

# Difficult Decision-Making

Receiving a diagnosis that your companion animal is seriously ill or critically injured can create feelings of sadness, helplessness, fear, and even anger. When important decisions must be made regarding the care of your companion animal, you may worry about making the right choice. When should treatment be considered that would allow your companion animal additional time to enjoy life and live with dignity? When is palliative care (hospice) an option? When should a decision be made to provide your companion animal a quality end of life? You may find yourself asking others, “What would you do if this were your pet?”

## Anticipatory Grief

If your pet is aging, seriously injured, or chronically or terminally ill, you may find yourself grieving as if your pet has already died. Grieving that begins before a death occurs is known as anticipatory grief, and can involve the same physical and emotional reactions as those experienced following a death.

## Be Informed

In order to make sound veterinary care decisions for your companion animal, it is important that you fully understand your pet’s condition and the medical options that are available. If the information that you receive is unclear, ask questions. If you have additional questions after talking with your veterinarian, write your questions down and contact your veterinarian for follow-up. If you understand information more clearly when it is in writing, ask your veterinarian for written resources about the illness or recommended treatment options.

## Decision-Making Considerations

Pets do not know that they have choices between further interventions, no intervention, palliative care, or euthanasia. Since they don’t know that there is any option other than to struggle on, that’s what they attempt to do. Because pets are very good at masking their illness, the discomfort we see may be much less than the discomfort they really feel.

The medical training that your veterinarian has received may enable them to provide your pet with a diagnosis and a recommended course of treatment. Your veterinarian, however, cannot “know” what is the best decision for your pet and your family at this time. YOU are the person your pet depends on the most to make veterinary medical care decisions. It is important to consider the needs of all the members of your family when making difficult decisions. It is often appropriate to include children in the discussions regarding the condition of your companion animal. When deciding the best treatment plan for your pet, it may be helpful to consider the checklists on the next page.

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## Beware of Information on the Internet

Be cautious about medical information obtained on the Internet. Since not all information on the Internet is published by reliable sources, the information may be misleading or inaccurate. Occasionally, information will be published regarding “miraculous” new veterinary medical treatments. Often, the medication or treatment being discussed has only been tested in one case and/or no long-term follow-up has been conducted. In many instances, the treatment that is being recommended by these unknown sources may cause serious harm, including death, to your pet. If you want to become more informed about your pet’s illness and treatment, ask your veterinarian for reliable sources of veterinary medical information. Under no circumstance should you attempt to provide medical or alternative treatment for your pet based solely on Internet information or without professional veterinary supervision.

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## Companion Animal Needs

- What are the prospects of providing your companion animal with a quality of life that fulfills their basic physical and psychological needs?
- Is there a reasonable chance for a cure? For comfort?
- How much additional time might treatment offer? What will the quality of that time be?
- How many of your companion animal's usual activities are still possible? (Make a list and review it on a regular daily/ weekly/ monthly basis.)
- Is your companion animal suffering, or struggling, even though physical pain may not be evident? For example: unable to control urination, lack of interest in eating, chronic vomiting, restlessness, unable to get comfortable, withdrawal from family, or withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities.
- Is there hope of alleviating this pain to allow for a reasonable quality of life?
- What would your companion animal be unable to tolerate and/or live with? (Write a contract with yourself, knowing that you can always renegotiate.)
- What do you think your companion animal would want?

## Personal Needs

- Do you have the financial and emotional resources necessary to handle long-term medical care if it is required?
- Will you have the necessary physical and emotional stamina required? (Getting up or staying up during the night, preparing special food, maintaining a feeding tube, giving injections, caring for wounds, cleaning up and assisting with bathroom functions, lifting or assisting with walking, climbing stairs, etc.).
- Is the relationship with your companion animal changing or decreasing in quality as you anticipate this loss?
- What are your religious, spiritual, and personal values and beliefs regarding end-of-life decision making?
- What is your personal “bottom line”? What are you unable to tolerate and/or live with? (Write a contract with yourself that you can always renegotiate.)
- Ask yourself, “When I look back on this several months from now, what will be most important about what I did or did not do? Which decisions will be the easiest for me to live with?”

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## What is the Most Important Question?

The single most important question you can ask yourself is, “*Is my companion animal still having fun?*” Keep in mind that “*making it through one more day*” and “*having fun*” are two very different qualities of life. Think back to when your pet was healthy. What did your pet enjoy doing the most? People watching? Animal watching? Going for walks? Chasing squirrels? Riding in the car? Eating? Are these activities still being enjoyed today? What is the likelihood that your pet will be able to enjoy these activities with medical intervention? Is your pet having more “good” days than “bad” days?



# Difficult Decision-Making

## Euthanasia

*“Euthanasia is often not so much a question of ‘artificially ending’ a life, but of determining when to cease artificially extending that life.”*

Moira Anderson Allen

[www.pet-loss.net/euthanasia.shtml](http://www.pet-loss.net/euthanasia.shtml)

Deciding to euthanize your companion animal may be one of the most difficult decisions you ever make. Some people have a difficult time with the thought of “taking a life.”

Realize that the illness, disease, or injury is causing the end of life, not you. Many people wish for an ideal situation in which their companion animals will die peacefully in their sleep. Unfortunately, it is rare when this actually happens. While euthanasia might have a sad connotation, it doesn't need to be negative. It might be helpful to try to look at it positively - that we actually have the opportunity to allow our companion animals to die humanely and with dignity, avoiding unnecessary suffering. Many people in the veterinary profession describe euthanasia as “a gift” that we can give to our companion.

## Treasuring Your Time

If you have decided that euthanasia is the most appropriate choice for all involved, you may choose a variety of ways to spend the last months/weeks/days of your companion animal's life. You may want to spend additional time with your companion animal, doing special things together.

That might mean giving extra attention, including petting, grooming, holding them or making them special meals to eat. You may decide to go on a special trip or walk. When you have decided on the time for the euthanasia, you may choose to be present or not. There is no right or wrong choice, as it is a very personal decision.



## The Honoring the Bond program at The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

The mission of the Honoring the Bond program is to recognize and honor the human-animal bond by providing support to companion animal owners. Honoring the Bond program services are available, at no cost, to clients of the Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center.

Our social workers can assist in the following ways:

- Act as a liaison between the companion animal owner and veterinary medical team
- Provide crisis intervention during difficult situations
- Assist in processing difficult decisions (quality of life assessments, treatment decisions)
- Be present before, during, and/or after euthanasia
- Facilitate family discussions with children
- Provide assessment and referral for further follow-up counseling, if needed
- Provide resources, including reading lists, websites, counselor and pet loss support group referrals, cremation/burial resources, memorial ideas, etc.

If you would like to speak with someone from the Honoring the Bond program, you may:

- Ask your clinician, student, or client services representative to contact us
- Contact us directly at (614) 247-8607
- Access our website and email at: [vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond](http://vet.osu.edu/honoringthebond)

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This brochure is adapted from the original work of Jennifer Brandt, MSW, LISW, PhD