

Anticipating The Loss of a Pet

If your pet is aging, seriously injured or chronically or terminally ill, you may find yourself experiencing all the emotions of grief in anticipation of losing your pet. Grieving that begins before a death occurs is known as anticipatory grieving, and the physical and emotional reactions involved are the same as those experienced in normal grieving.

It's tough to watch your cherished pet's health and quality of life deteriorate over time. Constantly reminded that your pet's death is inevitable, you may experience intense feelings of guilt, denial, anxiety and ambivalence.

If expensive treatment or care is required, at times you may wish your pet would die — and then feel very guilty for having that wish. On the other hand, in an effort to cope with your feelings of guilt and loss, you may deny the seriousness of your pet's condition and, against all odds, spend time and money you can't afford to seek out more tests, more treatment and more surgery. If you're faced with the decision of euthanasia, you may be struggling with anxiety over separating from your pet, uncertain how you'll ever bring yourself to say good-bye. Torn between not wanting to see your pet suffer and not wanting to lose the animal, you may go to great lengths to postpone or to avoid the decision all together.

Coming To A Decision

Deciding when and whether to euthanize your pet is probably one of the most difficult choices you'll ever have to make. Because your pet has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness may not be reason enough to resort to euthanasia. Depending on the stage and severity of your pet's illness or injury, and the resources you have available, you and your pet may still have many happy years left together. Exploring all aspects of the decision with your veterinarian and with others whom you trust is very important. Keep in mind, however, that in the end, the decision belongs to you and you alone.

If euthanasia is being considered for your pet, like most people you're probably wondering, "How will I know when it's time?" As you come to answer that question, think about the following:

- What is your pet's general health and attitude? (Is your pet still happy with a zest for life? Miserable? In pain? Terminally ill? Critically injured with no hope of recovery?)
- What is the quality of your pet's life? (Is your pet still living with dignity?)
- How much care does your pet require?
- Can you afford the costs involved, in terms of time, money and emotional strain?
- What is your pet's prognosis? (Will more tests, treatments or surgery make your pet any better? Are there any negative side-effects from such tests or treatments?)

- How do you feel about euthanasia? (Do you consider it an act of compassion?)
- Are there any signs from the pet that s/he is "ready to go"? (Some pets have a way of telling us these things.)
- Sometimes people keep their pets alive in order to meet their own needs (to not feel guilty, to not let go) rather than to meet the needs of the pet. Hard as it may be, ask yourself if this could be going on with you.

Preparing For What Lies Ahead

Most of us find it very difficult to think about planning ahead for the death of our pets. We act as if merely thinking or talking about the pet's dying will somehow make it happen — or we act as if not thinking or talking about our pet's illness will somehow make it go away. Yet the reality is that none of us has the power to cause the death of another merely by thinking or talking about it — and illnesses aren't prevented or cured simply by choosing not to think about them.

Detaching from a cherished pet is just as difficult whether it happens suddenly or over an extended period of time. But having time to prepare for what lies ahead can be one of the more positive aspects of anticipatory grieving. You can make the most of the time remaining by talking with your veterinarian, family, friends and trusted others about the pet's death as a probability (not as a remote possibility). You can also use this time for:

- Feeling and expressing whatever grief feelings arise.
- Confronting and sorting out your own basic values and beliefs about death, dying and the afterlife.
- Thinking about and planning what to do with your pet's remains after death (keeping in mind what's best for your family and what's consistent with your own beliefs).
- Talking to your veterinarian to clear up any questions or reservations about your pet's diagnosis, treatment and prognosis. (Expressing your greatest fears enables both you and your veterinarian to plan out how to deal with them.)
- Thinking about and planning a ritual, ceremony or other way of memorializing your pet.
- Making your final days with your pet as special as possible and making treasured memories that will offer you comfort later (e.g. indulging in your pet's favorite activities; taking lots of pictures; taking a feather or clipping of fur; preserving a paw print).
- Taking care of yourself while caring for your sick animal (by getting enough nourishment, relaxation, rest and exercise).

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