

Pet Loss and Guilt

Guilt is almost always part of grieving. It is so hard to lose someone without regret for things that we wish we had done, done better, or not done. Many loving and dedicated pet owners are wracked with guilt at the end of a beloved pet's life. Modern medicine, in all the options it makes available, leaves so much room for people to second guess their decisions. The euthanasia decision also causes so much pain and self-doubt.

Guilt often comes from one or more of these concerns

- ♥ Concern that the owner caused the illness/injury, could have prevented it, or could have cured the pet.
- ♥ Being unable to afford care, or being physically unable to care for a pet at home.
- ♥ Euthanasia: ethics, being present, and other considerations leave so much room for regret. In particular, many loving pet owners fear that they waited too long, or euthanized too soon. Illness usually takes an unpredictable course, and so many aspects are truly beyond our control. With many diseases, it's impossible (even for a veterinarian) to know what each day will bring. The notion of a precise "Right Time" is a myth, but one that can bring much distress to owners who feel that they might have missed this magical moment.

Almost all pet owners feel guilty about something they could **not** have prevented or done differently. If you deeply mourn the loss of a pet, this means that you truly loved that pet. Make a list of everything you wish you had done differently. Look at each of the items on the list one by one.

- ♥ Did you *really* have another option for what you could have done?
- ♥ Would the long-term outcome have been very different if you had chosen a different path?
- ♥ Ask your veterinarian to help you understand the medical aspects of your pet's case – very often, terminal pets can be helped for a brief time only.
- ♥ Some owners regret pursuing too much care, and thereby prolonging illness. But if there was a chance for recovery, these tough decisions were made with love.
- ♥ Know that euthanasia did not end your pet's life – his or her disease did this. Euthanasia is a gift to prevent suffering.
- ♥ If a good friend had made the same decisions for their pet, what would you say to them?
- ♥ If your pet could have talked about their care, what would they have said? Would they have wanted to live a prolonged life with debilitation? Would they want you to undergo financial hardship for heroic care? Wouldn't they know that you loved them and were doing your best?

So often, guilt is sorrow crying for a way out. Some people may even hold onto guilt as a way to hold onto a beloved pet's memory, but this is not what our pets want for us.

Sometimes, even the most loving pet owner makes a mistake that results in harm. It takes time to heal from guilt in this situation, but try to remember: animals are so forgiving – this is part of the unconditional love that makes the human-animal bond so strong. Would your pet want you to be tortured by guilt? If you could write to your pet a description of everything that you feel guilty about, how would he or she respond? No one is perfect, and you must find the strength to learn from life and forgive yourself.

The hardest thing for a loving pet owner to do is make decisions about the end of life. Many people become focused on every aspect of their pet's last days, particularly which treatments to give, and when to say goodbye. It's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture during this time. Remember that a beloved pet has a legacy that is much greater than their final days. The details that surround the end of life do *not* take away from the years of love that you shared. Nor does anyone want to be remembered as terminally ill. The biggest part of healing is seeing your pet's life in its entirety. We owe our pets the honor of remembering the best parts of their lives, and our joy in sharing our lives with them.