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How to Prepare for Before and After Your Cat's Final Days.

Fri, 2017-07-14 13:45 — Robin Olson

This post is not filled with research data or rules you've seen before about determining quality of life, it's written solely from my own experiences facing the final days of life of my cats. I hope some of these ideas might help you one day, as you have to bear witness to your cat's last moments.

The thing I've come to embrace over the years is that when my cat is nearing the end of his or her life that euthanizing them allows their experience to literally be to go to sleep. I've hated the phrase "put them to sleep" because they never wake up, but now that I have witnessed euthanasia enough times, I truly respect those words. For us, the cat-mom or cat-dad, it's a sleep they never waken from, but thankfully for them it can be VERY PEACEFUL as they experience simply going to sleep. To me, that's the best gift I can give my cat—peace and love in those final moments.

But let's take a few steps back...

How do you face it when you either know or are suspicious that your cat is nearing the end of his or her life? Personally, when it's been a longer road, like cancer and even though treatments may help, at some point my cat will grow thinner, weaker and have other issues. The sicker my cats get, the less I can sleep, eat or function. The last month of Gracie's life I could barely cope with getting up in the morning, fearing I'd find her dead, but also secretly hoping that would be the case. I hated witnessing her demise, knowing I could not cure the cancer that was killing her. This is something I think effects a lot of people. Sam can function better and handle the stress better so I began to depend on him to provide some of Gracie's care (*mostly giving her her medication*), while I focused on preparing her food and keeping her clean. Having support made it a lot easier to face the last months. **If you have a family member who you can lean on to assist in providing care, a team approach can really help. Each person takes on what they can do best and the cat will greatly benefit. If it's not possible, then reach out to friends, family or your spiritual advisor so you have someone to talk to about your feelings during this difficult time. You should never have to feel alone.**

What I learned from Gracie's passing

What I aspire to do is to face death with less fear and more gentleness. Our cats live in the moment. They don't even know about death. They know they feel good or bad right now. They know they are hungry or not. They know they are loved and safe. My goal is to be more like them and live in the moment, not obsess about what is yet to come, then end up not even being emotionally present when my cat needs me the most.



©2007 Robin AF Olson. My most beautiful and sweet girl, Gracie at the prime of her life.

If my cat has a terminal illness, then I need to find a way to accept it, then forget about how I feel and focus on my cat. *Is she ok in this moment? Yes. Is she eating? Maybe not.* Maybe I'm syringe-feeding her for a few days to see if her appetite picks up or giving her medication to increase her appetite. **I'm making certain I've spoken with my vet (usually more times than I care to admit) to get feedback about the care I'm providing. It definitely helps to have someone who knows my cat, but is not emotionally involved, weigh in on how things are going.**

But what do you do if you don't know what's wrong with your cat?

Of course, first, get the cat to the vet. Understand that many times they will not be able to give you a definitive diagnosis. It can cause a great deal of stress on the cat's caregiver because treatments may be iffy, specialized tests, too costly to do, or your cat may be unwilling to be medicated without a great deal of fussing or even bloodshed if they fight you every time they need medication. It's a very difficult balance between providing care for your cat when your cat may be wildly uncomfortable being medicated. Then you have to ask yourself how much you really can do to help when their reaction causes them even more suffering.

Your vet may require a consult with a specialist, or for you to take your cat to see one. Getting a second opinion on cases that are not clear cut is a great idea. You may also find out about alternative treatments from the specialist. There are also holistic vets, too. In a way, it can complicate knowing what is the best answer for your cat and many times it's driven me nuts- especially if you add "Dr. Google" and asking all your friends for advice on what to do. Too many choices can be distressing, **but it's also a great thing**, because someone may have an answer that no one else has and that's what may change things for your cat.



©2016 Robin AF Olson. *Gracie's final days.*

So how do you handle not knowing the best route to take with your pet's care? **The answer is that you will never know the best route** (*rarely only in hindsight*), BUT, if you come from a place of always trying to DO YOUR BEST for your cat, do research, ask a lot of questions, weigh the pros and cons, no matter how things resolve (*a cure or your cat dies*), then you can sleep at night because you did everything you could.

