

A Good Death

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
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When is it time for euthanasia?



At some point in our pet-loving lives, many of us will face the wrenching decision of whether to end the life of an ailing pet. It's not always a clear and easy decision. How do we know that, if we do nothing, our loved one's health won't improve? How do we determine if quality of life is poor?

Since we're so emotionally involved, are we in denial about their state of decline? If we invest in life-extending veterinary treatments, will they be worth it? Will a natural death be peaceful? Welcome to the hard side of responsible pet ownership.

Euthanasia is a veterinary procedure in which a sedative and often a pain medication are administered to a dog or cat; then a lethal injection of sodium pentobarbital is given that quickly and painlessly causes loss of consciousness and the heart to stop beating, leading to death in a few seconds. It is considered the most humane and respectful means of taking the life of an animal. The word euthanasia comes from the Greek, meaning "good death."

Veterinarians are often helpful in the decision-making process, although ultimately, it is up to the pet owner to determine the next steps to take.

Melinda Harper, a program coordinator for WPLG-TV and contributor to its weekly program *SoF loTaste* tells the *BT*

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that she was traumatized by the sudden and difficult end-of-life decisions for her beloved 13-year-old Boston terrier, Miso.

Diagnosed with pancreatitis and treated at an emergency vet hospital, Miso's condition worsened, and Harper transferred the dog to her regular vet at Biscayne Animal Hospital.

Miso couldn't eat, lost a lot of weight, and eventually her kidneys and liver failed. "Dr. Goldstein asked me what I wanted to do, but I didn't want to give up on the chance of a miracle happening. But I soon had to make one of the saddest and most heartbreaking decisions ever," says Harper, which was euthanasia.

Online sites can help people evaluate their pet's condition by charting and scoring on a quality-of-life scale.

Journeys Home Pet Euthanasia (www.journeypet.com) offers a quality-of-life calculator that measures eight variables on a score from one to ten. It adds up your scores for the following: mobility, pain, medical uncertainty, respiration, hygiene, eating and drinking, your sense of worry, and the pet's social ability. A score of 80 is a happy, healthy pet. A score of 8 is a pet that is suffering. A low score on a single variable may be a good reason to look at euthanasia.

Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center has an excellent program called Honoring the Bond (www.vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond). This nonprofit offers services at no cost to pet owner clients of the medical center. Its social workers support pet owners in assessing quality of life and treatment options. They provide crisis intervention and can be present during euthanasia.

Honoring the Bond's online guide, "How Will I Know?" helps pet owners make the difficult decisions involved in end-of-life care. Within the ten-page guide is a 25-variable worksheet that evaluates an ailing pet's well-being. Scores are rated one to five; low scores indicate low quality of life. Completing the worksheet helps owners to better visualize their pets' well-being and is an important tool in making treatment and end-of-life decisions, especially for those who feel overwhelmed by emotions.

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HTB variables are specific, such as: my pet...does not want to play; is trembling; is losing weight; is having diarrhea often; has a rough-looking coat. The program recommends other simple assessments of quality of life. It suggests marking a pet's good and bad days on a calendar. When bad days outnumber good days, euthanasia should be considered. Also, list five things a pet likes to do. When he's consistently unable to enjoy things on the list, it is time to think about end-of-life decisions.

Sometimes a catastrophic event happens that allows little time for end-of-life decisions. This summer my niece and her husband were vacationing in upstate New York, 200 miles from their Pennsylvania home, when Gunner, their seven-and-a-half-year-old Great Dane, started vomiting at night. The next morning, they drove the dog to Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine's Companion Animal Hospital, an hour away in Ithaca, where he was diagnosed with bloat, a life-threatening condition where the stomach twists. Emergency surgery would have been \$6000. Gunner's advanced age (a Dane's life-span is nine years), plus a painful and costly treatment, were factors in their decision to euthanize.

After reading Honoring the Bond's guide, Harper says she thinks it's very helpful, especially for pet owners who have not yet had to deal with a dying pet. "Leaving your pet in pain or poor quality of life -- to let him die naturally on his own so you don't feel guilt -- is prolonging unnecessary suffering."

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