

Experts offer
advice on end-
of-life decisions.

By Katie Ingmire

FINAL *Farewell*



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Saying goodbye to an ailing dog challenges all of us, even those who deal with grief on a daily basis.

Michele Pich had to say goodbye to her American Staffordshire Terrier Cleopatra on June 21, the longest day of the year.

"I remember having her in the car driving her into (the University of Pennsylvania) at the time, and just realizing that date coincidence and thinking, 'Wow, this really will be the longest day of my life if this is the day that I have to say goodbye to my best friend,'" says Pich, a veterinary grief counselor at the Ryan Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Cleo had received a lymphoma diagnosis in 2009, and the doctors at Ryan Veterinary Hospital treated her with chemotherapy drugs for two years, until she was 13½ years old. Eventually, the treatments were no longer working and her condition wasn't going to get better. Cleo's neck began to swell a few days after her last chemotherapy session, prompting Pich to make an appointment for the following day, June 21. Pich asked the vets about the likelihood that Cleo would begin having trouble breathing if she took the dog home that night; they told her it was a definite possibility.



PHOTOS BY VANESSA GROSSEMY

A veterinarian can help you assess your dog's quality of life and offer an objective view of the situation.

"At that point, I realized it wouldn't have been fair for me to keep her another day," Pich says. "So at that point I realized that no, this is the day I have to let her go."

Like Pich, we are often faced with hard choices at the end of a pet's life, and making these decisions is unquestionably one of the most difficult parts of owning and loving a dog. With our guide to making end-of-life choices, we hope you can find comfort and reassurance when the time comes to give your dog a final farewell.

Quality of life

If you have a dog who used to relish every bite of his kibble but can no longer eat, or one whose greatest joy was playing fetch but can no longer stand on his own, when is the time right to say goodbye?

To answer such a tough question, consult with people who have you and your dog's best interests at heart. "When (people) ask us these kind of questions, I always say, 'Well, who is your support system? Who helps you make these decisions?'" says Gail Bishop, clinical coordinator for the Argus Institute, a counseling and advocacy program within Colorado



You can find comfort in making plans for your dog when the euthanasia may be weeks or months away.

State University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Fort Collins, Colo. "A lot of times, just asking that question helps families realize, 'Well, wait a minute. I do have other people that have a vested interest in my companion animal,' and it would be nice to gather or initiate their feedback and opinion, not only to give you additional information, but also to provide you with more emotional support." For those who may not have a spouse, family member, or friend to turn to, many resources are available online and through pet loss support hotlines. Bishop also recommends working with your veterinarian to assess your dog's quality of life.

Another way to look at your dog's well-being objectively is by using a veterinary quality-of-life scale. End-of-life-care specialist Alice Villalobos, D.V.M., DPNAP, created the HHHHHMM Quality of Life Scale — available at www.pawspice.com — in which people give a dog a score of zero to 10 in seven categories. The scale takes into account animals' basic needs and abilities they should have at the end of life, including eating, drinking, hygiene, happiness, mobility, and pain control.

"There should be no pain. ... It outweighs all the considerations," says Villalobos, the director of Pawspice, a Los Angeles-area practice that embraces standard care along with treating the symptoms of a pet's decline. "If the pet cannot breathe, it's struggling to breathe ... then that would be a reason to elect the gift of euthanasia, which is a well death."

Villalobos also emphasizes that every animal's different. Certain criterion on a quality-of-life scale may hold more importance for one dog than another. "For some people, their bottom line is mobility," she says. "If they have a 150-pound Great Dane, if that dog can't walk around with his bone cancer issues or arthritis, that score would probably be zero or one, but that outweighs everything else on the scale, even though he might be eating well and all those other things."

Experts suggest keeping a daily journal or other record, making it easier to identify when the bad days start outnumbering the good ones.

Euthanasia decisions

Although losing a pet can be heartbreaking, euthanasia can prevent further suffering and provide your pet with a quick, merciful, and typically painless death. In some cases, you may have time to plan; others may be emergencies.

"I try to help families have a plan A

and a plan B," Bishop says. "A plan A is, you have the luxury of time, so you have the luxury of assessing quality of life, you have the luxury of making an appointment, you have the luxury of saying, 'Who do I want with me during this last time I'm going to say goodbye to Fluffy? Do I want music? Do I want a poem read? Do I want this outside, inside? Do I want this at home?'" Bishop recommends trying to plan the things that are important to you, and making the plan when the euthanasia



Involving kids

Your children may feel just as connected to your family's dog as you do. Here are tips on how to involve your kids before and after you've said goodbye:

→ **Take pictures.** Michele Pich, a veterinary grief counselor, suggests taking a lot of pictures with and of your dog. "(That) can help to write the stories about and talk about the things that have been your happiest memories with (your dog), so those are things that can be talked about before the pet is gone," she says. That way, once your dog has died, you can bring up those memories in a positive way.