The most important advice I have about end-of-life care for your cat is this: *No matter how things play out, this is about THEIR FINAL MOMENTS, NOT YOURS. It's not about YOU. It's about them.* Yes, you're going to be upset, scared, heartbroken— but think about your cat. How would they like their final days to pass? Would they like to be surrounded by people who are anxiety ridden, crying, possibly even angry or shut off from the world OR would they like their environment to be full of love and peace?

That's why IF I have the chance (*I realize some times the end comes very fast*) , I make sure my home is quiet, my cat is comfortable, has a low-sided litter pan that's easy to access (*even if it's in an awkward place for now*) . We don't run the TV or talk loud. Every mealtime is a chance for love and affection, too. After I fed Gracie and Sam medicated her, we would brush her because she loved it. You could also spend some quality time petting or just sitting with your cat. Make sure they can easily be in a sunny spot, on a soft blanket, possibly give them a box or covered space that's in a social area of your home so they can get out of the way but not be away from the family. Hiding them in a room, alone, is not ideal if your cat was usually a social part of the family. If they tend to be fearful, that's a different situation. **Just remember "*what is best for them?*"**



©2016 Robin AF Olson. Because Gracie was weak we set this area up for her so she wouldn't be bothered by the other cats and still enjoy being in the center of the room where we spent the most time. Gracie wanted to be with us and we made sure her space was comfortable with easy access to whatever she needed. The heated pad was always covered with a soft cloth or towel, but she had another unheated bed incase she felt too warm.

ALWAYS ALWAYS ALWAYS look at the situation through your cat's eyes. Ask yourself what would they want to make them happy, feel loved and be comfortable. They might benefit from a pet-safe heated pad or a cat bed with a thermal core to reflect body heat but not be too warm.

Also RESPECT this process. It is natural for our cats to grow weaker as death comes closer. They will eat less (*if they are not eating then that is very serious if you're not supplementing them with assist-feeding*). They may miss the litter pan (*no scolding them if that happens*). They may be more vocal at night. Forgive them for anything that you may find difficult to deal with, as long as you're clear that you understand the underlying health issue.

Do not ASSUME your cat is dying without proper vet care and consultation.

There have been plenty of times when I thought "This is it." and the cat rebounds and is fine for years. This is why it's so tough to know when is the right time to say goodbye because in many cases, with some effort, medication, dealing with messes around the house, your cat can recover.

Last summer when ALL of our 10 cats got sick, I thought we might lose Spencer and Nicky. They were both over 15 and both were quite ill. Our cat Cricket, had to be euthanized. He was only 12 and it came on very suddenly for him and after a lot of tests and treatments that didn't work we had no other option. The fear was very real that we'd lose two more cats.



©2016 Robin AF Olson. Nicky last July when we had the first bad scare we were going to lose him.

This is where that tricky word, faith, comes in to play. I had to learn to have faith, being brought up in a home with parents

who were atheists. I think that folks who have religious backgrounds understand faith better than I do. It's been a long road and I still struggle, but when your cat's diagnosis is not clear, sometimes faith is the little bit you need to keep you going and not give up on your cat just yet.

I also want to talk about letting your cat pass away at home. I've witnessed it a few times and I want to say it's okay to do this, but looking back on it it was NOT okay. One cat fell into a coma and passed away very peacefully about 20 minutes later, clearly in no pain, but another struggled and I know I waited too long. On the way to the vet she died in Sam's arms. Not ideal.

It's too risky to wait and let nature take its course to that last second. The risk being your cat WILL very likely suffer if you don't help them pass away. That's why this is so tough. You will never know the perfect time, you just have to do your best and come from a place of love. It will guide you, but you have to be willing to let go and that is so very difficult. The saying goes: "Better to do it one day too soon than one minute too late."



©2016 Robin AF Olson. Our last moments with Nicky a few months after our scare in July. We spent time holding him and helping him feel comfortable and loved.

Eight months ago when we euthanized Nicky, our 16-year old cat. We could have brought him home and hoped to have a few more days with him. It would have been very likely he'd have another seizure and die painfully, but we could have had him euthanized at home. Inasmuch as we wanted him to be home, we also loved him so much that we wanted him to have the best death possible.

Yes, I said BEST death.

