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Ask a psychotherapist

Question: Recently my beloved cat died. He was 18 and had a good life, as everyone keeps reminding me. But he was my dear companion for all those years and I am crying all the time as if I lost a person. People keep saying ?he was only a cat!? and ?just get yourself a kitten to replace him?. Is there something wrong with me for taking his loss so hard?

Answer: You do not mention in your letter whether you live alone or with other people as well as your animal or animals. For people who live alone, companion animals ARE family and grieving for them when they die can be as painful and prolonged as grieving for human family members.

Even for those who live with people as well as animals, the death of a beloved pet can be wrenching. This is at least partly due to the fact that animal companions give us unconditional love. They are always happy to see us, grateful for any attention we bestow on them and loyal sometimes at their own expense. The same can not always be said of human relationships.

Grieving the loss of a central person in one's life fully and completely can take as much as two years. It is not unreasonable to predict that a similarly prolonged grieving period may ensue when a relationship with a companion animal has been particularly meaningful and intense.

Sometimes creating a ritual to honour your animal friend can foster the grieving process and help you to move forward. Some ideas include mounting your favourite picture of your friend or buying an ornament that looks like him, making a beautiful gravesite, memorializing or scattering ashes and/or writing a letter of love and appreciation for your friend's life.

So tell those friends of yours unlucky enough to have never had the kind of deep bond with an animal that you had with your beloved cat that it is actually healthy for you to acknowledge and to grieve this loss. You might wish to add that no new kitten will ever replace your animal friend and that you will decide when you are ready to invite a new animal into your life.

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