

Considering Euthanasia? It Means 'Good Death'

The decision of euthanasia is demanded by humanitarian obligation, but is met with intense emotional responses for the person who must finally make it. Educating yourself about the process ahead of time may help relieve feelings of guilt that may follow.

By: Colleen Rolland

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Euthanasia is one of the most difficult decisions anyone can ever make for a pet who is a beloved companion
- The more individuals educate themselves about euthanasia — ahead of time — the less likely they will question the decision or procedure
- This can help ease the feelings of wishing something different could have been done and possibly relieve some of the guilt that inevitably follows
- Having a beloved pet euthanized at home can be the most personal and respectful thing that can be done for them
- Before these final moments, pet owners will have to consider how to say goodbye and make arrangements for aftercare

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Even when understanding that euthanasia means the "good death," how does one navigate the extreme mixture of emotions and feelings that accompany that choice for their animal companion? We have found that many people later worry that they finally opted to do this too late — or too soon.

Rarely does a Pet Loss Grief Specialist meet with a client who believes their choice of euthanasia was done at the right time; pet loss grief work can help individuals process this experience as one that was out of love and compassion for their ailing animal companion.

Complex feelings are natural after euthanizing a companion and are what we refer to as euthanasia remorse. It's important to recognize that the decision to euthanize was not theirs anymore. It had been taken away by their pet's illness or circumstances. It simply had to be that way to fulfill the humanitarian obligation of living with and loving a pet.

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 met with intense emotional responses for the person who must finally make it. It is perhaps the ultimate heartbreak individuals must be willing to endure for their companion animal.

There are opposing truths in euthanasia: it is the humane thing to do to end suffering for the pet and a psychological nightmare of confusion, guilt, and even final responsibility for the human. It can be helpful for individuals facing this difficult decision to put this humanitarian obligation into perspective.

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Deciding When the Time Is Right

The decision of when to euthanize is as unique and personal as are the individual and pet, and it involves great personal courage and sacrifice. Many people fear they will not be able to recognize when the time is right. Guidance from a veterinarian or a palliative care and hospice veterinarian will help with this. It can also be helpful to include close family members or friends who share a close bond with the pet in the decision-making process.

This is a time when an anticipatory griever will need the support of those who truly understand the unique bond between humans and pets. The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB) has online chat rooms for grief and anticipatory grief and video support grief groups, that a pet owner can attend, and receive peer support from Pet Loss Grief Specialists. When contemplating euthanasia, we suggest individuals take into consideration the following:

- Does the pet still seem to enjoy life?
- Are they 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 treatment compromise a comfortable quality of life?

Another important consideration is the cost of treatment. For some, this can be the overriding determiner. With the cost of medical intervention and treatment, many can incur debt leading to personal financial challenges; it's important for the individual to weigh the options for themselves and their situation when the time comes.

In making the final decision, one may consider good days versus bad days. When the bad override the good, it probably is the right time.

Remember, no one knows an animal companion better than their human. They have spent a great deal of time learning to communicate with them by reading body language and knowing specific habits. It's important to attend to what the pet may be trying to communicate and trust what the heart tells them. While questioning this is a natural reaction, one should rely on the present reasoning and situation bringing them to this difficult decision.

Making the Appointment

Once the decision to euthanize has been made, the next step is making the appointment. The timing is often critical and one may need to act quickly. Some people prefer to spend a few final days with their pet and enjoy the time doing things that were enjoyable by both the pet and human.

If the time to plan ahead is an option, it is a good idea to first discuss with a veterinarian all aspects of what to expect. Some important considerations are:

- Where will euthanasia be performed? The euthanasia procedure is typically done at the veterinarian's office but can also be performed at home. Not all veterinarians offer this service, however. If it is the decision that an at-home euthanasia will be the best way to honor the companion animal, a referral for this service may be provided.

If the veterinarian can't offer at-home euthanasia or a referral, then an individual should research local veterinarians who offer this type of procedure and understand that there may be a wait time involved. Euthanasia is normally a quick, peaceful, and virtually pain-free procedure for a pet, regardless of where it is performed.

- Individuals would also want to consider the time of day and the day of the week if they have the liberty to do so. Making time to work through the emotional response to losing a companion should be considered, both at the time of the procedure and after.

Taking a day or two off from work might be warranted. The grieving should not hesitate to care for themselves. While this process involves making the best decision for the overall comfort of the pet, what is best for the individual must also be considered.

- "Palliation," a medical intervention used in terminal cases, may also be considered. It can usually prolong life a short while. The additional financial and emotional expense as well as possible additional stress and suffering for the pet should be considered. Sometimes the treatment can be aggressive and painful — working closely with the hospice veterinarian and trusting of instincts is important.

Preparing for In-Home Euthanasia

We have always strongly recommended in-home euthanasia. While some veterinarians offer in-office procedures in spaces that are set up like a home environment, there are added benefits to the pet, owner, and pet siblings if it can be performed at home. Please realize that there are some circumstances when that might not be the right fit.

Having a beloved pet euthanized at home can be the most personal and respectful thing that can be done for them. This alleviates some of the trauma that most animals (and their owners) experience when brought to a vet's office. At home, there is a unique sense of intimacy and final privacy that can't be experienced anywhere else.

There is an indescribable sense of finality and breaking of the physical bond during euthanasia, and individuals shouldn't torture themselves with the thought that they could have done something more, or better.

There are many practical considerations that need to be thought out in advance for in-home euthanasia. Most pet owners are in a heightened emotional state at this time and can easily overlook many of these. Below are some considerations:

- A vet performing this personal house call will have to charge more than if the service were done in the office. See if there are additional costs for travel.
- Select the date — be mindful of holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries.
- Think about the space in the home where the euthanasia will be performed and try to prepare ahead of time.

