



The Conscious Cat

with Ingrid King



conscious living, health and happiness for cats and their humans

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When Grief Goes Viral: How COVID-19 Affects Those Who Lost Cats to FIP

Categories: [Feline Health](#), [Pet Loss](#)



Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP) appears out of nowhere and leaves families heartbroken and bewildered. Cats affected are typically kittens less than a year old or young cats just gaining a foothold on maturity.

As the world grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, the relentless mention of the word “coronavirus” in the media can be emotionally challenging for those who lost a cat to FIP.

FIP is caused by a coronavirus, but it's not the same as COVID-19

Both diseases are caused by coronaviruses. Both diseases manifest as mild to moderate, but in certain cases prove deadly. Both diseases can interrupt lives. And both diseases are mysterious and understudied.

COVID-19 has only recently come to our attention, while FIP was first described in the 1960's. We have known about the virus that causes FIP for decades, and yet, we still have no FDA-approved treatment or protective vaccine, mostly due to the lack of funding for feline studies. Perhaps our latest pandemic with humans can eventually contribute to clinical successes with FIP, and what we know about FIP can accelerate treatments for COVID-19.

Helplessness, guilt and anxiety

No matter how a beloved cat passes, there is a large piece of family life missing in the aftermath. What I have discovered over the past few months during my research into FIP is that the loss of a kitten or cat to FIP is such a traumatic event that people remember this experience, sometimes for decades. Time lessens the blow, but triggers exist everywhere to reignite the pain once again.

The universal response to a diagnosis of FIP seems to be helplessness. My friend Marie clearly remembers finding a stray sick cat decades ago. After bringing her to a local vet, he took one look at the cat and said “a yellow cat is a dead cat.” Until recently, that attitude was the norm. The only option was [palliative care](#), followed by euthanasia.

Mimi describes her reaction to the diagnosis for Ember, a young kitten that she dropped off at the vet clinic before heading to the airport for a business trip. “The vet called me to tell me she suspected an incurable disease. She said the outcome was death in a week to ten days. I felt like I was slapped by a brick. We looked for a miracle but after three weeks we had to let her go.”

Guilt is another common thread among the human survivors I talked to about their losses. Bernadette lost her Balinese kitten Winston to FIP in 2001 and still retains the original clinical paperwork. “The diagnosis was a real shocker. I’d never heard of this disease,” she explains. “His brother Diz was heartbroken by his death.”

Laura Bernier, an APLB Certified Pet Loss Bereavement Counselor from Beverly Hills who knows first hand the effects of FIP, finds that guilt surrounds these losses, because “we can’t guard and protect” our precious kittens. Hopelessness and helplessness combine, creating a perfect storm for prolonged guilt.



Diz and Winston

“Anxiety over loss of a kitten to FIP can be so traumatic that people will lose the ability to enjoy cats in their lives,” suggests Peter Cohen of [ZenByCat](#), an organization dedicated to fighting FIP through research. “One tiny kitten sneeze can bring back a flood of helplessness, guilt and anxiety.” Peter knows all too well the terrible pain evoked by watching an FIP-positive kitten die. He lost Miss Bean in 2016 after she was unable to be saved at UC-Davis. Although UC-Davis has had some success, Peter notes that UC-Davis researcher Dr. Niels Pedersen once admitted that, “we are never going to be able to save all cats.” But let’s hope we can save more moving forward.

Harry, who lost Parker in 2005, echoes these thoughts. “We got Parker as a singleton at a local rescue event. He was a major cuddlebug ... adored by my daughter immediately.” By December of that year, it was clear that Parker was in trouble. He stopped eating. The vet found abdominal fluid. He crashed over a few days and was euthanized. A few years later, Harry and his family thought they were reliving the nightmare when their four-year-old cat developed walking problems, reawakening the anxiety. “Even though it’s been years, we all still talk about and remember Parker.”



Parker

Traumatic experiences are never fully lost

For some human survivors of FIP, the experience has resulted in action. Harry is currently serving on the Board of Directors of the [Feline Foundation of Greater Washington](#). His family continues to learn all that they can about FIP and the feline coronavirus. They all volunteer with the rescue.

Peter Cohen has more than 14,000 Facebook followers of [ZenByCat](#) and works with FIP support groups all over the world. “Doing something really helps. This is my way

of doing good.”

Mimi has found a different outlet for her “out-of-the-blue” moment. She says that the loss of her Ember “affected me more than any others. FIP changes people. I needed to find a purpose to come back to life.” So, [she started drawing portraits of FIP Angels](#) for grieving owners and has turned this into more than \$6,500 in donations to the [Winn Feline Foundation’s Bria Fund](#) to support FIP research

As for my friend Marie, she is one of the volunteer members of our Aztec Cat community at San Diego State University. We trade off weeks feeding our feral campus cats. She comes onto campus during her weekly shifts and is the only person I know who can actually pick up BJ, one of the more elusive of the campus cats. She gives back everyday.

Bringing us back to today’s reality

Like most of us, I am now forced out of my daily routine, off campus, and working in my kitchen. Everywhere you turn, our lives are being constricted by yet another coronavirus. But according to Bernadette, who lost her cat Winston, “knowledge is power. I know that cats and dogs carry coronaviruses. And this latest COVID-19 virus scare triggers memories of my grandmother’s brother’s story. He died young of the Spanish Flu in 1918.” Reports of one illness can trigger anxiety about and memories of another.

In this situation, delayed anxiety or triggered grief is common. “Cats can provide us with comfort and reduce our anxiety in times of great stress, so the loss felt by owners can be difficult in these times,” says Laura Bernier. However, this grief does not have to be crippling. “If you find yourself reliving past grief, remind yourself that you made the best decisions you could at the time with the information you had available. Be kind to yourself.”

Good advice anytime, but especially today.