



By Fintan Browne



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Paw Prints

The Big Sleep

Many people comment on how much they would like to swap jobs with me; the opportunity to care for sick animals appeals to something deep within us. However almost universally people will follow up "I'd love to do your job" with "but I don't think I could ever put an animal to sleep". It is not surprising that this is a task that most sensitive people would balk at. There are no other professions where one is asked on an almost daily basis to perform the act of euthanasia. How do vets cope with this onerous task without letting it depress them? I can assure readers that it is not through any kind of hardening of the heart or simply through getting inured to it through familiarity. In fact it is unfortunate that when the normal coping mechanisms fail it is one of the factors that contributes to a relatively high level of depression and suicide in the veterinary profession. However in most cases the vet will use his or her experience and humanity to make the process as painless as possible for both the pet and the owner.

The most commonly requested reason for euthanasia in a pet is old age or serious illness that has robbed the animal of any real quality of life. In these cases both the vet and the owner can feel that they



have done the animal a great service by relieving it of a life of pain and suffering. A natural death can be long and drawn out and even the best-intentioned owner will have a difficult time taking care of all the needs of a terminally ill pet. In these cases it is almost always preferable to intervene at some stage and to try give the pet a humane death. There are other situations where it is less black and white: healthy dogs that are potentially dangerous may have to be put to sleep in order to reduce the risk of injury to innocent people. This is always a difficult situation but if a dog is considered to be dangerous then a responsible owner must consider having it humanely destroyed. Finally and tragically a huge number of healthy stray dogs

are put to sleep in dog pounds and shelters every year in Ireland. Last year over 16,000 healthy stray dogs had to be destroyed, an unbelievable number compared to most other modern civilised countries. This is why it is vital that you have your pets neutered.

The exact procedure for humane euthanasia in pet animals can vary a little but it essentially involves the administration of a powerful anaesthetic drug, usually by the intravenous route. The injection used allows the administration of a huge anaesthetic dose in a very short period of time. This knocks out the patient in a matter of seconds so that the experience from the pet's point of view is essentially the same as when an anaesthetic is administered for any other reason (e.g. before a surgical procedure). The dose used is sufficient to stop the heart and to stop respiration but this effect is preceded by general anaesthesia so the patient experiences nothing of this. The injection does not sting or cause any discomfort beyond the prick of a needle. In patients that are fractious or that resent being handled or restrained a mild sedative can be given first to try minimise any stress during the procedure.

If you are unfortunate enough to be faced with having to put your pet to sleep there

are some important things that you should consider before arranging an appointment with your vet. You should firstly decide whether you or other family members wish to be present during the procedure. Any vet will be happy to discuss this with you and accommodate you in any way possible. Sometimes it may be possible to have your pet put to sleep in your own home but this is not always the case. In some instances a busy vet may simply not have time to do a house call; usually a veterinary nurse is needed to hold the animal while the injection is being administered and again this is sometimes only possible in the veterinary clinic.

Another thing to consider is what you would like to do with the pet's remains. Many people now live in apartments or in houses with very small gardens so home burial is not always an option. In this situation you should think about having your pet cremated. This is a service that any vet should be able to offer as there is a highly reputable company offering pet cremation nationwide. Your pet's remains will be collected directly from the veterinary surgeon and cremated. With the standard service the ashes are not returned to the owner and in fact most owners are happy simply to know that their pet's remains have been disposed of in a respectful and legitimate manner and do not want the ashes to be returned. It is also possible to have the ashes of individual animals collected and sent to the owner in a small wooden casket. Some people like to either keep the ashes as a memento of a favourite old pet or else to bury the ashes in the garden or scatter them in an area where a dog liked to walk or play. It may help to consider these things before arranging to have a pet put to sleep and even discussing them with your vet beforehand because in the highly emotional atmosphere afterwards you may find it difficult to make these important decisions.

Finally it is important to allow yourself time to grieve for your



departed friend. A scene that I am regularly faced with is that of a grown man crying as he is faced with putting a beloved pet to sleep. I say a grown man because in general women are more in touch with their emotions and find them easier to express whereas it takes an awful lot to make many men cry. Often people are surprised at the overwhelming grief they experience after the death of a pet and some people find it hard to cope with their feelings afterwards. It is important to recognise and accept the feelings that go along with the loss of a pet. In very many ways it is a similar bereavement to the loss of a close friend or family member. I would ask readers to be sensitive to the feelings of other people when they experience the death of a pet as some people feel very isolated and alone at this time and fear that expressing their feelings would result in ridicule from friends and colleagues. This can arrest the normal grieving process and prolong a difficult and painful bereavement. I have committed the rest of my contribution for this issue of the Journal to a discussion on pet bereavement as I think it is an important issue which is generally poorly understood. In fact the entire topic for this article was suggested to me in a recent e-mail I received from a distraught owner, whose dog had died 3 weeks previously, who felt that she really needed some help and advice in dealing with her feelings after the loss of her pet. Sadly it is a position most of us will find ourselves in at some stage in our lives so I think that it is advice worth committing to print.

