

The Final Act of Courage

By George Cuellar, DVM, Diplomate ABVP C/F

By far the most difficult decision we will make as pet owners is euthanasia. This is a very private, reflective, and difficult time. My clients always ask me two questions when faced with this difficult decision: “How do I know when it is time?” and “What would you do?”

There are times when the decision is made for us and our loved pet dies at home. This is a gift that, unfortunately, rarely happens. There are times when a devastating accident occurs and it is obvious that the level of suffering currently happening can't continue. There are times when we get a terrible diagnosis that is totally unexpected that will limit how long a pet will be with us to days or weeks. Then there is just the natural end of a life from a variety of causes. Years of discussion with my clients during this time has shaped how I respond to the questions.

The most pressing concern is timing. Too early means taking away precious quality time with the family and too late means allowing unnecessary suffering. I rarely hear that a family acted too early and hear many times that they waited too long. Sometimes, we simply don't have enough information to make the decision.

What is quality of life? That is a very challenging question. However, we can make some general observations for every pet. I think it is important that during the last part of a pet's life we address common problems like pain, inappetance, chronic organ failures, and medical problems. We have a plethora of medications and strategies to create comfort later in life. Pets are living longer than ever and it is no longer uncommon for me to see 20 year old cats and dogs. Unfortunately, life is not a forever proposition. We need to consider what to do once a pet has reached the end. The following factors, in my experience, contribute to an assessment of quality of life:

- **Eating.** Not eating is the most consistent sign that the time is either approaching or has arrived. If this is sudden and without explanation, please check for a complication, a new diagnosis, or see your veterinarian. Many cases of inappetance are treatable. That said, if treatment does not work or if this is expected or prolonged then this is one of four major considerations.
- **Sleep.** Sleep is the second major issue to consider. Some pets may not sleep well for a variety of reasons or conditions but inability to sleep at all for long periods is a major concern. Some wander all night and all day or vocalize all night and all day maybe sleeping 30 minutes or an hour in between from exhaustion. My 13 year old, diabetic, blind, black pug had a stroke. She wandered up and down the stairs and around each room at a brisk pace for 24 hours and rested exhausted only 2-3 times for about 30 minutes each time.
- **Ability to urinate and defecate normally.** The pleasures for pets as they age (maybe us too) include normal peeing and pooping. Sometimes a body process occurs and pets can no longer get up or get out to do their business. They end up soiling themselves and requiring extensive nursing. Having mobility is a key to a happy life. Sometimes the problem is not mobility but instead problems occur because there are blockages. Also, sometimes is severe voiding pain for urination or defecation. All of these are important concerns.
- **Pain.** Pain, especially intractable pain or pain too great for medication to alleviate is a greater focus these days than in the past. How can we tell if a pet is in pain? Pets do not normally vocalize with pain, their behavior changes. They get into unusual places like closets and under the bed. They may become clingy and prefer to be almost on top of owners. They may be sullen or withdrawn from the family. Their appetite may be decreased. The most common thing I hear about a pet in pain is that they are not “happy” anymore.

These four signs are the major considerations when contemplating euthanasia. If any one of these signs is severe, then it is time. If multiple signs are partial in different categories, then it is time. What happens most is what I call the roller coaster effect. The roller coaster effect occurs when there are periods of time with good and bad days. Just when it looks like it's time, a great day comes along renewing hope. This happens over and over again like an emotional rollercoaster. Pick any period of time and try using a calendar to mark the good days and the bad days. This will help assess the situation. When the bad days well outnumber the good days, it's time.

There are few emotions in life like loss of a loved one or loved pet. The companionship, the love, the selfless giving, and the kindred spirit that pets give throughout their life with us is profoundly special. Euthanasia should never be taken lightly or unadvisedly. For all of us, it comes down to a question of resolve and courage. We must resolve to not allow suffering. We must have the courage to convert all the selfless love our pets have given us over the years into the last act of peace for a beloved pet.

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