

Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor

Do pets grieve for the loss of another cat? **Vicky Halls** investigates...

Some years ago now I conducted an owner survey into the behaviour of elderly cats and one section related to the reaction seen in cats after the death of a feline friend. According to their owners, nearly two thirds of the cats surveyed that had outlived another had shown some visible reaction to the loss. There is absolutely no reason to presume that cats will not grieve and it isn't necessarily just reserved for old age. The loss of a companion has a profound impact on a household – grieving humans, changes of routine and the absence of a familiar part of the social unit. Under these circumstances it is probably more surprising that a significant number of owners report no response whatsoever from the surviving cat. This may be unpalatable for grieving owners but it is perfectly normal for those cats cohabiting without forming any particular bond.

The stages of grief

The flexibility of the cat's social structure makes it difficult to generalise about the grieving process, but in the various reports received as part of the elderly cat survey and in my experience since, there appear to be three stages. The first is relatively short-term and manifests itself in excessive vocalising, pacing and searching. This appears to be an active phase as the cat attempts to find the missing individual. One owner who took part in the survey wrote of a 12-year-old Siamese: "From that day on Kula began to grieve for Kiki. She cried day and night for her. There wasn't a cupboard drawer or wardrobe she didn't look in or pull things out of to see if she could find her." Another letter concerning the same behaviour seen in an 18-year-old Birman stated: "Solomon was very disorientated and confused and obviously very insecure. He looked for Cy around the house and called a lot. This lasted two to three weeks."

Depression sets in

The second stage is a more passive one where depression sets in and the cat becomes withdrawn and inactive. Some more sensitive breeds like the Siamese and Burmese often lose their appetite and appear quite unwell for several weeks during this part of the process, often needing veterinary intervention to stimulate a return to normal eating habits. This stage tends in most cases to decrease with time until the cat emerges into the third and final stage of acceptance.

This often heralds a period of transition as it is commonly reported that permanent character changes become evident at this time. Some cats will become more friendly and attentive towards their owners. Others will appear to blossom on the demise of their companions, a response that many owners find uncomfortable. This can, however, be a relatively common outcome as passive aggression or tension between incompatible cats within a household often goes unnoticed by owners and can only be appreciated in retrospect once the more assertive one is no longer there.

Cats will shut down and withdraw from social contact as a coping strategy when faced with constant intimidation and competition. If the antagonist is removed, the survivor is more likely to



Photo: CP Library/Bude



approach owners for interaction. They can be seen adopting many of the rituals and habits of the deceased, perceived by some owners as a psychic manifestation of the spirit of the departed, but in reality this reflects their ability to claim premium sites and rights of access that had previously been denied.

Will a new kitten help?

Those cats that express grief in this way can take anything from days to months to adjust to the change. Owners are keen to comfort the apparently inconsolable and a new kitten is seen as a solution. These introductions can be a disaster but some cats are easily distracted, as one owner reported: "When Biz died, it took her sister about five days to realise it and then she started to howl day and night. Since the kittens have been with us the howling has stopped." This 18-year-old domestic shorthair clearly found that Biz was an easy act to follow.

There are some cats, in my experience, that are sociable with others to a degree that borders on dependency and the ability and need to direct that focus onto another animal is greater than any sense of loyalty to the departed. Without another feline companion as a replacement, these cats are prone to attaching themselves firmly to their owners and suffering a form of separation anxiety in their absence. This should never be encouraged but, sadly, they are the cats that need the most reassurance and some do not respond to the arrival of a newcomer, craving instead the company of the familiar. Time and patience heal with sufficient comforting from the owner to ease the transition with an equal degree of encouragement to build some self reliance.

If multiple cats remain after a death, there can be quite an evident upheaval as the balance of power between them shifts depending on the role played by the deceased. This is another complex part of the grieving process and it is probably best to leave them to achieve stability again without human intervention.

Tips to help your cat through the grieving process

- Losing a pet can be very distressing but the way it impacts on your emotional state and behaviour will affect those felines left behind, so try to be as normal as possible in your cat's presence
- Maintain the general routines of the household as much as possible, this will provide your cat with some sense of continuity at a confusing time
- Don't be too hasty in removing the deceased cat's favourite bedding and other items. The gradually fading scent will confirm that individual is no longer around
- If your cat goes off his food, appears withdrawn or lethargic, do not automatically assume this is purely an emotional response that will pass with time. The stress that the loss of a companion may cause, irrespective of the perceived quality of the relationship, can tamper with the immune system and make the cat more susceptible to disease so if the problem persists get him checked out by your vet
- Take care that your desire to provide comfort is appreciated. If you focus attention on the remaining cat it may have stressful consequences if that level of attention is unusual or undesired. It is best at this time to make yourself available but allow the cat to initiate social contact
- It may be comforting for some cats to see the body of the deceased. If there is no specific risk of disease transmission – and the death occurred under circumstances that make it practical – then there is certainly no harm in doing so but some cats can respond negatively to any foreign or challenging smells on the body
- If you do consider acquiring another cat as a companion, do bear in mind that this will not necessarily be a positive thing for your cat. Waiting for a reasonable period, such as three months, to see how the remaining cat settles will be a better indicator of whether or not he really needs a new feline friend. All introductions should be gradual and advice sought to ensure it is done sensitively
- Don't think the impact of the deceased cat has only been felt in the household. If he was active in the territory outside then the lack of scent messages out there will soon become apparent and other cats may start to encroach into previously defended space. This may have serious repercussions for the remaining cat if he had historically relied on his companion to deal with territorial matters ●

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the FAB's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For further information regarding these and to subscribe to Vicky's free monthly e-newsletter featuring cat behavioural articles, cats in the news, tips for cat owners and competitions, please visit her website at www.vickyhalls.net