

YOUR PET'S FINAL FAREWELL

Saying goodbye to a beloved animal is one of the hardest things to go through in life. When we receive a terminal diagnosis for our pet, many of us, at least initially, experience shock, trepidation, depression, and an anticipation of pain.

All of these emotions need to be acknowledged. The dying process can be a roller coaster for you and your pet.

So, what can you do before things get tough?

Consider having logistics in place before the active phase of dying. You might want to have phone numbers and references ready ahead of time, such as pricing of euthanasia, cremation, after-hour services, and in-home veterinary services.

Consider having extra pain relief, comfortable beds, and heating pads on hand and setting aside a quiet space for your pet if you have a busy household.

While they're hard under any circumstances, decisions on the best modes of treatment, palliative care, pain options, euthanasia, natural death, cremation, or burial **can be** an absolute nightmare if you are unprepared. Get questions answered and details handled before the active hospice phase.

Talk to your veterinarian -- often. Look for pet loss support or pet hospice groups in your area. Make a bucket list for your pet. Also, ask yourself what kind of support you need from your family and friends to prevent burnout, as this level of caregiving is often emotionally and physically demanding. It's also important to pay attention to your own emotional state and avoid projecting your fear of pain and dying onto your pet.

The biggest question many of us face is this: *How do I know when it is time?* Remember, first of all, to trust yourself! You know your pets better than anyone; you've lived with them for a long time.

With that said, sometimes it's clear when the end is near, but sometimes it's not. The common saying, *you will know*, applies often but not always. For instance, you may spend a good deal of energy pondering whether to delay euthanasia until things get unbearable or to choose a day when life forces are diminished. Still, your pet is in a peaceful state.

Remember that not every pet stops eating altogether as its death draws nearer. Some will get

quieter and sleep more, while others will get restless. Some will withdraw and be less willing to engage with you. You might see other behavioral changes, such as defensive behavior, increased vocalization, or mental confusion, such as sundowning, which can be a sign of CCD and canine cognitive dysfunction.

End-of-life behaviors can be confusing. For instance, when you schedule a euthanasia time, you might see your pet suddenly be lively again. This is not only emotionally trying, but you might second-guess yourself and cancel the dreaded appointment only to find your pet collapses again soon after.

In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a beautiful description for this: “the last bloom,” the last thank-you from our pet, a final reaching out towards us, and gratitude.

Here are some other pointers that might be helpful.

If you have other pets in your home, it's a good idea if they're around for the end. Death is a part of life, and it is well-documented that cats, dogs, and horses who see the deceased body will spend less time searching and grieving than pets who have not seen a companion's remains.

If you have children, think about how they can be part of the end-of-life process in an age-appropriate way. One of my client's two daughters was five and seven years old when their family dog, Zoe, died. They made a box for Zoe with things she might need: drawings, dog treats, gemstones, and a big key to open the door to Heaven. After Zoe's passing, the little girls received a special golden package with her ashes in the mail and spread it in Zoe's favorite places.

Last but not least, every cultural tradition -- religious or otherwise -- has distinct phases before, during, and after death. I encourage you to explore different rituals to honor your pet. From wakes and burial ceremonies to journaling and spiritual work, find the best possible closure for you and your family.

“All the love you created is still there. You live on -- in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here. Death ends a life, not a relationship.”

- Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom