

GRIEF AND COMPASSION FATIGUE IN ANIMAL RESCUE



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It takes a compassionate person to work with animals. We strive for the best for every animal we meet, to set them up for success and watch them live long, healthy lives. Sadly, no matter what we do, that isn't always the outcome.

My name is Ashley and I am a kitten rescuer and foster parent. Shortly after becoming a volunteer dog walker for a local shelter in 2015, I went through the sudden and tragic loss of my own father to suicide. Out of this tragedy came beauty- I started fostering neonatal kittens for the first time. I would continue fostering kittens for years to come, not expecting the loss of foster kittens as a new challenge I would take on. Each loss was a fresh reminder of the loss of my dad, a deep painful wound. I had found something that both made me feel like living again, and also broke my heart to pieces.

As someone who has been through the loss of family, pets and fosters, I wanted to put together a booklet that would help other foster parents, rescuers and shelter workers. I have used de-escalation tools, in person therapy, and CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy) to help me through the many losses we face each year.

I want to walk you through some techniques that have helped me to cope with the grief, manage the aftermath and find the path to continue helping animals in need.

What is grief?

Grief looks different for every individual and is a completely natural response to loss. Dealing with the loss of any animal is heartbreaking, whether you care for them for one hour, one year, or a decade. While one person may do best by talking about their loss with people around them, another might need time alone to process what has happened. No matter how you handle grief, it's ok. Find what helps you the most and do not rush or force yourself to feel better. Your grief is valid.

Symptoms of Grief:

In the beginning, grief is usually exhausting. You may feel mentally, physically and emotional drained. Here are some of the symptoms of grief you may experience:

- Crying
- Fatigue/Exhaustion
- Questioning your purpose in life, or the purpose of helping animals.
- Upset stomach, Weight Loss/Gain
- Headaches
- Replaying scenarios in your head

*If at any time you are unable to manage your grief in a healthy way and find you are experiencing suicidal thoughts, self harm or extended isolation, please seek the immediate help of a professional.

I am not a licensed therapist or counselor.

Guilt:

One of the most painful parts of loss, and the most common, is the feeling of guilt. We often think about what we could have, should have or would have done differently if we could go back and do it again. You may question if you did the right thing by euthanizing an animal, or if you could have saved them if you held on a little longer. We question if a different medication would have made a difference, or if another person could have saved them. We are trying to make sense of what has happened, and how we could have prevented it.

Be gentle with yourself. Unfortunately, we can no longer do things differently. We can not change the past. Your feelings of guilt will normally subside with time as you come to terms with what has happened.

What you can do is focus on healing.

Here are a few ways to cope with guilt:

- **Journal about the situation-** what happened, what you are struggling with the most, what you wish you could have done differently.
- **Look at the reality of the situation-** was there really anything you could have done differently that could have changed the ending? Or did you do the best you could with the situation at hand?
- **Remember that the animal was given a chance because of you.** You are not a perfect human being, no one is. Mistakes will be made, and we will do our best, but we can never expect perfection from ourselves.
- **Accidents do happen.** Let me repeat that- if the loss of the animal is due to an accident, it does happen. This goes back to perfection.
- **If this happened to your friend or family-** would you let them expect perfection of themselves? Do not hold yourself to unrealistic expectations you wouldn't expect of the next person, you are human.
- **Sometimes we are completely powerless to change the situation at hand.** A congenital abnormality, a severe illness, etc. We can only control certain factors in our lives, and the loss of an animal is often out of our control.

Ways to work through your grief:

Find a method that helps you through your grief. There is no timeline. While you may feel like you have mourned enough to go through your days without tears anymore, a few months or years later you may see something that reminds you of your loss and experience grief all over again. It's ok to continue mourning as long as you need.

Techniques to grieve:

- While it might sound simple, crying is one of the best ways to grieve. Let yourself feel your emotions and mourn the loss. This is tough, you do not need to hold it all together. Cry it out.
- Journal about what they meant to you, how they changed your life, and how they have impacted you.
- Consider how their life could positively impact your work in the future. This might look like learning about an illness you hadn't dealt with before, learning a new skill, or helping another animal in their memory.
- Talk with friends, family and others in animal welfare. I find the most helpful people to talk to are the ones who have also dealt with loss. Find someone who will understand. There are many online forums and pet loss support groups who will lend an ear. It is never "just an animal", it is a soul that you loved dearly. Do not let others minimize your loss.
- Read books or online forums about coping with the death of an animal.
- Take a break- in rescue and fostering- it's easy to get overwhelmed. Especially after the loss of an animal. Ask a friend to watch the other animals in your care while you go for a walk or hike, go to a spa or head to a movie. Allow yourself some time away.
- Take a break from fostering or dive back in. When I would lose a foster kitten, the thing that helped me the most was diving back in and helping another. I wasn't trying to ignore the loss, but harness my sadness into helping another animal. Maybe this works for you, or you need to take a break in general from animal welfare. That's ok. You do not need to feel guilty for allowing yourself time to heal. Do what you feel is necessary for your own mental health. We can only give so much of ourselves and we can't continue life saving work if we are drained mentally and emotionally.
- CBT therapy: CBT stands for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. It focuses on change our thought patterns. It helps us learn how to identify and change destructive thought patterns that may be negatively affecting us emotionally and behaviorally. You can find CBT workbooks online to do at home, or reach out to your doctor or therapist about in person CBT therapy.

