The Decision of Euthanizing Your Pet

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> "Like all vets, I hated doing this, painless though it was, but to me there has always been a comfort in the knowledge that the last thing these helpless animals knew was the sound of a friendly voice, and the touch of a gentle hand."
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> James Herriot
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> *All Things Wise and Wonderful*

For owners and veterinarians, euthanizing a pet is one of the most difficult things we will ever do. Euthanasia continues to be an option for many pet owners who do not want their terminally-ill pet to suffer, or who may find the veterinary costs for continued treatment of their pet to be prohibitive. As an owner, the emotions you feel at this time often may make it hard to think, communicate, and make decisions. Therefore, it is often helpful to discuss the process of euthanasia with your veterinarian well in advance of its occurrence. Which family members will be present during the procedure, when and where it will take place, options for handling the pet's remains, how the family members may want to say good-bye or provide a memorial for their pet, and how and with whom they will spend time immediately after the euthanasia are all important issues which should be discussed.
How will I know when it is time?

Knowing when euthanasia should be considered depends on your pet's health as well as your own. It is often helpful to look at the quality of life your pet is experiencing. Does your pet still enjoy eating and other simple pleasures? Is your pet able to respond to you in a normal way? Is your pet experiencing more pain than pleasure?

You will be able to make a much better decision, and be more comfortable in your decision if you get as much information as possible regarding your pet's condition. If your pet is sick, ask about the treatment options, possible outcomes, and chances of recovery. In most instances, you will not need to make the decision immediately, so take time to think about what you should do. Discuss the decision with all of the other family members, including any children. Although it is a human tendency to question our decisions afterward, if you know you made informed decisions it will reduce the 'what ifs' you may tend to ask yourself. Decide what you want your pet's death to be like.

As hard as it is, you need to consider the financial cost as well as the emotional cost of continuing to care for your pet. Do not feel guilty if you cannot afford expensive treatment; there are many people who cannot. It does not make you a 'bad' owner or one who loves their pet any less.

You need to consider what is best for your pet, but also what is best for you and your family. Are you physically able to manage your pet's care? Do you feel ready to say good-bye, or do you need some more time? What will make it possible for you to feel comfortable regarding the decision?

Hospice

Home-based hospice care is becoming available through some veterinary hospitals and volunteer organizations. The concept behind pet hospice is to provide comfortable care for a terminally-ill pet at home. Such care may be helpful when the family members of a pet need more time to adjust to the imminent death of their pet. Hospice can be especially helpful in providing children time to understand that the family pet is dying, or giving time for a geographically distant family member to come home to say good-bye and provide mutual support to the other family members.

Euthanasia for behavior problems

New medications and research in animal behavior, as well as more specialists in the animal behavior field make euthanizing pets for behavior reasons much less common today. In some instances, however, after trying multiple alternatives, some owners may decide the safest and most humane option for them and their pet is euthanasia.

People who have had to make this decision often feel guilty and have feelings of failure. These need to be resolved before true healing can take place. Other people may say things such as, 'Good, you're rid of that problem.' This lack of understanding from others can also make the grieving process more difficult.

If a pet needed to be euthanized because of a behavior problem, children may irrationally fear the same could happen to them if they misbehave. Make it clear to any child involved that misbehavior in children is treated differently than misbehavior in pets.

What happens during euthanasia?

Euthanasia is a peaceful and virtually pain-free process, but it is best to understand what will occur and how your pet's body may react. Knowing these things may help you make your decision regarding euthanasia, and make the process less traumatic for you.

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To perform the euthanasia, first a catheter or needle will be inserted into a vein in your pet's front or back leg. If your pet has been very sick, or has had many intravenous injections, it may take a little time for the veterinarian to find the best location.

Some veterinarians may then inject a drug into the vein which will place your pet in a state of relaxation. The actual drug used to perform the euthanasia is a concentrated solution of pentobarbital, which will also be injected into the vein. In most cases, the injection works very rapidly (5 seconds). The injection causes the pet's heart to stop beating. In some instances, the time between the injection and the death of the pet may be slightly longer. This is especially true if the pet has poor circulation.

In some cases, the pet's muscles may relax or contract after the pet has died. This can be very disconcerting if you are not aware of this possibility ahead of time. The muscles of the urinary bladder and the anus may relax, and your pet may void urine and stool. Involuntary contractions of muscles may result in the pet appearing to gasp, or move a leg. Again, remember your pet is not aware of these things happening since they happen after death. In almost all cases, the pet's eyes will not close after death.

Knowing what happens during euthanasia may help you and other family members decide if they want to be present.

Who should be present during euthanasia?

Many people wish to be present during their pet's euthanasia to say good-bye, to prevent feeling guilty for 'abandoning' their pet, and to know what the death was like so they will not wonder about it in the future. Each individual, however, will need to decide for him or herself whether they want to be present during the euthanasia. Sometimes friends may encourage you one way or another, but it is ultimately your decision, and you need to do what is best for you.