That's the "great" thing about euthanasia-you can have a say on how your cat dies. Yes, in some very rare cases maybe you can let them just fade away at home, but **it's far better to have an opportunity to create a meaningful send-off for your cat.**

Some tips:

- **Light.** I think it's VERY important, if you can, to keep the lights low in the room. At our vet's they had two banks of lights-one on the ceiling and one under a cabinet. We shut off the overhead lights and it was significantly more peaceful in the room. If you're at home, you can lower the lights or maybe light a few candles if it's safe. If needed, use the light on your phone so the vet can see the vein in your cats leg, but you don't have to have blazing lights on in the room. Cats feel safe in the dark so this will help them.
- **Sound.** We had it very quiet in the room and were whispering. Maybe your cat was used to music softly played or just hearing your voice. You don't have to say a lot. Of course you will be upset, but keep focusing on the love you have for your cat and just let them know how you feel and let them know it will be okay.
- **Location.** Wherever we are, always try to hold our cats when they pass. **Be prepared because many times fluid will**

come out of the cat after they die so hold them gently wrapped in a towel or have a towel with a puppy pad under it, or place them on a soft cat bed that you won't care about getting ruined.

If you can, of course be at home with your cat. There are many services that only do in-home euthanasia. Take a moment to look one up right now and put the info into your address book. You may need it right away and knowing you have the info is, in a way, a comfort.

Before, During and After Passing

- **Preparations.** I prefer to have my cat cremated. They can be cremated privately, meaning, their remains are cremated without any other animals. This is a more expensive option, but certainly worth it. You can have your cat's cremains returned to you (*or not if you don't want them back*) or placed in an urn. Many pet cemeteries can provide an urn or you can make your own or have one made for you on places like Etsy. Your vet will help you make the arrangements.

I also bring with me a photo of me and Sam and a few special items that I will have cremated with the cat. With Gracie, we sent her off with a photo of us, she was wrapped in a beautiful, colorful cat bed and with her favorite catnip toy. For Nicky, we wrapped his body in one of Sam's softest fleece shirts because he often held Nicky in his arms. You'll know what special things you can do for your cat to give him or her the proper send off.

- **The Process.** If you have your Vet help your cat pass, the process itself is usually very quick. They will have to shave a small area on one of the legs to access a vein. Then there should be two injections. The first one is a sedative (***ask for this if your vet doesn't usually do it-they really should***), which does not kill your cat. It just helps them relax and go to sleep. This is when you can truly say goodbye. Your cat won't feel any more pain now and will be resting. You can take a moment before the final injection. The last one is an overdose of Sodium pentobarbital which will slow their heart beat down and finally cause it to stop. It is very fast acting and often-times you won't even know your cat is gone until your vet verifies by listening to their heart for any sign of function.

I ALWAYS ask my vet to take a paw print impression from my cat after they have passed. It's a little thing I like to have. Some folks cut a small lock of fur. There's even a fibre artist who makes memorials out of your cat's fur ⁽¹⁾ (*you can have one made while they are still alive, too*).

- **Just After.** Although I've wanted to run screaming out of the room after my cat dies, I stay put. **It's very very difficult**, but this is a time when you can say your goodbyes. I take time to clean any mess off my cat's body as a sign of respect and love. I will often brush them and place them on the special cloth or item of clothing I want them to be cremated with. I've written them a note and placed it with them, along with a photo of myself. I find doing these things very comforting. I stay with their body for as long as I feel I need to-some times it's been up to an hour, some times because our vet wasn't open and our cat passed away at home, we kept their body with us over night surrounded by candles in a makeshift memorial. How you choose to spend your final moments with your cat is up to you.

- **Religion.** Do whatever feels right either before, during and/or after your cat passes. After Gracie and Cricket died we did a Buddhist ritual for them. Perhaps if you feel it would be appropriate and if there's time, ask for help from someone in your spiritual community to be there or prepare a special service for your cat and invite your friends and family to be there after you get your urn back. This is about you and how you want to honor your cat. Everyone is different. Some, like me, feel better having their cat's ashes and some prefer burial. **Whatever is right for you, is the right way to go.**



The Bottom Line

How each cat passes is unique. How you handle it doesn't have to be. You can flip out, run away, not deal with it and make an excuse why you let them suffer because you were afraid, or you can use this experience to truly cherish those last days, to celebrate them both before and after your cat passes away. This is not an easy path but we all have to face it. Being prepared and resolute in your roll will go a long way to making those last days blessed and at some point you will be able to look back and feel comfortable with the choices you made.