Immediate de-escalation for panic attacks and anxiety due to grief and loss:

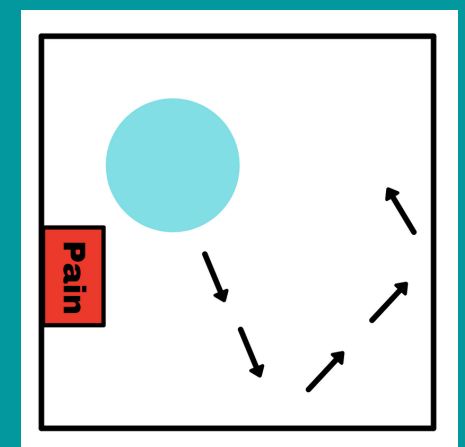
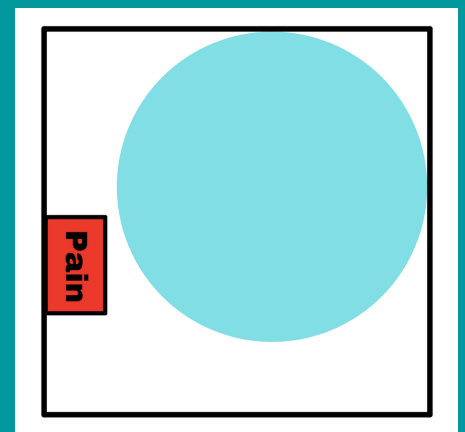
- If you are suffering from a panic attack or uncontrollable anxiety and upset, please seek the help of your doctor. These methods may help you while you try to seek help:
- **Deep Breathing:** In and out of your mouth- breathe in for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds. Repeat. Focus on the air going into your chest and belly, and slowly letting it out.
- **Distraction:** While not intended as a long term solution, temporary distraction is an amazing tool to de-escalate your emotions. Watch a movie or listen to a podcast. Get out that coloring book and focus on the colors and lines. Need something more specific to get your brain to stop focusing on the grief? Count the number of grey items in the room, the number of floor boards in your house, etc. Focus on something to bring your breathing and emotions back to a “normal” range so you can seek help to go through your grief.
- **Ice cube trick:** Sounds cold right? Hold the ice cube over the sink, focusing on how long it takes to have no other thoughts than “this is cold!”. Flip the ice into the other hand and experience it again until it’s so cold you have to toss it in the sink. Holding an ice cube forces our bodies nervous system to focus on the coldness in your hand, and not the panic you are going through. Giving your brain a break from the panic can let you regroup.
- **Sleep or take a nap.** Essentially pressing the on/off button on our body to allow ourselves to rest.

The Ball in Box Theory:

Grief is like a box with a ball in it, with a pain button on one side.

In the early stages, the ball is very big. Every time you move the box, you frequently hit the pain button. It hits it over and over again, feeling like you can’t control it. It hurts non-stop, even when others are trying to comfort you, the pain is personal and overwhelming.

As time goes on, that ball gets smaller. It will never disappear completely, and when it hits the pain button it’s just as intense, but it’s less frequent. Some days that ball is going to be big, and others it will be smaller. Some days it will hit that pain button too many times, and others it won’t touch it. Grief is like this ball in a box, it won’t be the same each day.



Memorials

One of the most healing things for me is memorializing the loss of an animal. This makes me feel like I did something for them, to show I will never forget them and that they were special to me. Here are some of the ways you can memorialize your animal:

- Keeping their favorite item, toy or blanket in a little box with their picture and a note about what you loved so much about them.
- A garden statue, stake, or plaque with a symbol that reminds you of them. I have a small planter in my garden with metal stakes with the names of the foster kittens I have lost.
- Find an artist to draw or paint them.
- Paint a rock with their name on it for your garden.



This cute succulent garden has a Rainbow Bridge memorial stake, as well as markers with the names of the kittens who have passed. You can find the Rainbow Bridge Stake for sale on Etsy, store name: SantaBarbaraSoul Also on Etsy, the markers with custom names are from the Store CandTCustomLures

This delicate embroidery was custom made for my past foster kitten Oreo who passed away. It is a sweet way to remember him and our time together when I spot it on my wall.
Etsy store: kmdoyleembroidery also known as TheFairybeam



When Life Starts to Move On:

To us, it may feel like time has stopped, however life continues to move on. It isn't about going back to normal, or forgetting what happened. You will find a new path, where you remember the life of the animal lost, while remembering you still matter and have purpose in this world. The goal is for the pain to diminish over time, not disappear. My hope for you is to be able to look back on your memories with love, compassion and meaningfulness.

Can I handle another loss?

