

Making the Decision



a guide to knowing when its time



No matter what age you are, they give us unconditional love. Its no wonder it is a difficult decision as their health fails whether we should consider euthanasia



The decision to euthanize or “put to sleep” is a difficult one for most everyone. Keep in mind as you read this that there is no moral absolute to euthanize a pet before it dies naturally. Each of us will likely die without being euthanized. Its simply an option to consider. In most cases it prevents suffering at the end of life. This is a handout to help you consider whether its an option that will allow dignity for your pet if he/she is having a terminal illness, or if they are overwhelmed by age related degeneration of organ systems, arthritis and other age related problems or Cognitive dysfunction.

I struggle with end of life decisions with my pets as much as you do.

When I was admitted to veterinary school, I brought with me a puppy that I had adopted from the practice that I worked in as a veterinary assistant. A client brought in a beagle that had been misbred by a lab. 3 puppies were taken by Csection and the owner asked that we find a home for them or euthanize them.

I took one. She was white with black spots and looked like a panda bear. I called her Pandy.

Pandy was cute but very mischievous. She dumped the garbage. She ran away when someone opened the door.

But she was also the dog I learned how to use a stethoscope with. She was with me through my first marriage, 2 kids and a divorce. As she got older she had more difficulty getting around. I adjusted by starting her on

antiinflammatory medications and supplements and things improved for awhile. Then I began to see signs of cognitive dysfunction. Cognitive dysfunction is very simply like Alzheimers in that it is a degerative, slow process that leaves its victims losing more and more capacity. But she never lost her appetite...and some days were better than others. As it progressed though, she became incontinent of urine and feces. As part of the cognitive dysfunction she would also pace in circles. The combination meant that sometimes I would come home to 'poop circles' in my living room. I cleaned it up and was frustrated. I checked her bloodwork, took Xrays to see if there were any deeper problems. With the exception of arthritis, her body was working ok.

I didn't go away except for work, and then I would check on her

whenever possible. I worried about her alot. But she still ate.

I had to go to a veterinary conference the last spring she was with me and I asked a veterinarian colleague to watch her. I left her a 3 page instruction sheets on dos and don'ts for Pandy. When I returned she told me that she wasn't sure if I was a saint or if I was doing the wrong thing by not putting her to sleep.

I remember I was angry when she said that.

That fall I came home to find her dead. I had by that time confined her to a crate in my bedroom, which was the only place she seemed comfortable and at peace.

The first thought I had was that I couldn't believe I hadn't had the courage to let my own dog go when it was time. I rationalized it, and with 8 years of school and at that time 15 years of practice, I should have known

Questions that might help

Each time I help someone make the decision to let their pet go

I do it with mindfulness of the relationship they have shared. Each of us at Kindred Spirits have experienced that special relationship with a pet, and each one of us has had to say goodbye.

Some people tell me they just knew when it was time. Some people have been forced to make the decision quickly because of an acute medical condition or serious trauma. But many people begin to ask the question slowly as they watch their pet age and begin to question their quality of life. I envy the people who “just know”. I help the people who must make the decision to relieve pain and suffering. But I agonize with the people who watch their good friend decline and wonder when the right time will be. In this last group especially, I have come up with a few questions to assess the situation and help weigh in on this heavy decision.

Does your pet show signs of pain, and does it affect their day to day life?

As pets age, it is common to have pain from arthritic changes. We now have many medications, supplements, and now alternative treatments like acupuncture and chiropractic to help painful patients. We all experience days when we are sore and as we age that becomes more frequent. Animals are no different. But when that pain is

unrelenting, and they can no longer get around, letting a pet go may be the only option.

How has your pet's quality of life been for the past week, month, or 6 months?

As we look over time, we can sometimes see the decline more clearly. Age is not a disease, but some of the degenerative conditions are more common in aging pets. Most people who have had a pet in their lives 10-15 years see decline slowly at the end and often adjust for it without recognizing the cumulative effect. Age can bring a list of problems on the medical problem list, so the complaints can become very specific. I encourage pet owners to consider that the ability to see the big picture sometimes requires a bit of distance. Imagine looking at a painting. If you look closely you can just see the colors and the brushstrokes. As you step back a bit you can see that the brushstrokes make a pastoral scene, or a portrait. Sometimes others can help you see the larger picture. Other times friends and family can muddy the water. Part of what we are here for is to help make that determination.

I can tell you from experience that there is nothing worse during such a difficult time than a friend or family member who offers support by saying...“its just a cat/dog, I don't know why you are so upset” If you have a trusted friend who ‘gets’ your

relationship, by all means ask for their opinion as well.

