

LIFE & TIMES **FAMILY**

Pet-rified of letting go

When a pet becomes a part of your life, how do you deal with life when it's no longer there, wonders **Aneeta Sundararaj**

YOU walk into the office and one of your colleagues is bawling her eyes out. There's been a death in her family and she's clutching a photo of the deceased close to her chest.

Just as you offer your heartfelt condolences, you realise the photo is actually that of her pet cat. Do you step away thinking, 'she's mad. It's just a cat' or do you empathise completely with her because you, too, have lost a pet?"

In conjunction with World Pet Memorial Day today, Dr P. Ravinderan, 56, a veterinary clinician and surgeon in Alor Setar, says: "Frankly, every day, I see animals that are either dying or ill. When the animal dies, I am sad, yes. What saddens me more is that the owners are sometimes so misinformed. Often, they bring the pet to me when it's too late for me to do anything."

C.D. Siby, 46, senior ayurveda physician at Ayur Centre, says: "Grieving is very important in ayurveda. Grieving is what makes you human."

Siby then points out that losing a pet doesn't always mean that the pet dies. "Sometimes, cats and dogs just disappear."

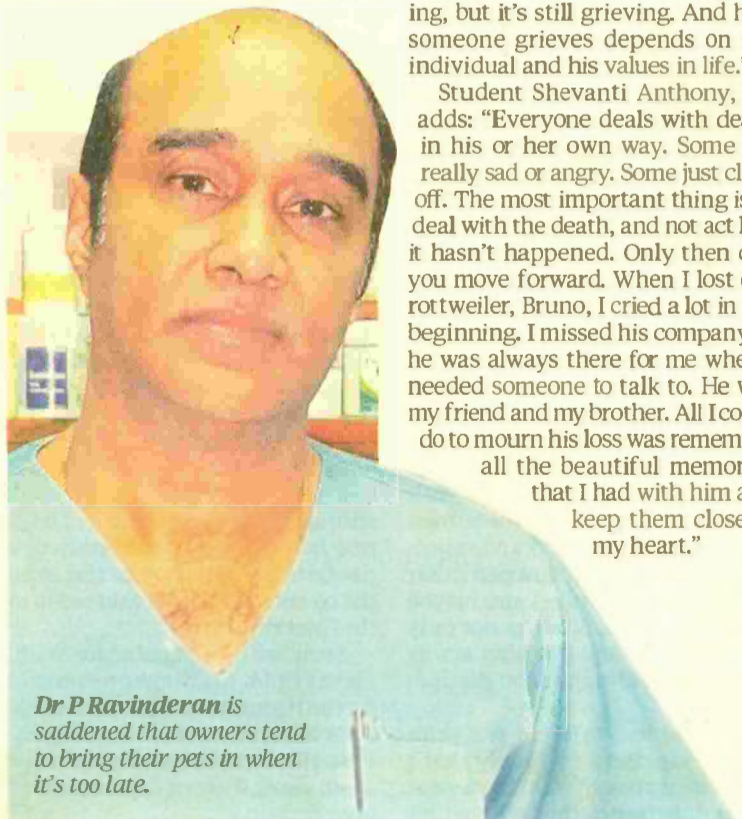
This was what happened to Nirmala Emam, 41. "When my cat, Enzo, left us, I was a basket-case. We were very close. He followed me everywhere and he was very *manja*. I couldn't understand it. I was never like this before. In fact, I didn't even like cats. It's my husband who loved cats. But when Enzo left, I was crying all the time," she says.

Siby explains: "Just because it's a pet doesn't mean you mustn't grieve its loss. It's a different kind of grieving, but it's still grieving. And how someone grieves depends on the individual and his values in life."

Student Shevanti Anthony, 23, adds: "Everyone deals with death in his or her own way. Some get really sad or angry. Some just close off. The most important thing is to deal with the death, and not act like it hasn't happened. Only then can you move forward. When I lost our rottweiler, Bruno, I cried a lot in the beginning. I missed his company as he was always there for me when I needed someone to talk to. He was my friend and my brother. All I could do to mourn his loss was remember all the beautiful memories that I had with him and keep them close to my heart."



Dr Siby advises owners to remember the joy their pets brought them.



Dr P Ravinderan is saddened that owners tend to bring their pets in when it's too late.

Dealing with one's own sense of loss and grief is one thing. The other is dealing with the reaction of those who either offer (or don't offer) comfort. Nirmala shares her frustration about the comments she received when another cat, Houdini, died.

"I felt that people didn't understand. People were telling me 'Move on-lah, already'. And they would say the strangest things to me. One person said, 'After all, you have so many other cats'."

