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Euthanasia of a Beloved Pet



*To every thing there is a season,
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die.
— Eccles. 3:1*

This page is devoted solely to helping you better understand and deal with euthanasia. Most people later worry that they finally opted to do this too late — or too soon. Rarely do we meet with a client who feels this was done at the right time. Good counseling can help change that, for many who don't know how to handle their grief. We prefer telling them they are now experiencing what we commonly refer to as euthanasia remorse. The decision was not theirs anymore. It had been taken away from them by the terrible illness. Actually, there was no longer any decision to make. It simply had to be that way.

Euthanasia is one of the most difficult decisions anyone can ever make for a pet who is a beloved companion. Although the decision is demanded by humanitarian obligation, it is always traumatic for the person who must finally make it. It is perhaps the ultimate heartbreak we must be willing to endure for our adored companion animal. Aside from being the right thing to do, euthanasia can be a psychological nightmare of confusion, guilt and even final responsibility.

As loving stewards we have an unspoken covenant with our pets — that we will euthanize, if it is necessary. In the final analysis, only the owner can really understand when the time is right. And even then, emotions still make it so difficult. This is the ultimate loving act for our beloved companion animals. It is for them, regardless of the effects on us, that we must do this. But it is inevitable that we will grieve for ourselves, as well. And now we have to learn to somehow put this into some meaningful perspective.

As a pet owner, none of us like to think of the day, seemingly far in the future, when we must say good-bye to our pet. Though the thought may briefly skim through our minds from time to time, we seldom dwell on it. It is natural to feel we have a lifetime to enjoy our dear pets. Unfortunately, because their lives are far shorter than ours, we must always be ready to face this terrible decision.

The more you educate yourself about euthanasia — ahead of time — the less likely you will be to question the decision or procedure, afterward. This can help prevent those feelings of wishing you had done some things differently, and it may relieve some of the guilt that inevitably follows. Making the decision to euthanize your pet can involve conflicting emotions.

Deciding When the Time Is Right

The decision when to euthanize is as individual and personal as you and your pet are. This is a judgment that only you can make, and it involves great personal courage and sacrifice. Many people fear they will not be able to recognize when the time is right. Do not hesitate to seek

Chat Rooms

Pet Loss

Monday
Tuesday
Wednesday
Friday
8 p.m.-10 p.m. ET

Sunday
2 p.m.-4 p.m. ET

Thursday
7 p.m.-9 p.m. PT

Anticipatory Bereavement

1st and 3rd Thursdays
8 p.m.-10 p.m. ET



guidance from your veterinarian. It is good to include family members or friends who share a close bond with your pet in the decision-making process. This is a time when you will need the support of those who truly understand. Also, the APLB has six online chatrooms that a pet owner can attend, and receive exceptional supervised peer support.

Some important things to take into consideration, contemplating this decision may be:

Does the pet still seem to enjoy life? Is he/she able to carry out normal body functions as before — eating, walking, and eliminating? Is the pet in pain? What is the medical prognosis? What are the treatment options? Will they create an uncomfortable quality of life?

Another important consideration is, are you able to afford the cost of treatment? For some, this must be the overriding determiner. Regardless of their opinions, other people should not stand in judgment of this. In making the final decision it may be helpful to weigh the good days versus the bad days. When the bad override the good, it probably is the right time.

Remember, no one knows your pet better than you do. You have spent a great deal of time learning to communicate with him/her by reading the body language. Attend to what your pet may be trying to communicate. And trust what your heart tells you. Later, you may question this, but that is a natural reaction, and you should rely on your present reasoning.

Making the Appointment

Once you have made the decision to euthanize your pet, the next step is making the appointment. The timing is often critical, and you may need to act quickly. Some people prefer to spend a few final days with their pet. If you do have the time to plan ahead, it is a good idea to first discuss with your veterinarian all aspects of what to expect. Some important considerations are:

Will the veterinarian who cared for your pet be the one performing the euthanasia? Remember, you have the option to change this, if necessary.

Consider the time of day and the day of the week. You will need time before and after to deal with your emotions. You may need to take a day or two off from work. Do not hesitate to care for yourself. You are important. You are making this very critical decision based on what is best for your pet. Make some decisions that are the best for you, as well.

