably have to go through the experience of life and death once again.

HANDLING YOUR PET'S DEATH AS A FAMILY

As you read through my account of our cat's death, you may have noticed some of the ways we helped our children learn how to handle death:

1. Prepare your children in advance. Learn how to talk about death as a natural part of life. Anticipate that your pet will die some day, and talk gently about how each one of you would feel. What will you miss when your pet dies?
2. If you must end your pet's life because of infirmity, age, or whatever, do not involve your children in the decision. This is an adult decision, and your children will not have to feel any guilt associated with a choice of such magnitude.
3. Take pictures of your pet so that you will have plenty of reminders of its life. Be sure to look at those pictures as a family after the pet's death, to remember some of the good times you had together.
4. Once you have decided that the time has come to see the vet, plan the whole experience step-by-step. Plan the date, the time, who will go to the vet's office, when the children will be

informed, and what you will do together to grieve the pet's death. There is great sadness at this time, and it is better to express your feelings and get them all out. This is good practice for the time when you must face the death of a relative or close family member!

5. Decide how you will tell the children, and then sit together to allow feelings to be expressed, and stories shared. There is sadness and humor. Be sure to ask, after the initial tears, "what do you remember best about _____?"

6. If you have decided to dispose of the body (many people choose to leave that to the vet or the humane society) try to have a viewing so that the children know the reality of the death. This may seem difficult to do, but is the best thing you can provide your children. They require many opportunities to deal with death directly.

7. If you are able to bury your pet in a suitable site (check your local ordinances on that), do it together. Dig the hole together. Carry your pet's "coffin" and lower it into the grave. Put in a flower or a memento. Say some words over the grave like, "we'll miss you," or, if you're religious, give and the joy you had together. Tell some stories. Then together put the earth over the body, and seal the grave. Put a marker on the grave if you like, or remember the spot for future visits.

As you join in these many activities together as a family, you accomplish several important tasks:

--sharing feelings at a very emotional time, and learning that it's ok to have the feelings and to express them

--learning how to say goodbye to a beloved pet

--learning how to say goodbye to a

beloved person who will one day die

--building stronger bonds as a family while going through these deep experiences together

When a beloved pet dies, we experience a deeply sad time in our life. By carefully living through the death and making sure that all family members are involved as much as possible in the goodbye process, we both honor our pet's memory and learn how to handle crisis as a family, becoming stronger and healthier people.

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