



OVC Pet Trust Preparing for the Loss of a Pet

A Support Guide for Pet Owners



“Grief is not a state but a process...” — C.S. Lewis



Support for Pet Owners Preparing for the Loss of a Pet

An Introduction

Preparing for an impending loss is one of the most difficult, challenging and emotional situations a pet owner may face over the lifetime of their beloved companion. People may feel guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness and embarrassment, among other feelings when they're facing death and preparing to say goodbye. It may begin with receiving bad news or a life-limiting medical diagnosis from your veterinarian, or perhaps your pet is aging and their quality of life is declining. Dealing with imminent or future care decisions about your pet's health and well-being can be stressful and overwhelming and in some cases extremely emotional and difficult to navigate.

This Pet Loss Support Guide, developed at the University of Guelph's Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) provides suggestions and ideas to help you explore and prepare for your loss. The intent is to help you think about and plan for your loss so that you are able to cope and feel more confident and comfortable when considering end-of-life decisions for your pet. However, this guide does not replace speaking to a trained health professional should you require additional support. Please refer to the Resources section for more information.



“If love alone could have kept you here, you would have lived forever.” – Anonymous



Coping with Anticipatory Grief

We often think of grief as something that happens after a death. In fact, it often starts long before the death actually occurs. Grieving that begins before an impending or expected loss is known as anticipatory grief, and it can involve the same physical and emotional reactions as those experienced after a death, as people adjust to the new landscape of their lives. People who experience anticipatory grief may have feelings of anxiety, anger, depression, denial, guilt and acceptance, among others. Some people experience only some of these feelings, while others feel none at all.

People cope with grief in very different ways. If your pet is aging, you may find yourself grieving the small changes in their life and daily activities over time. If you're facing a serious injury or chronic illness with your pet, grief may set in when you think about what the future holds. It is important to remember that we all grieve and cope differently. When grief is seriously impacting your ability to manage daily activities of living, then it may be time to reach out for professional support.



“Sometimes you don’t realize your own strength until you come face-to-face with your greatest weakness.” – Susan Gale



Finding Support

Establishing a support network of friends and family is very important when you are preparing for a loss. Sometimes the primary pet owner may bear the weight of the decision making, and might be afraid to share it with the rest of their family or support network. It is important to know you are not alone. Make a list of the people in your pet's life and decide if you want to let them know about your pet's condition and your decisions. Consider reaching out to other people you know who have gone through losing a pet. Parents may be hesitant to include children in decision making about a family pet's health, however including children in the process may in fact teach them valuable life skills and decrease their fear of death, depending on their age and maturity level. Your veterinarian is a great resource for ideas of support in your community. If possible, establish your support network early and in advance of your pet's death.



“Goodbyes hurt the most when the story was not finished...”
– Anonymous



Be Informed

In order to make the best veterinary care decisions for your pet, it is important you fully understand your pet's condition and the medical options available for treatment. If you are unclear about the information you receive from your veterinarian or veterinary specialist, ask questions. If you have additional questions after talking with your veterinarian, write your questions down and contact the hospital for follow-up. If you understand information more clearly when it is in writing, ask your veterinarian for written resources or for recommended online resources about the illness or recommended treatment options.

Some people may choose to ignore or deny that death is imminent. Others find that if they are prepared in advance they may be able to cope or find meaning more easily than those who aren't. If you are able to have a realistic expectation of what your pet's death or euthanasia may involve, it may decrease the unknown and help you feel more prepared when it occurs. Don't be afraid to ask your veterinarian what to anticipate.

Consider asking your veterinarian for reliable sources of information. Be cautious about “Dr. Google”, or health information obtained on the internet. Since not all information published online is reliable, the content may be misleading or inaccurate. Any medical or alternative treatment should be offered or recommended by your veterinarian.

“The trouble is, you think you have time.” – Buddha



Decision-Making Considerations

Animals live in the present. They don't think about the past or worry about the future the way humans do. We don't know what pets may think or feel – and we may never know for certain – but from available evidence and research it seems likely that pets do not know that they have choices between further interventions, no intervention, palliative care or euthanasia. These decisions are often difficult for us as humans because we know that the end is near.

