

Pet Loss & Grieving: Part One

By Jennifer M. Brauns

There are few things in life more devastating than losing a pet. A dog's love for his human is unconditional. It is one of the few relationships in our lives where we are loved without judgement or boundary. Humans spend a lifetime searching for such love and acceptance, but rarely find it. A dog brings that kind of love into your life every day without fail. How then do we cope when their time with us is coming to an end, or worse, when they are taken from us unexpectedly?



Photo by Cate Frost

Looking Ahead

It helps to decide in advance how you will deal with the passing of your canine companion when the time comes. Will you consider euthanasia and if so, at what point? If your pet has to be euthanized, will you want to be with him or not? Will you want your children to be there? What about your other pets? Would you prefer to be at home or at your veterinarian's office? What would be best for your dog?

Everyone is different in the way that they deal with the passing of a loved one. You need to do what feels right to you and not be influenced by the expectations of others. You may prefer not to be with your pet at the end, while your spouse may want their furry friend curled up in their lap or in their arms when the time comes. Each person must deal with the loss in their own way and in their own time. Dogs know when they are dying, but they have nothing to fear. To them it is just another phase in their life cycle. They do, however, sense our emotions and can become distressed by our reactions.

Aging Pets

As your dog ages, his body will go through many changes. Dogs can develop joint pain and swelling, hip and back pain, vision problems, bladder control issues, dementia and many other ailments in their senior years. Proper veterinary care during their later years is key to a long life.

Terminal Illnesses

If your dog's health is declining or if he has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, there are a number of decisions that will need to be made. Will you allow your loved one to pass naturally or will you intervene? End-of-life decisions are incredibly difficult to make. People often feel guilty about taking another's life into their own hands. The moment you feel that your loved one is suffering unnecessarily, you will have to make a choice. Decide now how you feel about issues

like euthanasia and burial versus cremation. Take time to research your options and talk with people who have been through pet loss. With these decisions out of the way, you will be calmer and better able to focus on comforting your beloved friend (and yourself) when the time comes. I recently spoke with a woman who had put her dog down at her vet's office, only to learn afterwards that in-home euthanasia had been an option. She regretted not asking more questions.

Pet Hospice

The Argus Institute is a service of Colorado State University that provides pet hospice care for companion animals that have less than three months to live as well as counseling services for their owners. Hospice volunteers can teach pet owners how to provide advanced care for terminal patients. They also make regular visits to evaluate the status and needs of their furry clients.

Euthanasia

Do you know what to expect if you decide to have your pet put down? When an animal is euthanized, they are first given a sedative to alleviate anxiety, then an anesthetic to relieve pain. This puts them into a deep sleep, allowing them to be comfortable in their last moments. Next, an injection is given which causes the heart to stop. The animal will pass quietly in a few moments and the attending veterinarian will inform you when the heartbeat has stopped. It is a very calm and quiet process. If your pet has

been showing obvious signs of pain and suffering, it can be a comfort and even a relief to know that he is finally at rest.

How Will You Know When Its Time?

People often wonder how they will know when it is time to consider euthanasia. Your decision should revolve around quality of life. If your dog can't walk up the stairs by himself anymore, he may still be happy if someone can help him when needed. If he can't get up at all or snaps at family members who try to assist him, or cries out in pain when moved, those are signs that it might be time. If he won't eat anymore or has significant trouble breathing, those are signs that it might be time. If you are unsure, ask your veterinarian. Too often, pet owners put off the decision to end a life because they are afraid to let go. While the thought of losing a pet is hard to bear, stalling for your own reasons when your friend is suffering is not right.

In-Home Euthanasia

More and more people are choosing to have their pets euthanized at home. We spoke with Sharon Adams of the Pet Stuff Place in Castle Rock because of her background in human hospice work, her own pet loss experiences and the Pet Loss Peer Support that she offers to her clients. "I encourage customers to give serious consideration to having their pet euthanized at home," Sharon said. If you've got surviving animals and you drive away with their pal never to return, they are left wondering what happened. "When they witness the process, they don't have to wonder what happened," she added. Children and other family members as well

as surviving pets should be allowed to be present or not, or come and go, depending on what feels right to them.

There are many reasons why people choose to euthanise at home. Large pets with mobility problems may be difficult to physically move. Some animals become frightened or anxious when going to a vet's office. Some people just prefer to have the service performed at home where animals and people are more comfortable and where there is freedom to grieve in private. With an in-home service, you can choose your pet's favorite bed, couch, blanket, toy, treat or whatever will make him the most comfortable.

Today, there are many options that weren't readily available a decade ago. The cost for in-home euthanasia is about the same as having the service performed at a vet's office. Dr. Ann Brandenburg-Schroeder founded her Beside Still Water at-home euthanasia service in 2000. She started the practice to allow animals to die in familiar surroundings with family and friends present. She assists pet owners in making arrangements for euthanasia, cremation, burial and memorializing their pets. She gets to know each pet and family member and doesn't rush through the process.

Dr. Kathleen Cooney started her business called Home to Heaven in 2006 and has since helped over 1,200 families with the beautiful experience of in-home euthanasia. She loves hearing stories about her client's pets. She is currently writing a book on euthanasia techniques for veterinarians. There are many other vets who provide in-home euthanasia and related services. Your family vet may be one of them. If you

are interested, ask your vet if they offer this service. If not, ask who they would recommend.

Cremation Options

There are several ways your pet can be cremated. Individual cremation ensures that only your pet is cremated and that the ashes returned to you are those of your pet. Witnessed cremations allow you or a designee to witness the cremation to further ensure that the cremains are those of your pet. In communal cremation, your pet is cremated along with other animals. No ashes are returned to you. The cost of cremation is determined by the weight of your pet. Most crematories provide pick up and delivery to your home or veterinarian's office. Vets offering at-home euthanasia usually provide disposition services once your pet has passed on. You should know that you can request a specific crematory handle your pet's remains. Many vets have relationships with certain companies, but you can choose your provider.

Burial

There are a number of pet cemeteries in Colorado where your pet can be laid to rest. Home burial may also be an option, but you will need to contact your city, county and/or homeowner's association ahead of time. Private burial sites must be covered by a minimum of two feet of earth, be away from buried lines and water and must be in a location that will be free from disturbance by other animals.

Join us in the next issue for an extensive directory of end-of-life products and service providers. We will also discuss the topic of grieving the loss of a pet and ways to memorialize your friend. 🐾