

Knowing When It's Time to Say Goodbye

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It could be the hardest decision you ever make. You love your pets like family, because they are. But one day you have to let them go. So how do you know when it's time? How can you be sure? If only they could just tell you, "It's okay, I'm ready".

You may be skeptical about an article written by a euthanasia veterinarian. Some will assume that we advocate for euthanasia sooner rather than later in most situations. That isn't our point of view and we often try to help clients see alternatives they hadn't considered. We believe this decision should be made carefully and thoughtfully, with good counsel and accurate information. This article is written to help you know when the timing for euthanasia is right. *If your pet is not exhibiting the signs described in this article, euthanasia may not be the right decision at this time.*

For most people, euthanasia seems appropriate when the pet is unable to get up, refuses food and water, or is in a coma. It's much harder to know what to do when the signs are less obvious. To avoid pain and suffering for your pet, you may be faced with making a decision about euthanasia before these obvious symptoms occur. Sometimes nature doesn't bring death quickly or painlessly. You may be able to spare your pet pain and suffering and also spare yourself the awful memory of your pet's suffering.

We know that you take this decision seriously and want to do what's right. This information, in addition to that provided by your pet's veterinarian, is your objective guide to decide what's right for your pet. Three helpful things to consider:

1. Is my pet suffering or in pain?
2. Has my pet's quality of life diminished significantly?
3. Am I able to provide the care my pet needs?

1. Suffering and Pain

No one wants their pet to experience pain and suffering. Since you can't ask them, it can be difficult to know. Pets often mask the signs of pain. For example, pets don't often vocalize until pain is severe. You'll need to look for behavioral clues to know how your pet is feeling. You will be able to recognize the signs of pain if you pay careful attention.

Signs your pet may be experiencing pain and suffering:

- Hides in unusual places and avoids human interaction
- Shakes, trembles or pants
- Eyes may sometimes appear glazed or "checked out"
- Diminished appetite (even when offered special treats)
- Inappropriate elimination – movement is painful or lacks energy to get to litter box or outside
- Grooms infrequently
- Licks an area of the body repeatedly or avoids laying on one side
- Avoids moving around or needs assistance to get up
- Has difficulty sleeping restfully
- Tail is tucked or wags infrequently
- Vocalizes, whimpers, or yelps spontaneously or when touched

Increasing frequency and severity of these signs are indications that pain needs to be addressed. Mild and moderate discomfort can often be relieved with medications available from your pet's veterinarian. We strongly encourage you to discuss options for pain management. If pain symptoms persist, you may need to consider euthanasia. If you are unsure, a conversation with your pet's veterinarian or one of our trained counselors may help clarify.

Cissy was an older cat suffering from the effects of failing kidneys. She eventually refused each of the many varieties of food offered to her and began to have accidents outside of her litter box. Her people lost a family member to kidney failure and remembered their struggle with nausea and pain. They wanted to spare Cissy that pain. It is safe to assume that pets experience many of the same symptoms of physical discomfort as humans with similar conditions.

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2. Quality of Life

Quality of life refers to your pet's general well-being. Illness and age can significantly reduce a pet's quality of life.

Signs your pet may have diminished quality of life:

- Doesn't engage in play very often
- Doesn't enjoy things they used to (going for walks, riding in the car, etc.)
- Consistently loses weight
- Vocalizes differently (more or less, louder or softer)
- Tries to get your attention or "ask for something" without a clear need
- "Bad days" outnumber "good days"
- Isolated from you due to loss of mobility or elimination problems
- World has become "smaller", more limited
- Sometimes seems vacant or unaware of their surroundings
- Doesn't express their personality the way they used to
- Experiences mental distress, anxiety, or confusion

Recognizing a significantly diminished quality of life is sometimes an indication that it's time to consider euthanasia. This is true especially when several signs are present and they are progressing. Your intuition will be a good guide. Euthanasia may be the decision you make when you realize your pet's condition isn't likely to improve much. Today is perhaps the best it's going to be.

Tucker was an older dog whose owners were concerned that for the past year "he just hadn't been himself". He was anxious almost all of the time. He paced relentlessly and couldn't get comfortable and rest.

He experienced severe mental distress as a result of dementia and medication didn't help. They didn't want to see him suffer this way anymore.

3. Meeting your pet's need for care

Your own physical, financial and emotional resources can impact your ability to care for a pet that is nearing the end of life. Sometimes your pet's needs exceed your personal resources. These are common reasons to consider euthanasia and often cause great distress:

- Obligations and responsibilities at home or work may conflict with your ability to care for your pet.
- The financial burden of veterinary care can make it unrealistic for you to continue with treatment. There may be low cost clinics or other resources to help with the costs of care so be sure to explore these resources if available. It's also okay to give yourself permission to stop making medical interventions.
- Your pet may be eliminating inappropriately. This may seem trivial until you experience the difficulty of continuously cleaning up and the expense of repairing damage. Your frustration may significantly diminish the quality of the time you have with your pet. Also consider the loss of pet's dignity.
- Severe behavioral issues such as aggression can compromise safety and well-being of other family members.

Bailey was a dog whose behavioral issues compromised the safety of family members and other pets. For her, behavioral modification hadn't been successful and her family came to the painful conclusion that euthanasia was the appropriate decision to avoid a serious injury.

Pets with severe fear or separation anxiety experience an extreme form of mental suffering and it may be kindest to release them from it.

Though it is very understandable under these circumstances to feel guilt about contemplating euthanasia, you must realistically take into account your own resources and limitations when determining your ability to care for your pet. Our pet loss counselors are trained to objectively help you sort out your options. Knowing you haven't left any stone unturned can give you peace of mind.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, there usually isn't one unmistakable sign to know when it's time to say goodbye. Trust yourself that you are the one who can best determine the right time. No one knows your pet as well as you. Only you can decide the right thing to do in your situation. It's normal to feel emotional and to have mixed feelings about your decision. It's a good time to reach out for support from friends and family who can provide a patient, listening ear. Our experienced counselors can also provide you with the help and support you need. Feel free to contact us to discuss your questions and concerns.