Because most pets are very good at masking the clinical signs of their illness, the discomfort we see may be much less than the discomfort they actually feel. The medical training that your veterinarian has received enables them to provide your pet with a diagnosis and recommended course of treatment, which may include pain management as indicated. Your veterinarian, however, cannot “know” what the best decision is for your family. You are

the person your pet depends on to make veterinary medical care decisions, and it is important to consider the needs of your pet and the members of your family when making difficult decisions. It is often helpful for children to be involved in decision making to the extent they are able.

When deciding the best treatment plan for your pet, it may be helpful to consider the following questions.

Companion Animal Needs

- Is there a reasonable chance for a cure?
- If not curable, how much additional time might treatment offer?
- What will my pet's quality of life be like with the suggested treatment?
- What will my pet's quality of life be like without treatment?
- How many of my pet's usual and favourite activities are still possible? Make a list and review it on a regular daily/weekly/monthly basis.

“Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.” — Earl Grollman

- Is my pet suffering or will my pet suffer? How will I know? What treatment options are available to keep my pet comfortable?
- What are my options if my pet becomes incontinent (unable to hold urine or stool), lacks interest in eating, becomes immobile, withdraws from the family and usual activities?
- What will the dying process look like?
- Will my pet die in a hospital or at home?
- What do you think your pet would be unable to tolerate and/or live with?

Personal Needs

- Will you have the necessary physical and emotional stamina to support long term health needs for your pet? For example: getting up or staying up during the night, preparing special food, maintaining a feeding tube, giving injections, caring for wounds, cleaning up and assisting with bathroom functions, lifting or assisting with walking, climbing stairs, etc. Some pets will require a significant amount of time and effort; others not. Your veterinarian can help you understand what to expect.
- Know your own limitations and be realistic about what you are able and not able to do to support your pet. Ensure you have considered your own self-care and supports so that you can manage your pet's care and not put yourself at risk.

- Is the relationship with your pet changing or decreasing in quality as you anticipate this loss?
- What are your religious, spiritual and personal values and beliefs regarding end-of-life decision making?
- What is your personal “bottom line”? What are you unable to tolerate and/or live with — both financially and emotionally?
- Ask yourself, “when I look back on this several months from now, what will be most important about what I did for my pet or did not do? Which decisions will be the easiest for me to live with? Will there be anything I regret doing or not doing?”

“If there ever comes a day when we can’t be together, keep me in your heart, I’ll stay there forever.” — A.A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*



Is Euthanasia The Right Decision For Me? / Assessing Quality Of Life

Deciding to euthanize your pet may be one of the most difficult decisions you ever make. Many people struggle with knowing when it's time to consider saying goodbye. One of the most important questions to keep in mind is: "Is my pet still having fun and enjoying their favourite things in life?"

"Making it through one more day" and "having fun" are two very different qualities of life. Your veterinarian can help in assessing several major domains of your pet's daily activities to determine their quality of life including eating, mobility, sleeping and pain levels. Think back to when your pet was healthy. What did your pet enjoy doing the most? Enjoyable hobbies may include people watching, animal watching, going for walks, chasing squirrels,

riding in the car or eating. Are these activities that are still being enjoyed today? What is the likelihood that your pet will be able to enjoy these activities with medical intervention? Is your pet having more “good” days than “bad” days?

Enlist the help of your veterinarian. While your veterinarian cannot make the decision for you, it is helpful for them to know that you are considering euthanasia. Remember how your pet looked and behaved prior to the illness or aging. Sometimes changes are gradual, and hard to recognize. Look at photos or videos of your pet from when they were young or before the onset of illness. Mark good and bad days on a calendar. This could be as simple as marking a happy or a sad face for good or bad days. If the bad days start to outweigh the good, it may be time to have a discussion with your veterinarian. Write a list of three to five things your pet likes to do. When your pet is no longer able to enjoy these things, it may be time to discuss end-of-life options.

