

Making the Decision To Euthanize A Beloved Pet: A Quick Checklist

The decision as to when is the right time to put our beloved furry friend to sleep has to be among the hardest of questions an individual or family will ever have to make. This is because the conclusion as to when it is the right time to humanely euthanize a family pet is loaded with what seems like an endless amount of complications and emotional contradictions. Scientists, doctors, philosophers, and all of the other great healers in history have used the term *multi-factorial* to describe this conflict of thinking. That is, there are so many sources of information and input that are involved in making this most difficult of choices that it is almost impossible to list each question and then summarize every one.

Therefore, in this quick checklist, I provide only the most basic of thought-provoking questions. In the accompanying book I expand on each question in great detail because I believe each and every part of this difficult decision is important and needs to at least be considered. Ultimately, the final determination you make still rests with you, the precious pet's loving owner.

In closing, I'd like to remind the gentle pet owner that this guide represents only my personal observations on this very sensitive subject. There are probably as many ways to approach this difficult task as there are stars in the sky. My sincerest hope is that this guide will help make your path just a little bit easier.

Basic Questions to Consider Before Bringing Your Pet to the Veterinarian

1. Who is the dog or kitty's primary care-giver?

As simple as this question sounds, the answer is probably the most important one that needs to be decided. And it needs to be decided early in the process because sometimes the owner and the primary care-giver are not the same person. It is important to know the answer because someone, ultimately, will have to make the final decision. The answer to this question can be a real can of worms; however, if the pet is lucky at this end-time of its life, the primary care-giver and his or her owner will be one in the same and all will go smoothly.

2. Has a recent, objective, overall-health assessment of the pet's condition been made by a veterinarian?

As the primary care-giver of an aged (usually), chronically ill, or mortally wounded pet, you may instinctively feel that you know what's best for your pet. But unless you are a practicing veterinarian, you really can't; especially if you and the animal are very close. Because you're often too emotionally involved. This question also serves a double purpose. A visit to a veterinarian will help to confirm your instincts with regards to your pet's actual quality of life from an objective, medical point of view. Or, as is frequently the case, it may also yield some suggested drugs or therapy that may greatly improve your pet's quality of life and will then allow you to have more time with them.

***An important side note: As a primary care veterinarian who has practiced front-line veterinary medicine and surgery for twenty-five years, I often see pet owners who have waited too long before bringing their pet in to see me, at which time I'm no longer able to reasonably help the animal. When asked why they waited so long, the answer without fail is: "Doc, I was afraid you were going to force me to put my beloved Fido or my sweet little Fluffy to sleep."

Although I talk about this problem at some length in the book, I now will SHOUT the following statement as simply and as strongly as I can! Most beloved and gentle reader, at least here in America:

**TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE AND
PROVIDING YOU ARE OF SOUND MIND, THE ONLY PERSON WHO
CAN FORCE YOU (AS THE ANIMAL'S OWNER) TO PUT YOUR PET TO
SLEEP IS A JUDGE VIA A COURT ORDER. YOUR NEIGHBOR CAN'T,
YOUR KIDS CAN'T, YOUR VETERINARIAN CAN'T, OR YOUR
MOTHER-IN-LAW CAN'T!**

3. Do you feel you are being forced in one direction or another with regards to euthanizing your pet? Or worse, are you being made to feel guilty?

Are you considering putting your precious pet to sleep because you, as the dog or cat's primary care-giver, feel that their time has come? Or is it because a visiting mother-in-law, a well-meaning friend, or some other person who may have absolutely no business to do so tells you that the pet is "suffering."

4. Have you considered the dog or kitty's quality of life from your pet's point of view?

The term *quality of life* has as many definitions as there are people on our planet. This is because everyone has their own worldviews that are based upon their individual life's experiences, their basic personal natures and sensitivities, their maturity (or lack of maturity), and, sadly, their social and political circles. There are people who feel that as long as there is life, then everything *possible* (which also is a confusing term) should be done to extend it. There are others who feel that animals should not have to suffer any misery or discomfort at all.

Additional Questions to Ask When You're at a Veterinarian's Office

5. As your pet sits on an exam table between you and a veterinarian, are you and she sharing at least a few common values and opinions?

This is important on many levels. This is because, when all is said and done, regardless of whatever decision is finally made, it is important for your peace of mind that both you and the veterinarian should come away with some sense of the right thing having been done. I spend a lot of time sharing my thoughts on this

issue in the body of this book.

6. Do you feel you're being pushed in one direction or another into doing something you're not comfortable with? Is the doctor clearly sharing and explaining to you his reasons and thought processes?

If you find yourself feeling uncomfortable with whatever discussion is taking place, there's a chance you're probably correct. Be cautious, but don't always first assume you're being taken advantage of. People often confuse sinister intentions with a simple lack of communication; you may have an opposite worldview from that of the veterinarian with regards to end-of-life issues, or you're simply both just a bad fit.

It's important to remember that veterinarians are people, too. We all have our hopes and dreams, our life's experiences, and our points of view. We have mortgages, student loans, kid's braces, and family obligations that must be filled. This topic, too, I discuss in great detail in the book.

7. As the pet's primary care-giver, are you willing or able to perform any aftercare that may be required to save or extend your dear pet's life?

This is a huge concept to keep in mind. This is because very often, in the passion and desperation of the moment, difficult and sometimes lengthy aftercare needs are frequently not factored into your decision.

8. Have you seriously considered your precious dog or cat's age, their personal temperament, or their tolerance for the possible demands of hospitalization and/or long-term care that is about to be thrust upon him or her?

This is a question very few pet owners ever consider. Even if you're willing to sacrifice yourself for your pet's sake, will he or she be willing or able to go along with your wishes? Because we humans are thinking and rationalizing creatures, we have the ability to project our lives into the future. That is, if we are sick or injured, we are able to have reasonable expectations that whatever medical procedure is going to be performed on us, we will know that someday we will be better.

Dogs and cats don't. All they know is that somebody who has always treated them

with nothing but kindness is now jabbing them with needles every day, is making them eat special crap that they hate, and is forcing them to have to spend time in a hospital with other people who are now jabbing them with needles, etc., as well.

9. Can you afford any heroic lifesaving or life-extending procedures for your pet?

This is a devastatingly difficult question that the vast majority of my treasured clients have had to grapple with when confronted with lifesaving or life-extending treatment for their aged or injured pet. Yes, it is unfair that money has to come into the picture, but that's just the way the world works.

10. Is the ultimate decision you are trying to make in your dog or cat's best interest, or are you doing (or not doing) it for your own sake?

This is a tough, tough question! From both my personal and professional experiences of having to confront both sides of the realities of pet euthanasia, I know that this question—at least on its surface—may sound a bit insensitive. But it still needs to be asked. If I didn't ask, I would not be fulfilling the oath I took when I became a veterinarian. Sorry.

11. Finally, when all has been said and done, and you find yourself still confused and/or undecided, what should you do now?

This is a tough question as well, and I discuss this common aspect of the euthanasia decision-making process and make some detailed suggestions in the body of this book. But for now I will just say this: The question as to whether it is the right time to put your beloved pet to sleep can never be answered absolutely. Except in the most obvious of cases, there will always be doubts and second-guessing. All we mere mortals can do is the best we can with the resources and information we have at the time, and then move on.

However, having just said that, it has been my experience that if you are still completely baffled as to what to do, *don't do it*. Period! At least not yet. If after going back and forth, and back and forth, and back and forth, and you still can't come to a reasonably clear decision, my experiences have been that it is best to wait.