If you do not feel you can be present during the euthanasia, please do not feel you are abandoning your pet. Your pet has experienced your love throughout his life, and if he could talk, you can imagine he would say he understands. Your pet will not be alone, the veterinarian and staff will be there with your pet, talking to him and petting him during the procedure.

In many cases, the individual family members wish to have some time alone with the pet both before and/or after the euthanasia. If you wish to be alone with your pet, you may still want a friend to accompany you to the veterinarian's office to provide support.

Whether children should be present during the euthanasia depends on the age and maturity of the child, as well as other factors. Many experts feel it is best if children under the age of 8 are not present during the procedure, but can see and say good-bye to the pet before and after the euthanasia. If a child is to be present, it is vital that the child be counseled ahead of time by a child psychologist, or another trained professional so she knows what to expect. It is also helpful if the veterinarian or staff can talk with the child and explain what will happen and why. Parents need to be ready to provide support and answer any question the child may have.

Where and when

In some instances, you may have a choice as to where the euthanasia will occur. Some veterinarians make housecalls, and will agree to euthanize your pet at home. Some people prefer being outside, and if your veterinary hospital has a private outdoor area, you may find this will best meet your needs.

In general, if people are having their pet euthanized at a veterinarian's office, they prefer a time when the clinic is less busy, perhaps at the end of the day. Choose a time of day which will allow you to prepare yourself prior to the euthanasia, and have time for yourself afterwards. Some people prefer a Friday, so they can have the weekend to themselves; others think they may feel more lonely during the weekend and prefer the beginning of the week.

Saying good-bye

People say good-bye to their pet in many ways, and at different times during the euthanasia. You may:

- Say good-bye before your pet enters the exam room.
- Accompany your pet into the room, say good-bye prior to the euthanasia, and then leave before the euthanasia is performed.
- Say good-bye in the exam room prior to the euthanasia, leave, and then return to the exam room after the euthanasia to say your final good-bye.
- Be present at the euthanasia and say good-bye during the procedure.

Again, in many cases, the individual family members may wish to have some time alone with the pet both before and/or after the euthanasia to say their personal good-byes.

Remembrances

Many people wish to take something back home with them to remind them of their pet. It may be a lock of hair, a whisker, a clay imprint of the pet's paw, or the pet's collar or nametag.

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Options for the care of your pet's body

You will need to make a decision as to how you want to care for your pet's body. Depending upon where you live, your finances, and other factors, there may be several alternatives for you. If you have asked your veterinarian to dispose of the body it may be important for you to know how this is done.

Individual Cremation: Your pet's body can be cremated at a special facility that cremates pets, and the ashes can be returned to you in a urn either to keep or to scatter at a location you may choose.

Group cremation: You may choose to have your pet cremated with other pets. In this case, the ashes are generally not returned.

Burial at home: If it is allowed where you live (check your zoning restrictions), you may be able to bury your pet at home. Many people prefer this, but you should consider the fact you may move to a different home in the future.

Burial in a pet cemetery: Pet cemeteries are becoming more common, especially in urban areas.

Communal burial: Sometimes options are limited, and pets may be buried together at a common site. Some pet cemeteries and animal shelters may offer this service.

However you choose to care for your pet's body, you may wish to bring along your pet's toy, coat, etc., to be included in the burial box, if this is allowed (it may not be for certain crematories). If you will be burying your pet, you will need to make arrangements regarding how you are going to transport your pet from the veterinarian's office to the burial site.

Autopsy

In some instances, it may be important for you and your veterinarian to know how your pet died. If the death was due to an infectious disease, prevention measures may need to be taken with your other pets or animals or people who may have had contact with your pet. People may want to know if their pet died of a congenital or hereditary problem, and breeders certainly would want to know this information. Knowing what caused the death of a pet may help the owner recover from the loss and relieve uncertainty.

Caring for yourself afterward

You will need to take special care of yourself in the time immediately after the euthanasia. It will be best if you can have someone else drive you home and share the rest of the day with you. It is helpful to have plans for the rest of the day: a hike with your friend, dinner with someone who understands your grief, or putting a puzzle together with a friend. Understanding the grieving process and having various resources available such as pet loss hotlines and books on pet loss can also be beneficial.

Telling others

You will need to decide with whom you will share your pet's death. You certainly need to share it with someone who understands and will support you. You may, however, know people who will not understand your grief. It may be best to refrain from sharing with these people until you feel more ready.

In conclusion

The decision to euthanize a pet is a difficult one. It is helpful to prepare yourself for it, if possible, by becoming informed and making choices regarding the logistics ahead of time. It is important to have one or more friends you can talk to and spend time with both prior to and after the euthanasia. The decision to be present during the euthanasia is a personal one, and you need to do what is best for you.

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