It is important to acknowledge that some people may not believe in euthanasia. Euthanasia is a choice that not everyone will feel comfortable making for their pet. It is best to speak to your veterinarian about your concerns. Modern veterinary medicine has significantly progressed over recent decades and it helps if you are open to talking about end-of-life options with your veterinarian. Having that conversation may make your decision an easier one to make. Depending on your pet’s illness or condition, it is important to be informed and understand what types of clinical signs, level of distress and pain that you and your pet may experience if you are considering allowing a natural death. Sometimes these clinical signs can be very distressing (e.g., seizures) and difficult

to manage, so it's important for you and your veterinary team to plan ahead whenever possible. If euthanasia is not a consideration, you must decide if curative treatment is appropriate or not. If it is not, an emphasis must be placed on managing the pet's pain and symptom relief and control. Being informed about the anticipated physical changes your pet may experience as an illness becomes terminal is important so you know what to expect for your pet and to prepare yourself.

“Those who think there's a time limit for grief have never lost a piece of their heart.” — Anonymous



“Find ways to celebrate, savour and appreciate the positive moments in an otherwise difficult journey. Those memories will sustain you after the loss.” – Dr. Shane Bateman



Treasuring Your Time

If you have decided that euthanasia is the most appropriate choice for your pet, you may choose a variety of ways to spend the last months, weeks or days of your pet's life. Treasuring your time together may include special things like: giving them extra attention, including petting, grooming, holding them or making them special meals to eat, or going on a special trip or walk. Some people may find meaning by creating memorable moments, such as a "bucket list", before times get tough and your pet's quality of life starts to decline. Organize a "goodbye party" before your pet is too sick to enjoy it, and invite the humans and animals in your pet's life to celebrate with you. If you are able to celebrate before you say goodbye, you will always be likely to remember that. Be thankful for the moments and memories you make during your time together. Memories may help to counterbalance the heaviness of grief that is often present after the death. Everyone deals with situations differently, and individuals may choose to treasure their time with their pet in many ways.



“Goodbye may seem forever. Farewell is like the end, but in my heart is the memory and there you will always be.”
—Walt Disney



Understanding Euthanasia

When you have decided on the day, time and location for the euthanasia, you and other family members may or may not choose to be present. There is no right or wrong choice, as it is a very personal decision. Your veterinarian will be supportive of your decision. Know that it is acceptable to change your mind as well.

Understanding the process of euthanasia from beginning to end may help you mentally, emotionally and physically prepare for it.



Euthanasia: A Guide for Adults

Individual veterinarians, especially those offering home-based care, can offer different euthanasia protocols. Ask your veterinarian to review the entire process with you before the day of euthanasia, if possible. You may elect for euthanasia at your veterinary hospital or at home. Not all veterinarians will do the procedure outside of the hospital, so you may need to specifically ask if they are willing or able or can help you find a veterinarian who offers this service. In consultation with your veterinarian, you may already have elected home-based care for your pet and discussed the euthanasia location and protocol.

Euthanasia protocols vary but ultimately may involve the administration of a sedative to make your pet sleepy and calm. Ask your veterinarian to fully explain what they will do.

The injection that will cause death is a barbiturate drug. This drug causes brain activity to decrease and the lungs and heart to stop working. Your veterinarian will listen to the heart to confirm your pet has died. It is okay to continue to touch and hug your pet if you choose. Although uncommon, your pet's body may experience involuntary muscle movements at death; this is completely normal as the physical body reacts to loss of life. One involuntary muscle movement that may occur is in the diaphragm – if it contracts it can look like the pet is gasping for air. However, the pet is deceased; their body is simply adjusting.

Don't be afraid to have a conversation with your veterinary team about what to expect. There are established and published guidelines veterinarians follow during the euthanasia procedure, and they would be happy to talk to you about the process.