Nirmala has 22 cats. **Nirmala and her beloved cat, Houdini.**



"And then they ask me things like, 'How can you remember all their names?'. What kind of a question is that? I mean people work in the office and they remember everyone's names there. Why ask me this? Of course I can remember all my cats' names," she says.

Sympathising with her, Siby says: "Someone else may not understand what you feel. Often it's because they haven't gone through something similar."

LOSING LADOO

Like Nirmala and Shevanti, I, too, have experienced the loss of a pet, my lovely dachshund, Ladoo. That fateful night, I'd decided to stay close to her since her breathing was laboured the whole day. I planned to take her to the vet first thing in the morning. At 9.45pm, my father had gone to bed but my mother kept us company for a while. Then, at 9.53 pm, Ladoo's tongue was pale and I knew something was wrong. While my mum went to call my father, I

rushed to feed Ladoo some fluids. My parents said they could hear me screaming as they came down the stairs. I don't remember this. What I do remember was trying everything from CPR to beating Ladoo's chest to save it. When I didn't know what else to do, I held her close and hugged her. Then, in a manner that was ever so tender, my father put his hand on my back and said: "Neeta, she's gone. See, there's no heartbeat."

I took enormous comfort from the fact that Ladoo died in my arms, surrounded by the people who loved her most. She no longer endured the pain of living because I wanted her to — it had become painful to watch her suffer. Her illness made her exhausted as she couldn't eat or sleep.

While I have yet to come to terms fully with what's happened to the dog I named after an Indian sweetmeat, what has taken me by surprise is the response when news of Ladoo's death spread. Lim, my contractor, insisted I remain composed as Ladoo wouldn't want to see me sad. Paramjyothy, the

newspaper delivery guy, rang me at midnight and half-scolded me with, "How did this happen?"

It was impossible to understand Precy when she called from the Philippines because she couldn't stop crying long enough to speak. Family friends delivered condolence cards and flowers for Ladoo's grave. Joanna, a writer friend lit candles for the repose of Ladoo's soul. Raj, 8, from Seremban promised to give me a hug to comfort me when we next meet and Aaryan, 6, ordered me to get another dog, "exactly like Ladoo and you must call her 'Ladoo'" How could I explain to this sweet child that Ladoo could not be replaced?

I told Dr Ravinderan what Aaryan said and added that the time wasn't right yet to bring another dog into my life. For nine years, my life was defined as Aneeta and Ladoo. If you came to our home, you had to be aware that you were visiting both of us. In fact, in Ladoo's eyes, you were coming to see her and no one else. I remember Dr Ravinderan say-

LIFE&TIMES FAMILY

DEALING WITH THE LOSS

IT is always difficult when a pet dies or goes missing. This can be particularly traumatic for a child. Often the pet and the child grew up together and the pet is the child's friend. Parents of such children sometimes find that they're walking on egg shells and don't know how to help the child cope with such a loss. C.D. Siby, a physician at Ayur Centre, has the following advice for parents:

- Listen patiently to the story the child wants to relate.
- Don't take their expressions of attachment lightly or regard it as unimportant.
- Avoid silly remarks like "We can buy a new dog," or "It was such trouble to take care of it— after all it was only a cat."
- Take some time to go through the photos or videos you have of this pet.
- Share your stories or memories about this pet.
- Share your child's pain sincerely and not just for the sake of it.
- Above all, spend time with your child.



ing to me: "Aneeta, for nine years, it was not Aneeta and Ladoo — it was Ladoo and Aneeta".
Point taken.

The writer's beloved dog, Ladoo.

MOVING ON

Shevanti and Nirmala say they've learnt lessons from the loss of their pets. For Shevanti, it was that "... you should always follow your heart when making decisions and never regret them. If you make a mistake, accept it and move on. Because life is too short to live it in the past. So I always try my best to look forward to the future and put the past behind me."

Accepting that death is absolute, Shevanti takes comfort in her belief that Bruno was happy when he died. "I felt like he was content with his life. I also believe that all dogs go to heaven. So when a pet of mine dies, I know and believe with all my heart that they are in heaven and watching over me and my family."

For Nirmala, talking about her feelings helped. "I expected my cats to be there forever. Instead, I learnt that we are all put together for a certain time. I've learnt to cherish the memories I have of my times with Enzo and Houdini. It's hard to digest, but that helps me deal with the loss."

"In other words," says Siby, "you cannot become overly attached to a pet. Yes, pets are like children who never grow up. For its whole life, you have to do everything for your pet. You worry. Will it eat? Will it not eat? Will it be able to walk? Can it sleep? Pets can't look after themselves like humans. With all the care and attention you give the pet, it is not surprising that you feel so sad."

Instead of wallowing in the sadness, though, Siby advocates taking a philosophical approach: "Don't become over-attached to the loss of your pet. Instead, try to remember all the joy it had brought you."



Shevanti believes in looking forward.

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