The euthanasia procedure is typically done at the veterinarian's office, but can also be performed at home. Your veterinarian may or may not offer this service, and if you prefer, he/she may be able to offer a referral. If not, then you have some important research and networking to do. Euthanasia is normally a quick, peaceful, and should be a virtually pain-free procedure for your pet, regardless of where it is performed.

Palliation is medical intervention used in terminal cases. It can usually prolong life a short while, but always at great additional financial and emotional expense to the owner — as well as additional stress and suffering for the pet. Unfortunately, too often the treatment can be too aggressive and painful. Remember, pets are very good at concealing their pain and discomfort.

The following information is to help you understand what will take place during the euthanasia process and how your pet's body may react. We have included some additional advice that could be useful, afterward.

The Euthanasia Process

The euthanasia process itself should be as quick and peaceful for your pet as possible.

Ideally, this is a two-step procedure. First, a sedative should be administered, relaxing the pet,

and literally putting it to sleep. Then, an IV should be established, and flushed with saline solution, to make certain that it is inserted properly in the vein.

Based on our years of experience with many thousands of traumatic cases, we very strongly recommend that the sedative be administered first, so he/she won't have to be frightened by or feel the IV. It is understood that in exceptional cases alternate special means may be needed.

Discuss this well in advance with your vet, and insist on it! If he/she still refuses to do this (and that is uncommon) we advise going to another practitioner. It is best to avoid taking any chances, however remote, in the precious last moments of your pet's life.

When the veterinarian is ready to begin the procedure an assistant will usually be asked to help hold your pet. Once the euthanasia solution is given, the animal's muscles will relax and the heart will stop beating. It is a very fast-acting medicine. Most owners are surprised at how quickly death comes – in seconds.

Some pet owners initially think they will be more comfortable if they do not observe their pet's final moments, and would rather be in the waiting room (or elsewhere) during the procedure. But bear in mind that those who opt for not being present often later feel a terrible sense of guilt about this.

If possible, discuss with your veterinarian or his or her office staff before the appointment is made how euthanasia is performed at that particular office. Your pet's health, temperament, and your preferences should each be considered when making this decision. For very small, young or old, or exotic animals, there may be some differences from the procedure just described. Be sure that you are comfortable with the procedure that you and your veterinarian choose. Again, you may need to find another veterinarian to do the procedure the way you prefer.

Saying Goodbye

Before these final moments, you will have to consider how you would like to say goodbye. You may be present for the process, and decide to do this before your pet enters the room, or just prior to the procedure. Some feel they have to say goodbye in the room before then, and leave. If you decide to return afterward, ask your veterinarian to close your pet's eyelids, before then.

As emotionally traumatic as it is, most pet owners feel they need to be present the entire time, hold their pet, and say their farewells during the euthanasia procedure. Most people spend private time with their pets before, as well as after. Each veterinarian has his own policies and procedures, however, and you always should discuss these, beforehand. Be fully informed and in charge, despite your terrible emotional strain. Unfortunately, a few veterinarians are closed-minded and insistent on doing things their own way, despite what anyone else may think or want. This is rare, but you may find it necessary to opt for a different veterinarian and procedure. You want to avoid having any possible misgivings, later. Despite the great tensions at this time we suggest that you do not let anyone insist on anything that you do not want.

Most veterinarians will keep the body until a prearranged pickup service retrieves it for burial or cremation. Generally, it is good to make all arrangements with the cremation or burial service long before that final day, so that the last moments with your pet are as non-stressful as possible. Also your decision-making abilities will be better, at that time. If it is possible, arrange for someone to be with you. If it is possible, arrange for someone to be with you.

Aftercare Options

There are several options for aftercare for your pet's body. These are always influenced by financial and personal considerations, or religious beliefs. Most veterinarians will inform you of the choices, as they generally have a financial relationship with a nearby crematory or pet cemetery. Cremation or burial are the most common preferences. A tiny percentage of pet

owners may prefer more unconventional options, such as taxidermy or freeze-drying. We recommend that they investigate fully how that is accomplished, before deciding. There are some details and aftereffects that may deter the choice, or have unhappy effects, later.

