

# Catworld

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## End of life

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COPING WHEN  
END IS NEAR

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# An introduction to feline euthanasia

Sensitive and supportive advice for owners on coping with coming to terms with the fact that it may be kinder to let your beloved pet be assisted to pass peacefully

BY DR JENNIFER HARRISON

The death of a beloved pet is never easy. As cat owners, we all dread the day that we may have to face this situation and I have lost count of the number of times that I have heard owners say that they wish that their cat would just peacefully fall asleep at home and not wake up. The admirable but sad truth is that cats rarely pass away by themselves - they will often continue to live through severe and debilitating diseases despite a poor quality of life and even suffering. It is all too often up to us as their owners and their vets to prevent this and sometimes euthanasia (or a 'good death' as it literally translates) is our only option.

Some of you will have been through this, some may be currently dealing with the decision and some will feel that it's years away. I am writing this at a rather uncomfortable angle so as to not wake the snoring cat on my lap. He's not well at the moment and there's a possibility that I will need to take my own advice sooner than I had expected.

The discussion of when to let them go is a whole article in itself. Once the decision has been made though, the manner in which we proceed not only matters to them but to us as owners too. Those of you that have been through the process will know this better than anyone - we remember what happens on those days and our experiences have a huge effect on the

way that we are able to deal with our loss. Although the euthanasia of your cat may seem distant or even impossible to you as you sit reading what you thought was a cheerful and informative cat magazine, it's worth thinking about. Knowing what your options will be and having a think about what you prefer before the event will make it easier at the time. I've been through this with owners hundreds of times and I genuinely believe that those that are even a little bit prepared will find things easier. Of course, circumstances can change but that's cats for you!

As much as I like to feel that my pets know and understand everything that I say to them (and occasionally read my mind), there are times when it's good to accept that this isn't true. Thinking or talking about this stuff in your cat's presence is ok. Cats don't have an understanding of death in the same way that we do and they certainly can't process the concept of euthanasia, so try to keep this in mind. They don't know what we're talking about but by talking, we might make things easier for them when the time comes.

You may have noticed that I use the words 'euthanase' and 'euthanasia' quite freely. There are softer alternatives available but it is not a term to shy away from. It's unambiguous. It can't mean anything else. I stopped using the term 'put to sleep' the day that a little girl bravely hugged her dog as he passed away, only to ask



me a few minutes later what time he would wake up. I never want to have that conversation again.

## Home or away?

Very often, once the decision has been made that euthanasia is the kindest option for a cat, we then have to decide how or where this is to be done. There may be circumstances in an emergency where this isn't possible but often there is time to make some plans and one of the commonest discussions is whether to perform the euthanasia in the clinic or at home. This is a decision to be made with our cat as a priority but also have a think about how you feel as his or her owner.

When we think about euthanasia, let's look at some of the factors that might influence our decision.

On the whole, cats don't like leaving their home environment. At least once a day in practice I will hear the tale of someone who couldn't get their cat into their basket or has listened to them noisily expressing their dissatisfaction or worry, all the way to the clinic. Avoiding this journey certainly has its benefits. First of all, the cat remains in familiar surroundings and isn't subjected to the psychological stress of travelling. This can be physically easier on a sick cat too. For an owner, taking the cat on his 'last' journey can be tough - both practically and emotionally. Despite knowing that we are doing the right thing, guilt





can play a huge role in our ability to decide to euthanise our pet and affect how we cope with it afterwards. If we see our cat getting stressed and upset before we even arrive at the clinic, this will only make the guilt worse.

The home environment can be a more comfortable place for you and your cat and can make things easier for the family as a whole. Within reason, as many people can be there as want to be, whereas you would not necessarily all make the journey to the veterinary clinic. Those who want to be around but are not sure if they want to witness the actual process can step away at any point and it may be a more appropriate environment for children to have the level of involvement that you feel is right.

The degree of privacy that a home euthanasia gives you often means that you can express your grief and sadness far more openly than if you know that there is a waiting room full of people outside.

Having said all of this, veterinary

clinics do their utmost to help owners through this situation. Separate rooms which look less 'clinical' are often available and very often you can leave the clinic via a separate entrance. Often, a small candle will be lit at reception to let others know that there is someone saying goodbye to their pet. Lots of other people in that building, both staff and clients, have been there and they understand.