“In life we loved you dearly, in death we love you still. In our hearts you hold a place, no one else will ever fill.”
— Anonymous



Euthanasia: A Guide for Helping Children

Learning to understand and cope with illness, injury or death is a natural experience in life. Being involved in the decision-making and treatment of a family pet that is seriously ill or injured may provide valuable lessons for children about responsibility, compassion, commitment and coping. If appropriate, include children in the euthanasia decision; children may need help to understand why the decision has to be made and have a feeling that they've participated in making it. They also need an opportunity to say goodbye in their own way and make the most of whatever time they may have left with their pet.

Help young children understand why euthanasia is necessary in words they can understand:

- Old age: “When animals get very old, their bodies wear out and stop working.”
- Terminal illness: “Because the disease couldn’t be stopped, our pet is very sick. His body has worn out and stopped working.”
- An accident: “A terrible thing happened (e.g. hit by a car). Our pet’s body was badly hurt. He was in too much pain and couldn’t be fixed.”

Explain euthanasia in a developmentally-appropriate way. Let children know their pet will be helped to die peacefully and without pain:

- “We will be taking Charlie to the veterinarian to help him die. Dr. Smith will give Charlie a needle filled with medicine that only works on animals. The medicine will stop Charlie’s breathing, his heart will stop beating, and then he will die. He will not feel any pain. When an animal is suffering, we can choose to help them die. It’s a very sad choice to make, but one that we want to think about because we love Charlie so much. We know that he is very sick and won’t get better.”
- Avoid the common phrase for euthanasia, “put to sleep”. Since we go to sleep nightly, associating this act with death may create anxiety and might lead to disruptions in sleeping routines or behaviours. It can also cause fear about surgery and anesthesia.

- Allow the child to be present for their pet's euthanasia, if they choose. Let them know you will support their decision. The reality of a peaceful death may be less traumatic to children than their fantasy of it. Young children may not understand the permanence of death unless they actually see that their pet is not "just asleep".
- If your child is not present for the euthanasia, you may ask them if they want to see their pet afterward. Demonstrate that it is okay to talk with their pet and touch its body. Offer older children an opportunity to spend time alone with their deceased pet so they can express their emotions privately if needed. Reinforce that it is acceptable for them to change their mind if they want to be a part of the euthanasia and/or see their pet when it's gone.

"The sorrow we feel when we lose a loved one is the price we pay to have had them in our lives."

— Rob Liano



Remembering Your Pet

There are many ways to memorialize your pet after you have said goodbye. Your veterinarian can provide suggestions on methods to deal with your pet's remains after they have died. Traditionally, pet cremation is the most common choice by pet owners; communal or private cremation options exist in Canada. Most municipalities in Canada have bylaws against private burials of pets, but pet cemeteries do exist. Your veterinarian is the best resource to talk through the options with when considering what to do with your pet's body. Some companies manufacture memorial products that incorporate the pet's ashes, including options that allow some creativity in memorializing your pet. There are also newer 'green friendly' options. You are encouraged to do your own research and have a conversation with your veterinarian about the options available in your area.

The bond we share with our pets is special. The loss we experience before and after their death is significant, life-altering and real. Don't hesitate to reach out for help or support before and after your loss.



“Forever would not have been long enough.” – Anonymous

Resources

Available in this series:



OVC Pet Trust: Coping with the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide for Pet Owners



OVC Pet Trust: Preparing for the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide for Pet Owners



OVC Pet Trust: Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet

A complete listing of pet loss support materials including: online communities; grief and bereavement resources; pet loss support groups; pet memorial; suggested pet loss books and other online reading materials are also available on our website. Books on pet loss for children can help parents narrate a story around pet illness and death.

www.pettrust.ca/petlossresources.



“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.” — Elisabeth Kübler-Ross



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OVC Pet Trust, founded in 1986 at the Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph, is Canada's first charitable fund dedicated to the health and well-being of companion animals.

OVC Pet Trust supports innovative discoveries that improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of diseases of pets. Funds raised also help provide the next generation of veterinary leaders with the most advanced knowledge, skills and techniques, as well as equipment and facilities for the Ontario Veterinary College.

OVC Pet Trust's Pet Memorial Program provides an opportunity for people to honour the special relationship they have with their pets.

**Learn about OVC Pet Trust at
www.pettrust.ca**

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