"You think that dogs will not be in Heaven? I tell you they will be there before any of us."
Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Dealing with grief at the loss of a pet

Grief is a natural human response to the loss of a loved one. A bereaved person will undergo well recognised psychological

and physical upheavals as they attempt to cope with the change in their life brought about by the loss of a companion. Understanding the nature of the grieving process can help the bereaved person to come to terms with their loss and can help relatives and friends to better understand and support them during this difficult time. Grief experienced by a person at the loss of a pet can be similar in depth and intensity to the feelings experienced at the loss of a human companion. Grieving the loss of a pet can be made even more difficult if it is treated with insensitivity by other people, forcing the pet owner to suffer in silence. The death of a pet can be especially difficult for older people living alone. In this situation the pet is not only a close companion and a non-judgmental source of affection, but can also be a valuable link to the outside world.

The 5 stages of grief

Understanding the different stages of the grieving process can help bereaved people to accept that what they are feeling is completely normal, and is part of a natural progression towards acceptance of a pet's death. Different people will experience these stages to a greater or lesser degree, and the time taken before the whole process is complete will vary from person to person. Generally children are quickest to get over a bereavement, while older people typically take the longest.

1. Shock and Denial
The reality of death has not yet been accepted by the bereaved, who can feel stunned and bewildered.
2. Anger
A bereaved person can lash out at family, friends, themselves, God or the world in general. Bereaved people can also experience feelings of guilt or fear during this stage.
3. Bargaining
A bereaved person will often try to make a private deal with God for example, to try save a sick pet or bring back a lost or deceased pet. People commonly commit to going to church every week, or donating money to charity if everything is made OK.
4. Depression
Depression occurs as a reaction to the changed way of life created by the loss. The bereaved person feels intensely sad, hopeless, drained and helpless. The pet is missed and thought about constantly.
5. Acceptance
Acceptance comes when the changes brought upon the person by the loss of a pet are finally stabilized into a new lifestyle.

Explaining the loss of a pet to a child

Although children tend to grieve for shorter periods of time than adults, their grief can be just as intense. The problem is often compounded

by the fact that this may well be the first experience that a child has of death. Younger children tend to repeatedly come back to the subject, and it is important to deal with them in a patient and sensitive way. The age of the child and the circumstances of the animal's death will influence exactly how you deal with the situation, but these tips may be of value.

1. It is important to allow children to work through their grief in a natural way. Encourage the child to talk freely about the pet and to remember the good times they shared. Try to discuss death, dying and grief in an honest way that the child will understand. Give the child plenty of hugs and reassurance when they are upset. It may be useful to tell the child's teacher about the death of the pet.
2. Explanations like "God took your pet" or that the pet was "put to sleep" can be counterproductive as they can actually scare younger children into being afraid of God or afraid of going to sleep.
3. Include the child in everything that is going on.
4. Explain the permanency of death.

How does one pet's death affect the remaining pets in a household?

It isn't possible to tell if bereaved pets experience grief in the same way as humans do, but there can be no doubt that animals in a household can form very strong bonds and that their behaviour patterns can undergo dramatic changes after the death of an animal companion. The surviving pet may be anxious and restless and may show disturbances in sleeping and eating patterns. Some animals will appear to search for their lost companion, and seek more attention from their owners. The most important thing that an owner can do in this situation is to keep the remaining pet's routine as

regular as possible. If the pet is reluctant to eat just accept the fact, don't try to coax him to eat by constantly offering different types of food, as this type of behaviour can reinforce a selective appetite.

After the death of a pet there may be disagreements and fights amongst the remaining animals until a new dominance hierarchy is re-established. It is often best to allow animals to work out the new pecking order by themselves, and only interfere if an animal is in danger of being hurt.

Healing

Many people feel surprised at the intensity of the feelings they experience after the loss of a pet. But given time these feelings will subside and be replaced by a sense of acceptance, and the ability to remember the pet fondly without remorse. There are ways to help accelerate this healing process:

1. Give yourself the time and space to grieve the loss of your pet. Only you know how much he or she meant to you.
2. Try to get enough sleep and exercise, and eat regular meals.
3. Talk about your loss to people who will understand what you are going through.
4. Accept the feelings that come with grief, they are part of a natural process and they are nothing to be ashamed of.
5. Be patient with yourself: your feelings are important and may take some time to subside.
6. Make a memorial for your pet. This can be as simple as a photo on the mantelpiece or can be something more personal. It will help to make the loss more real, and it can allow bereaved pet owners to express their feelings, to pay tribute and to reflect on their loss.

Fintan Browne is a veterinary surgeon with Anicare Veterinary Group in Dublin, with branches in Clontarf (01 8330744), Glasnevin (01 8375543) and Blanchardstown (01 6409010). He graduated from UCD in 1996 and has a special interest in orthopaedic and soft tissue surgery. You can read more pet advice and tips at www.anicare.ie/ask_fintan

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