I wish we never had to say farewell to anyone, beloved pet or human we love, ever, but knowing our time together is limited makes it all the more precious.



©2012 Robin AF Olson. *I wrote this post in honor of the One Year Anniversary of Cricket's passing. I miss you so much, Crickie!*

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Comments

Fri, 2017-07-14 15:36 — [JaneA \(not verified\)](#) ^[10]

[One of the hardest and most loving decisions](#) ^[11]

Sometimes it's so clear-cut that euthanasia is the best solution. When my cat, Dahlia, had cancer with a very poor prognosis--the vet said we could try chemo, but it would probably only get her four to six weeks, and she'd be suffering the whole time--it was very clear to me what I had to do, for Dahlia's sake.

With my elder kitty, Siouxsie, the choice wasn't quite as clear. She was very old, and she was gradually fading away. She was eating and enjoying "lap time," but her body wasn't able to easily fight off infections and she got two major UTIs within a couple of weeks. The only way I knew was that in a half-awake moment in the wee hours of the morning, I saw Siouxsie under my night table and I heard clear as day, "Mom, I'm tired." I told her I heard her and I'd respect her wishes--but for the sake of my rational mind, I asked if she'd give me another sign, in a dream or otherwise. She crawled into bed with me and curled up in her usual position under the blankets, between my left arm and my body. When I rolled over onto my side, I moved her and she peed all over me. At that point I told myself that this was the sign I needed because I wasn't going to let her lose her dignity by being incontinent for the rest of her life.

I too find that ritual is so helpful to provide closure. About a month after Siouxsie died, I took her ashes, and the ashes of two other cats who had died (Dahlia and Kissy), to a beach at Golden Gardens Park here in Seattle. My sister and I burned incense and shared stories about the two cats (more accurately, my sister listened to me share stories), and we sent their ashes to the ocean, saying the last line of the Buddhist Heart Sutra with each one. It's still my go-to blessing for a cat who has passed: Gaté, gaté, paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi soha!

Fri, 2017-07-14 16:58 — [Eastside Cats \(not verified\)](#) ^[12]

How to Prepare for Before and After Your Cat's Final Days ^[13]

An excellent post, albeit a bit hard to read in some spots. Our Chucky has a bad heart; his time on Earth is limited. A month, a year or more? Who knows? But, I haven't thought about being prepared, even having a traveling veterinarian's info at hand. And the comment, Better a day too early than one minute too late really hit home. Thank you.

Fri, 2017-07-14 23:17 — Lynne (not verified)

Excellent Post ^[14]

Just excellent. Hard to write, but extremely helpful. Thank you!

Sat, 2017-07-15 13:40 — [jmuhi \(not verified\)](#)

RE: Saying Goodbye ^[15]

Thank you for sharing your thoughts, and your beloved ones' photos, with us, Robin. Indeed, this is a very personal and deep topic, one that everyone has to deal with in whatever way is best for them and most importantly, for their beloved cats. What is most important to me is the quality of life here on earth, and my spiritual beliefs and convictions let me know that this existence is but a pale shadow of the much richer and better life to come. I know my beloved ones who have ascended, whatever species they are, watch over me, and that we will be reunited in due time, never to part. The passing from this existence to the next is often very difficult. Love is what makes the difference. Indeed, it is the only thing that does.

Wed, 2017-11-22 15:11 — Aaron (not verified)

We just helped our 18 year old cat pass on ^[16]

Thank you for this blog. It helped me know we were doing the right thing and accept that our dear friend was ready and needed our help. Thank you. It has only been 24 hours since our last trip to the vet. So sad to lose her but we made her last days special. No pain. Just loving touch and peace.

Thu, 2017-11-30 17:36 — [Robin Olson](#) ^[17]

I'm so sorry for your loss ^[18]

Hi Aaron,

I'm very sorry for your loss, but it does my heart good to know our sad story helped you know you did right for your kitty. Losing an 18 year old cat is so very heartbreaking and I'm sure it leaves you feeling groundless and lost. Know I'm sending love and light to you and thank you for your comment.

xo

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