

CREATURE COMFORTS

Two questions help make a difficult decision

ABOUT ANIMALS



DR. BRAD DAVIS

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People decide that a pet needs to be put down for a variety of reasons. While most animals in this situation are sick, some have a behavioral problem, like an aggressive dog, or a cat with uncontrollable litterbox amnesia.

Other times a lifestyle change makes the pet difficult to keep. Owners often find it more humane to put the animal down than to find a new home. (The most irritating reason ever given me involved a lady who put her dog down because she had bought new furniture, and the dog's coat clashed.)

In the old days people seemed to believe it was cruel to keep an animal alive after a certain age. I still see grandchildren clash with grandparents who want to put a pet down just because it's getting old. Euthanizing for age alone has become an antiquated idea.

Veterinarians are often called upon to euthanize an animal, human or not, ending its life when its condition or situation leaves no other good options. Doing this minimizes the pain our patients must face, but it isn't easy for vets, or for the owners faced with making the decision.

When should you make the decision? When is it right? How will you know you are making the best decision for your pet?

Questions
I have my clients ask themselves two questions to help them make a rational choice. These questions take some of the emotion and pain out of the decision, so people can find the answer that's right for their pet, and for them.

Before those questions, I'd like to explain why I don't like using the word "suffering." Levels of suffering vary dramatically between people, and this is even more true in animals.

I've watched a Yorkie slip onto his back, wailing in agony because of the slight prick caused by the tiny vaccination needle. That dog barely felt the slightest pain, but was clearly suffering.

I saw a Labrador retriever, after stepping in a hole and breaking his leg at Hines Park, come running into my clinic, bone protruding from his leg, still carrying the Frisbee, unsure why the game had stopped. (Hey, I still have three legs). Despite the pain, this dog was not suffering. Take suffering out of your thought process. We can't understand another creature's suffering.

Use these two questions instead. As a rule, they will point you toward the right decision. If you answer "No" to both, then the time to make the hard decision has probably come.

Question No. 1: Is my animal still enjoying life?

Is life fun for your critter? Is it a chore? Does he or she greet you at the door? Eat well?

Animals live in the here and now. They don't look forward to weddings, graduations, the World Series. If they aren't happy now, if life is treating them harshly, and living itself is a bad thing, the answer is "No." Go to Question Two.

Question No. 2: Is there anything reasonable I can do to get my animal enjoying life again?

This is where your individual beliefs come into play. I've had people who wanted to get a kidney transplant for their cat who had advanced renal failure. I've had some people who felt giving a simple antibiotic was too far to go.

Sometimes deciding what's reasonable involves your belief system, other times it deals with finances (most can't afford a \$10,000 kidney transplant for their cat).

Put simply, if your pet is not currently enjoying life, and there's nothing that can be done to get your pet enjoying life again, then it is time to make the decision, no matter how it hurts you.

Duty
In almost every case, the decision is hard, but fulfills your duty as a pet owner.

When taking on a new young pet, you are saying to them that they will give you affection and companionship, and that you will take care of them, do right by them, and make the hard decisions for them.

Years later, when the time

comes to make the hard choice, no matter how much it hurts you, you're fulfilling that very important promise. It's not an easy decision, but that's because pets mean so much, and are such a part of our lives.

I believe this is one of the purist moments of love in anyone's life. Think about it: Marriage has a selfish side, gift giving has a selfish side, but this is a totally selfless act—you hurt so your pet won't have to.

Someday, it is hoped a very, very long time from now, when you are faced with a tough decision like this, do what you think is best. Only you can make the decision. Do what's right for you and your pet. You can't be wrong, as only you know what's right.

Take Home Message: Situations where the final decision needs to be made for a pet are always difficult. Use the two questions to decide if it's time. If it is, and you make that decision, put yourself on the back for having the strength to hurt, so your pet won't have to. Remember, while you were lucky to have such a great pet, your pet was lucky also, to have had you.

Dr. Brad Davis is the medical director for the VCA of Garden City, 2085 Inkster Road, Garden City, MI 48135. Feel free to write him there with questions and comments. He is also one of the hosts of the nationally syndicated radio show *Animal Talk*. You can send e-mail questions or comments to DrBrad@animaltalkradio.com.

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