How has this affected your life?

This is one most of my clients want to disregard in the decision to put a pet to sleep. As pets slowly decline, we tend to adjust to the new demands that our pets have put upon us. Cleaning up after errant urine or feces, soothing an agitated deaf/blind pet, watching to make sure he/she has eaten, staying up at night because the pet cannot get comfortable. We adjust our schedules, our vacations, our lives to nurse an ailing pet. Many people would gladly do whatever is necessary to help their pets after a lifetime of loyalty. What starts though as a little effort on a bad day can end up with a consuming way of life with no way out for the pet or the pet owner. I see many people, unable to leave their aging pets without tremendous anxiety (usually justified) that their pet needs such specific nursing care that no one else can do it.

No matter what, the decision to put a pet to sleep is a huge one. It is normal to have a tremendous amount of emotion around it. Many people I have worked with have commented that losing a pet was harder than losing a human family member. Support from friends and family is so important in processing such a huge loss.

DECISIONS TO MAKE AHEAD OF THE DAY

Do you want to be present?

Many people want to be present during euthanasia. Others would prefer not to. Either way the process is the same and we advise that you should follow your heart on this decision

What would you like done with your pet afterward?

You may bury your pet at home if your local ordinances allow it.

Or we can have your pet cremated. We use a family run crematorium in Turner Maine because we trust them to handle our patients with respect. They provide either simple cremation with other pets present or private cremation where you get only your pets ashes back.

In addition, there is a family run operation in Litchfield that will allow for cremation the same day as euthanasia, although they do not provide pickup services in our area.

you can find out more about this at their website www.flukesaftercare.com



What to expect the day of

It is simply put, very difficult to choose a day to let your pet go. The advantage of choosing a day is that you can take time and space for grief and end their suffering and the questions that go along with it. The disadvantage is that the day is difficult to choose. In general, we schedule euthanasias at the end of the day when there is less traffic in the practice and encourage owners to come in through the side door to avoid waiting in the waiting area with people during an emotional time.

We can also schedule an at home euthanasia, assuming that your home is within reasonable distance. This option requires more time to schedule and we generally schedule out 1-2 weeks.

In either case, we understand there are times

that people will decide at the last minute to not keep the appointment. Euthanasia appointments are never chiseled in stone. The nature of the decision requires some possibility of delay because either the pet or the owner is not ready. Bottom line is...its ok.

We first give a sedative to relax the pet. In dogs this is a combination of a morphine like drug and a sedative. The effect takes 5-15 minutes and is slow. Dogs simply drift into a light sleep. They are conscious, but not very reactive. Our goal is to eliminate anxiety with the pet and give them a good feeling, free of all pain.

In cats we use a combination of a pain medication and a valium like drug. This has the same effect, although the onset of action is a little faster.

The second injection that is given is an anesthetic. It works by anesthetizing the pet first and then stopping their respiratory and cardiac centers. It is very quick and very peaceful. The hardest part is undoubtedly the time before you come in, agonizing over the decision. The actual process of euthanasia is in our hands very peaceful and compassionate.

But it is emotional. Often for us as well. Which is why we choose the end of the day to do most euthanasia. There is all the time you need. After the second injection, you may stay with your pet as long as you would like privately. For some people, staying is uncomfortable and they choose to leave immediately. For others, awhile is necessary to stay in the

presence of their pet and grieve.

What is right for you is right for you.

Two other common questions that we have come across are

1) Should my children be present--this one is difficult for me to answer. There are guidelines on grieving for children on the website aplb.org/services/children.html

2) Should my other pets be present? -- Several reputable websites advise letting other pets be present with the body of the pet that has passed away to decrease the grieving afterward.

That there is grieving in pets that are left behind I do not doubt. I expect that many pets will act depressed, very clingy or decrease eating for

Other resources :

Websites

www.pet-loss.net

Practical tips for those who have lost a pet

www.petloss.com

Great resource for before and after the decision. Great ideas for honoring your pet.

www.asPCA.org/pet-care/pet-loss

ASPCA's overview on making the decision and dealing with the emotions.

Helpful and short.

www.aplb.org

Most comprehensive site we've seen. Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement is a non-profit group that understands the magnitude of emotion that loss of a pet can bring.

Books

Kids:

.....Dog Heaven by Cynthia Rylant--picture book for kids that have lost a dog

Cat Heaven by Cynthia Rylant--picture book for kids that have lost a cat

For Every Dog an Angel--Great book for kids or adults

Adults

Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet
Name says it all

Cold Noses at Pearly Gates