- What will be done with the pet's body afterward? Some veterinarians may be prepared to take the body with them. There are also aftercare services that can be used to pick up the pet's body; depending on the situation, these arrangements may need to be made beforehand. Another option is to find a burial site at the home.
- If the pet will be cremated or buried off-site it is important to discuss arrangements in advance. Knowing the price ranges for all the options will be helpful in making these decisions.
- If there are important people who will be invited into this special time, this should be planned out ahead of time. In some cases, the fewer present, the better.
- Having a vision for the type of experience desired during in-home euthanasia can be helpful in the planning process. Deciding on music, talking (either the veterinarian explaining the procedure or inviting individuals to share experiences with the pet), and inviting any pet siblings to be present should be discussed ahead of time with the veterinarian.

The Euthanasia Process

The euthanasia process itself should be as quick and peaceful for the pet as possible. It is advisable to discuss the specific steps that the veterinarian will take during this process to ensure that it goes in a manner that is least distressing for both the pet and owner.

Ideally, this is a two-step procedure. First, a sedative is administered, relaxing the pet, and literally putting them into a comfortable sleep. Then an IV will be placed 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 cases, we strongly recommend that the sedative be administered first, so a pet won't be frightened by, or feel, the IV being inserted. It is understood that in exceptional cases alternate special means may be needed.

When the veterinarian is ready to begin the procedure an assistant will usually be asked to help hold the 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 — sometimes within 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 another room, if at home, in the waiting room, or elsewhere during the procedure. Those who opt for not being present may later feel a terrible sense of guilt about this.

If possible, discuss all these factors with the veterinarian, or their office staff, before the appointment is made. The pet's health, temperament, and preferences of the owner 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. It is important that owners are comfortable with the procedure before they are able to go through with it; while it can extend the pain and suffering of the animal, a second opinion might be warranted if any of what is discussed is uncomfortable for the soon to be bereaved.

Saying Goodbye

Before these final moments, pet owners will have to consider how to say goodbye. This choice is a personal one; some may want to be present for the process, while others may wish to say goodbye in the room before the procedure and leave during the euthanasia and return after it is finished. When deciding to return afterward, it is advisable to ask the pet's eyes be closed before spending those last moments with the peaceful pet.

Many pet owners want to be present the entire time, hold their pet, and say their farewells during the euthanasia procedure, as emotionally exhausting as this can be. Others want to spend private time with their pets before, as well as after.

Each veterinarian has their own policies and procedures which should be discussed beforehand. Despite the heightened emotions at this time, we suggest that individuals do not let anyone insist on doing anything that is not comfortable or wanted.

Aftercare Options

There are several options for aftercare for the animal companion's body. These are always influenced by financial and personal considerations or religious beliefs. Most veterinarians will discuss the available options as they generally have a relationship with a nearby crematory or pet cemetery. Cremation or burial is the most common preference after euthanasia.

- **Cremation** — This option enables individuals to keep the pet's ashes in an urn or other special container in the home, bury them, or even scatter them later in a meaningful location. Cremation can be done either with other pets (communal or partitioned), or individually. With communal cremation, the pet is cremated with other animals so an individual's pet ashes are not available afterward.

Partitioned cremations allow a lower-cost option to individual cremation, where the animals are cremated together in partitioned sections. While this option allows individuals to receive the cremains it is possible that other animals' ashes will be mixed in.

With individual cremation, the animal companion's ashes are returned in the urn, or provided container to keep. Many veterinarians will be glad to make the arrangements and individuals will be notified when the ashes are ready for pick-up.

- **Burial** — Burial at a pet cemetery is a common choice. Each cemetery has its own requirements, and any specifics should be worked out in advance, among the bereaved, the vet, and the cemetery. This option can provide a sense of permanence and respect that many pet owners appreciate. Some pet cemeteries or animal shelters also offer less expensive communal burials.

There are many pet cemeteries and crematories across the country. It is suggested to investigate or research the options available beforehand. Burial at home is preferred by many, but may not be practical or permitted in the area. Be sure to check the local zoning restrictions. If it is allowed, and the burial spot is in the yard, keep this in mind if relocating from the home as removing the body might not be advisable.

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, individuals may want to bring a few personal items to be buried or cremated with the pet's body. This may be a special toy, coat, flower, poem, picture, etc. Other tokens of remembrance may be a paw print or fur clipping. These choices should be made ahead of time.

Pets Bereaving Pets

Losing a pet affects not only the people but can also upset other pets in the home. The makeup of the family has changed with the loss of a pet, and surviving pets may display signs of grief. Some surviving pets will cry, lose their appetite, look for the missing pet, oversleep, be incontinent, or even become disobedient.

The adjustment to a new hierarchy within the home can be a cause of change in behavior. If the surviving animal is bereaving, offer a special treat, a new toy — and most of all, extra attention, love, and comfort. The grief should diminish over time, as it does for humans.

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; this can be made available with in-home euthanasia.

Final Thoughts

We get so much unconditional love from our beloved animal companions in life, and we grieve deeply for them when they die. Dr. Wallace Sife, APLB founder, believed:

"When a dear pet's life ends, more dies than just a cherished friend and companion. We make them into living symbols of our own innocence and purest feelings, and so 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." They may appreciate visiting our Pet Memorials page, 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 are also our moral concern and responsibility.

Some of this information has been excerpted from the book, "The Loss of a Pet," 4th where there is a major chapter on the subject. It can be found on our Bibliography Page.

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