

Last summer I took over the care of my aging father's dog "Ashley". My father, now 86 years old, was no longer able to care for her, so I being the vet in the family was the obvious choice to take over. While quite advance in age herself, Ashley-a 16 year old collie mix-retained a certain spunk and vitality that amazed us and brought much joy to my family. Some weeks after her arrival at our house it became clear she was having difficulty walking. After some careful evaluation we came to the sad conclusion that she had a degenerative spinal cord disease that was and untreatable. Slowly, over several months, we would watch her worsen until last week it became clear we had to say goodbye, and put her down.

After some tearful goodbyes with my family at home, I brought her into the office to do what I had done so many times for countless other families over the years. I was no different than them. I felt the full range of emotions from sadness to guilt to a sense of relief she would no longer suffer-all along repeating to myself the reasons we had to take this step.

Thanks to the very sensitive and caring people I work with, this difficult task was handled with sympathy and professionalism.

I realize the topic of pet euthanasia is a sensitive one. I hesitate to write about it. But if a veterinarian can't openly talk about euthanasia, and in the process possibly help someone struggling with it for their own pet-then who can?

So in an odd kind of tribute to my father's beloved friend "Ashley", I thought I might address the issue of euthanasia and answer some of the common questions that surround pet euthanasia: How is it done? Does it hurt the animal? How are the animal's remains handled? How can I deal with the emotions?

Veterinarians approach the task of euthanasia very seriously. We understand that pet owners trust us to select a method that is truly humane, brief, and painless. The most common method of euthanasia is the intravenous injection of a barbiturate medication that rapidly (within seconds) renders the failing pet unconscious. A few seconds later this same medication arrests the heart. This method assures us, and the pet's family, that the animal feels no pain or anxiety, and simply "falls asleep" one last time.

After a pet is put to rest arrangements must be made for his or her remains. Each veterinary hospital handles this differently. Many offer special handling of the remains through a separate pet memorial park. Various options exist including burial and cremation services.

Over the years I've come to recognize some common truths about euthanasia . Below I offer some advice for families who may be facing the loss of their pet.

- 1) Euthanasia is a very personal decision.

While I encourage individuals facing euthanasia of their pet to seek the support of friends and family, I truly feel that the pet owner should make the decision on his or her own terms. So often I see well-intentioned family or friends imposing their own opinions and ideas on the grieving pet-owner. The "right time", the "right place", and the "right reasons" for putting your pet to sleep vary tremendously for each person. They need to do what feels right for them and their pet.

- 2) Don't let someone tell you "It's just a dog/cat/bird".
In our practice we never see "just a dog/cat/bird". These animals are usually beloved family members that someone has cared for and loved for many years. Psychologists tell us the grief felt with the loss of a pet can be equal to that felt with the loss of a human family member

- 3) Think about things ahead of time
When I work with a family that has a terminally ill pet I will encourage them to at least think about how they might approach euthanasia when the time comes. Some will make arrangements well in advance. This helps to reduce the number of decisions they need to make when their pet's time is near. Talk to your veterinarian. He or she surely understands the feelings you are experiencing and can help and support you through this tough time.

- 4) Seek help if you feel you need it.
After your pet is gone you may feel profoundly sad. Everyone deals with this grief differently. The UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine sponsors a Pet Loss Support Hotline (1-800-565-1526) for individuals who feel they might benefit from talking to someone about their loss.

- 5) Euthanasia is a caring and loving act.
Understand that euthanasia of a terminally ill or injured pet may be the most caring and loving thing you will ever do for your pet. Though it may not feel like it at the time, euthanasia can be the final "gift" for their pet that will finally bring to an end their pain and/or suffering.

With the support and understanding of many people, my family made it through the loss of "Ashley". She'll be missed and remembered for a long time for what she gave to us. Her gentle patience, joy and warmth brought us much joy. And whether we know it or not, she-as animals have a way of doing-showed us how to be better people as well

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