



Deciding When It's Time

The decision to put our pets to sleep can be overwhelming and feel quite complicated. The following four specific questions may help us determine if it is time to proceed with the decision to gently guide our pet companions through end of life.

Is my pet in obvious pain or distress that cannot be well controlled or relieved?

Signs of pain in animals may not be as obvious as we expect. Obvious indicators include whining and crying, wincing when touched, heavy panting or increased breathing effort and possibly signs of unexpected aggression. Less obvious signs of pain or anxiety include: not eating, trouble getting up or laying down, a dull and depressed attitude and pacing or even staring into space. A distressed pet may demonstrate unwillingness to settle/sleep where they usually do. They may seek out and hide in unusual spots.

Is my pet able to breathe normally and comfortably?

While an animal in pain may breathe faster than normal, a pet that is struggling to breathe is experiencing a profound stressor. Many end of life diseases that our pets develop, can culminate with the lungs being unable to acquire enough air to soothe the body.

Is my pet still participating in the activities that used to bring us both joy?

Activities that bring our pets and us joy are varied indeed! Simple joys can include eating a tasty meal, exploring the back yard for squirrels, protecting us from the vacuum cleaner and notifying the mailman that he better not come in! As our pets decline in health these activities may ebb. It is up to us to notice if our pets' interest in enjoying life has subsided.

Do the good times still outweigh the bad?

Imagine two jars of marbles. In one jar we put a blue marble every time we suspect our pet is comfortable and free from distress or pain. In another jar we put a green marble when we are worried that he or she is uncomfortable or anxious. Which jar has the most marbles? Do the comfortable minutes of everyday total more than the uncomfortable?

Addressing and answering these questions can be very difficult and upsetting. We need to keep in mind that at the end of the day, our pets' comfort level is our primary concern. If we cannot relieve pain, distress or anxiety and we feel our companions might be suffering, we do have a choice. We can help them through end of life in the most peaceful and gentle way available.