→ **Be honest.** Pich recommends being as honest as possible with kids if their dog is sick, even if you don't go into all the details. This honesty can make kids aware that the dog may not always be there with them, but will always be in their hearts and memories, and that it's important to embrace the times they do have with the dog, she adds.

→ **Don't say "put to sleep" when referring to euthanasia.** "Sometimes (kids) will then associate that with going to sleep at night, and if they go to sleep at night, you don't want them afraid to go to sleep (and think) that they're not going to wake up," Pich says.

→ **Talk about what gives your dog joy.** When discussing your dog's quality of life, you may make a list of things that give your dog joy, and including your kids can help make for a more fruitful discussion. "They may have different examples of what gives Fluffy joy than Mom or Dad," says Gail Bishop, clinical coordinator for the Argus Institute.

→ **Document good and bad days in a visual way.** When you're keeping track of your dog's well-being, Bishop says kids can help by putting different-colored stickers on a calendar to denote the good and bad days. "Or you could put seven beautiful rocks or marbles in a jar, and then talk about it during the evening, and take a rock or a marble out if it's a bad day, or put one back in," she adds.



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may be weeks or months away. "Then you either write it down and put it in a drawer, or have it on your computer, and you can let it go until you're faced with that decision," she adds.

Plan B involves figuring out what to do if there's an emergency — before it becomes one. "Let's not wait till the emergency before I think about, 'How am I going to get this dog down the stairs?' or 'How am I going to get him in the car by myself?' or 'Where's the nearest ER?'" Bishop says.

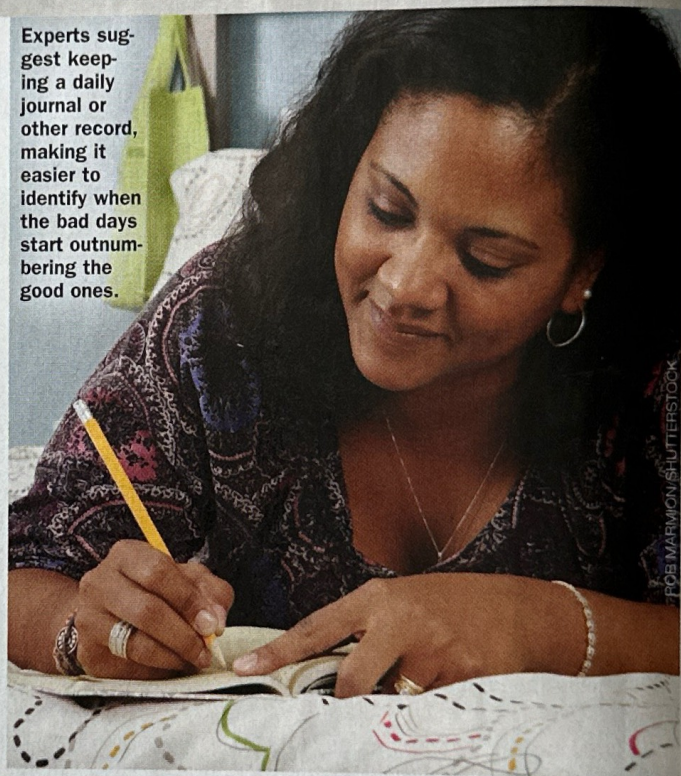
Besides the comfort you may find from making plans for your dog, knowing what to expect during euthanasia may help put you at ease, too. "It's important to have your veterinarian, if you're choosing euthanasia, to go over the protocol," Bishop says. "I want to know what to expect when I come in there; I want to know what to expect if you come to my home."

Now what do you do if you've made a plan A and plan B, and your veterinarian's told you what to expect during the euthanasia, but on the day of the appointment you notice your dog seems to be doing unexpectedly well? Then maybe that's not the day to make the euthanasia decision — it's OK to schedule the euthanasia and cancel it, Bishop says. "Let yourself have the permission to go, 'You know, not today,'" she says. "Then the next time when you look at the calendar and go, 'Wow, it's been four days, pretty bad here, and only one good day, now maybe I need to make that appointment again,' you'll have gone through a lot of the angst the last time." Check with your veterinarian about the logistics, such as if he or she will still charge you if you cancel — and figure out whether that will factor into your decision — and the time frame the vet would need if you cancel, Bishop adds.

Do the best you can

After making the choice about when to say goodbye, the most important thing to remember may be that we've done the best we can. "We're all human beings," Villalobos says. "We're going to try to make the best decision we can, and we have to

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be able to comfort ourselves that we have done the best we can under the given circumstances."

After Pich made the decision to say goodbye to Cleo on that June day, she got to spend a couple more hours with her. Some of the doctors at the Ryan Veterinary Hospital, including the head of the hospital, came up to visit, along with friends and family members. Pich was with Cleo during the final goodbye. "I was lucky enough, I got to hold Cleopatra's head. ... She kind of just laid her head in my hand," Pich says. **DF**

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