

The Pain of Facing Euthanasia - Steps to Prepare

Choosing to euthanize a beloved pet can be one of the most heart wrenching decisions a family can make. Most pet owners consider their pet as part of their family and a very important part of their everyday life. In fact, many “pet parents” call themselves “mommy” or “daddy”. Because the love for their pet runs so deep, quite often the decision to euthanize a pet is put off for days, weeks or months; even if it makes the most medical sense for the pet’s well being and comfort.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt, author, educator, nationally known grief counselor, and pet lover, says, “if someone makes the decision to euthanize their pet they need to trust their decision and believe that they have made the right choice”. The word euthanasia is actually Greek for “happy or fortunate death”. Together you and your veterinarian should sit down and decide what is best for your pet. If it is to end the pain and suffering then understand that you are choosing a “happy death”.

Once you have made this tough decision, I recommend several steps to assist you and your pet prepare for this day. Steps that will not only add to the special memories you and your pet share, but steps that will comfort your pet when the final hour has arrived as well as steps to help you grieve.

Step 1: Spend as much time as possible with your furry child. Together visit some of the places that are special to you and your pet. I recently served a family that told me that their pet loved the beach. So when this family knew that their time was limited, they actually took a special vacation to make sure that their pet got to see the beach one last time. Silly? Not at all. We would do that for any of our human family members, wouldn’t we?

Step 2: Allow your pet to do some of the little things that you would normally never let them do but would make them happy. You know, like begging and eating table food, sleeping on your bed, chewing on an old shoe etc. Another family that I served recently told me that they went out and bought ice cream with their pet, because they knew how much their pet loved ice cream, but could never have it.

Step 3: Take more pictures or videos of your pet. You can never have too many! This will help alleviate the regret of not having enough pictures in the future.

Step 4: Sit with your pet and look at and talk about the old pictures or videos that you have taken over the years. Discuss it in detail and remember how you felt, how your pet felt and even how it smelled. Now in all honesty, you will get much more from this step than your pet. But just the time spent together is all worth it.

Step 5: Make sure that you have made a decision on how your pet is to be memorialized and remembered. Memorialization is every bit as important when a pet dies as it is when a human family member dies. Search out and talk to a Pet Funeral Home or Crematory that you feel comfortable with. Discuss options, ideas, services and prices. Have all this information with you when you arrive at your Vet’s office for your final appointment. If at all possible, ask the Pet Funeral Home/Crematory to meet you at the Vet’s office at the scheduled time. (The same can be planned if euthanasia is planned for your home).

Step 6: Stay with your pet from the time you arrive at your Vet’s office until he or she takes their final breath. Bring their favorite toy or blanket, comfort them with a soothing, calm voice and hold them as long as needed, assuring your furry loved one that they will soon be in a better place and feeling much better.

Step 7: If you have other pets, allow them to be a part of all of these activities. They too will grieve in their own way and need a chance to say goodbye.

It is important to understand that even though you have absolutely made the right choice in euthanizing your pet, you must keep in mind that your grief can be affected by the manner in which your pet dies. It doesn’t matter if your pet was tragically killed in an accident, died of an illness, or even old age. Because you chose to euthanize your pet it may leave you feeling uneasy or guilty. You may even feel anger at yourself, your vet or your pet, along with feeling numb. This is normal.

You must allow yourself to feel all of these feelings and more. Talk about them with another family member or a friend who loves pets as much as you do. This will, in time, help these feelings become less powerful and you will grow more confident in your decision.

Finally, remember that guilt, regrets and self blaming are very common feelings after a pet dies. Dr. Wolfelt also talks about having a case of the “if only”; if only I had gotten him to the vet quicker, if only I hadn’t let her out the side gate, if only I had been more responsible.

If you find yourself experiencing the “if only” feeling, don’t be so hard on yourself. There really are some limits to your responsibility for your pet. Always remember this... You loved your pet with all your heart and took care of them with all you had. They really did appreciate your love and care.