Cremation: This option enables you to keep your pet's ashes in an urn or other special container in your home, bury them — or even scatter them later, in a location that will be meaningful to you. And there is no time pressure on you to make any of these decisions. You can have your pet's body cremated, either with other pets, or individually. In the less expensive group cremation there is no guarantee that the cremains that are returned (if requested) will be those of your pet. With individual cremation, the ashes are generally returned in an inexpensive box, to keep and deal with at your discretion. They will generally try to sell you an expensive urn. But usually owners, can find something they greatly prefer, later. At this point there is no rush to do that.

Usually, your veterinarian will be glad to make the arrangements and notify you when you can expect to have the ashes returned. Generally, pet owners are surprised at the small quantity of cremains that are returned. For example, a 75-pound dog's ashes will fill a space equivalent to about half a shoe box.

Burial: Burial at a pet cemetery is also a common choice. Each has its own requirements, and any specifics should be worked out in advance, between you, your vet, and the cemetery. Although somewhat costly, it also has a sense of permanence and respect that many pet owners appreciate. Some pet cemeteries or animal shelters also offer less expensive communal burial.

There are many pet cemeteries across the country. You can find them in the Yellow Pages, under Pet Mortuary Services, or through your veterinarian. And they can be found on the APLB website. Most people don't realize at first that the quality of management can vary quite a bit. Again, we suggest that you investigate this, beforehand, if possible. Prices vary, but expect a plot to cost at least \$100 for a small pet — with additional regular maintenance charges. You can supply your own casket or buy one from a reputable retailer. Prices can vary from \$50 for a no-frills plastic shell, up to over \$500 for a more elaborate casket. Although they may have quality merchandise, be wary of the sales pitch often made at the cemetery or crematory. Immediately after the death of a beloved pet is not the time for you to make a good choice. Try to make these arrangements beforehand.

Burial at home is preferred by many, but may not be practical, or permitted, in your area. Be sure to check your local zoning restrictions. Also, this option is not an option for those who live in a city, or rent. Your veterinarian may have this information for you. If it is allowed, and you decide to bury your pet in the yard, keep in mind that one day you may relocate to a new home.

There is a special section on the APLB website: [Aftercare](#), with listings of pet cemetery and cremation facilities, according to geographic location.

Whatever choices are made, you may want to bring a few personal items with you, to be buried or cremated with your pet's body. This may be a special toy, coat, flower, poem, picture, etc. Also, you may appreciate clipping and saving a bit of your pet's fur. Many pet owners take comfort in having this special remembrance.

Pets Bereaving Pets

Losing a pet affects not only the people, but can also upset other pets in the home. The makeup of your family has changed with the loss of your pet, and you may notice that your surviving ones may also experience grief. Sometimes you will observe crying, loss of appetite, looking for the missing pet, oversleeping, house-soiling mistakes, even disobedience. The adjustment to a new hierarchy within the home can also be a cause of change in behavior. If you feel the surviving animal is bereaving offer a special treat, a new toy — and most of all, extra attention from you. The grief should diminish over time, as does our own. It has been observed that the distress of pets is almost invariably made easier and briefer if they can observe and sniff the

body of the deceased companion. There is a special article "Pets Bereaving Pets" in the [Winter, 1998 APLB newsletter](#). This is available online to all APLB members.

Some Final Thoughts

We get much love and delight from our beloved pets in life, and we grieve deeply for them when they die. Because of the unique enhancement they give to our lives they become a treasured part of us, forever. When a dear pet's life ends, more dies than just a cherished friend and companion. Since we make them into living symbols of our own innocence and purest feelings, a treasured secret part of each of us also dies. This can be reborn as we slowly pick up our shattered emotional pieces and move on. Our dear ones bless us, just as we do them, and they enrich and prepare us for our moving on in life. The loving memories become a permanent part of who we are, and they live on, in our hearts. Our continuing and improving lives can be our best memorials to them.

Many bereaving pet owners will find comfort in reading "[All Pets Go To Heaven](#)". And they may appreciate visiting the [In Memoriam](#) pages, as well.

[APLB chat room](#) times are also listed. Please visit them for support through your bereavement.

Humane care and consideration for our pets is our direct obligation. The life and death of all creatures is also our moral concern and responsibility. Even the Bible states that man is the steward of all the animals.

This information has been excerpted from the award-winning book, *The Loss of a Pet*, where there is a major chapter on the subject. It can be found on our [Bibliography Page](#).