Many foster parents, shelter workers and rescuers may feel discouraged from continuing to help animals due to the pain of loss. This is completely natural. Be honest with yourself, rescuing animals is not worth taking your life over. If you feel you are unable to continue working in animal welfare without bringing harm to yourself emotionally or physically, it is time to step away.

I wish I could tell you it gets easier as the years pass and you have dealt with multiple losses. Each loss is fresh and painful. Each animal is precious and you can never get used to the pain and grief. Instead, it's about learning how we best grieve, being gentle with ourselves and not bottling up our emotions.

Each loss usually teaches us something valuable in rescue work- whether its a new illness we had never dealt with before, a congenital issue we didn't know existed, etc. We can use our new knowledge to help other animals in the future with the new skills and knowledge we obtained.

If you are wondering whether you can handle continuing in animal welfare, try taking on lower risk cases- whether that be healthy older kittens, an adult cat that needs a shelter break, a dog looking for a foster home. Giving yourself a reminder of the wonderful moments you get to also experience can help remind you why you started this work to begin with.

A reminder I like to give myself- while I may have been a temporary home to this animal, to the animal, I was it's forever home. My grief is temporary; the pain is only so deep for so long. To that animal, I was there at the end of its life. I got to be there providing comfort during the roughest part, and I am honored to have been there.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is a term used to describe the emotional, physical and psychological toll we take on as caretakers for others. It is one of the main causes of burnout and high turnover rates in animal rescue. Compassion Fatigue falls under the category of Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder. Symptoms are nearly identical to those of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The main difference is that Compassion Fatigue is not caused from one persons past trauma or suffering, but instead due to the knowledge and exposure to traumatic events, and taking on the pain and suffering of the situations surrounding them.

Sadly it is not uncommon in animal rescue to be completely overwhelmed and overworked. We look around ourselves and realize we have let animal rescue become our entire life. We put the need of every animals before our own. Sleepless nights and days too busy to care for ourselves; we no longer live our own lives, but a life only to serve others. It is so important to take a step back and ask yourself how long you can live like you currently are. I will always be an advocate for working in animal rescue, but it's equally important to find the balance between having a life of your own, and caring for the animals in need.

Rescue is not a competition of who can take on the most, you won't win a medal for having given every ounce of yourself. We need animal rescuers and fosters to be able to care for themselves so they can continue to adequately care for the animals. It's not easy to realize you can't do it all, or save them all.

There are a few ways to manage, prevent and deal with compassion fatigue.

1. Boundaries: create healthy limits. I like to think of them as non-negotiable protection for my mental health. These may look like:

- A limit on how many cats or kittens you can care for at one time.
- Setting days/hours in which you will take phone calls or texts related to animal rescue, and letting others know those days/hours.

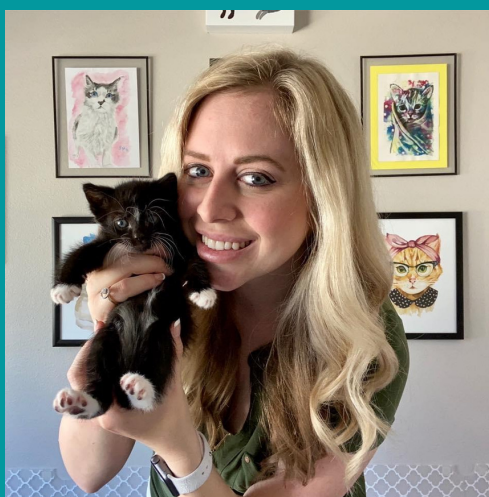
2. Self-care: integrating acts of self care into your daily life. Making sure you are getting adequate sleep, exercising, taking time to journal, take a bath, planning a meet up with friends once a month, etc.

3. Compassion Satisfaction: The opposite end of compassion fatigue, the reason we do what we do. The amazing feeling of helping an animal in need. Rewiring our brains to focus on the satisfactory components - the adoptions, the happy endings, the moments of joy we get holding a kitten and hearing them purr. It's so easy to let our minds spiral - thinking about worst case scenarios, the un-happy endings, the losses. Focusing on the victories instead, can help us remember exactly why we rescue, foster, etc.

It took me years to understand I am only one person, not capable of saving every animal on my own. I had to learn to reach out to others for help, and to put boundaries in place to protect myself mentally. There have been times when I have taken on so much, I sit in my car crying and hiding from the work I need to continue in my own home. I realized I was only living to serve animals, and not myself. To continue this work in the long run (which is my goal) I had to to slow down. Limit the number of cats in my care, look for fosters for others, reduce the amount of daily work I put on myself.

Each person is capable of different things. What might be overwhelming to one, isn't for another. Comparison is the thief of joy. It's about learning what works best for you, and honoring your own wellbeing.

We want you to be here, through the losses, the overwhelming moments, and challenging days. The moments of joy and victories outweigh the negative. I hope some of these tips help you in your own journey.



Ashley Morrison, known online as Youngest Old Cat Lady, is the founder of Ashley's Kitten Academy in Everett, WA. For more information please visit Youngestoldcatlady.com