From a vet's point of view, I like home visits. I feel that they give me the opportunity to be completely focussed on the patient and the people involved and to do my absolute best for them. It is a privilege to be invited into someone's home and to be able to contribute to making the experience as positive as it can be. It might sound strange but it is incredibly rewarding.

### **Who is the priority?**

I think as dedicated owners of all pets, we always want to put our animals first. At the time of euthanasia, this is absolutely right. But what happens

afterwards? When a pet has gone, regardless of what we believe happens for them, we are the ones left behind; memories are very powerful things and can really shape the way we feel about an experience that we have had and how we move on from it, sometimes for many years to come. I have often been faced with a client who comes to the practice on a routine visit, only to burst into tears when they enter the consulting room because a previous pet was euthanased there.

When Anne Whelan's cat Toshell became poorly with untreatable cancer, she elected to have him euthanised at home and was happy to share her experience:

"Our beautiful cat hated going in the carrier whether it was to the vets or otherwise. I also had a partner who could not travel to the vets and needed to feel, and be part of, the process that would end our cat's life. Our vet was wonderful, nothing was rushed; it was calm and dignified. All our questions were answered and nothing was left un-





said. She gave the cat an intra-abdominal injection which would allow him to die peacefully within a few minutes, on my partner's lap. The whole process was peaceful and dignified. If anything is good in the death of a beloved pet, this was. Watching the vet with my partner was wonderful. He observed how much care she took of Toshell, which enabled him to come to terms with what was in his best interests.

I have had both experiences in my life as a pet owner - euthanasia at the practice and at home. This is by far the nicest, most dignified, less stressful for all of us and the most fitting end for our beautiful cat."

In terms of arranging home visits for euthanasia, veterinary practices will always do their best to accommodate you when you need them. If visits are arranged in advance, you may get more flexibility in timing and also be able to choose the individual vet that you would like to visit. Visits booked at short notice are often still possible but your options may be a little more restricted. Talking to your own practice in advance of when you need them will

give you the opportunity to find out how they do things.

#### About Cloud 9 Vets

We are now also fortunate that there are services available that are specifically directed at home euthanasia visits. Cloud 9 Vets was set up in October 2017 with the aim of giving all UK pet owners access to home visits for euthanasia, seven days a week, 24 hours a day.

A group of caring and compassionate Care Coordinators are customers' first port of call, where they can discuss their pet's situation and what they feel they need. Very often, people speak to them several times in order to establish what will work best for them. A veterinary surgeon will visit the pet in their home, providing a gentle and un-rushed euthanasia and then, if necessary, cremation can be arranged via a private crematorium approved by the Association of Private Pet Cemeteries and Crematoria. Lisbet Stuer-Lauridsen, the company's founder, wanted to offer a service that allowed vets time to offer emotional support.

Ms Stuer-Lauridsen said: "In vet practices, the focus is on health and getting an animal better but when that time comes when there is no getting better, that is where one needs to focus on the best possible way of handling what is a very difficult situation."

Sue McCallum contacted Cloud 9 Vets when she made the decision to euthanise her 20-year-old cat, Spit. "I have had other cats put to sleep at vet's clinics and I found the experience a bit too clinical, plus, Spit hated the vets. I found Cloud 9 on the internet. When I read their home page, the values and sentiments they expressed were exactly the ones I was looking for. I called them and discussed my situation; Spit was over 20. The sympathetic and calming way they spent time with me was more than I could have expected. We had several calls and I was never rushed or hurried. I wish I had known about Cloud 9 Vets before. Although it seemed expensive initially, the service, help support and advice was amazing; for the time they spent with me and Spit both before and after the home euthanasia, it was worth every penny.

I felt more comfortable in my own home after Spit was put to sleep - walking out of a clinic in front of strangers knowing that I had just lost my companion of over 20 years was really not appealing to me. Associating the practice with end of life is also not a positive thing. Now I can think of the vet practice keeping Spit healthy and, when the end came, it came peacefully and gently at home with the family close by."

In conclusion, a home visit could make a real difference to you and your cat at the time of that final goodbye and afterwards. My little snoring cat has now woken up, leaving me free to leave my desk. I hope that we won't be making any decisions in the near future but if we are, I know where we'll be.

● For more information on the services provided by Cloud 9 Vets, visit their website at [cloud9vets.co.uk](http://cloud9vets.co.uk) or call the Care Coordinators on 0800 354 999.