A FREE GUIDE FROM PET LOSS PSYCHOLOGY

Preparing for the Loss

Preparing for a death does not bring it any closer. What it does is take the hardest decisions out of the hardest hour.

When you know an animal's life is coming to an end — after a terminal diagnosis, or as age quietly narrows what they can still do — you are asked to do two hard things at once: care for them well, and prepare to lose them. Preparing is not giving up on them, and it is not a failure of hope. It simply means that when the day comes, fewer things have to be decided while you are least able to decide them.

Why preparing helps

Decisions made calmly, days or weeks ahead, are rarely the ones people regret afterwards. Knowing what will happen also takes away some of the fear of the unknown, which is often as heavy as the sadness itself. And it frees whatever time is left for your animal, rather than for phone calls, prices and arrangements.

Questions worth asking your vet

Write these down before the appointment. Distress makes questions hard to hold onto, and vets are used to being asked all of this.

- What should I expect to see as this progresses, and how quickly?
- Which changes would tell us we have reached the point of considering euthanasia?
- What can we do to keep them comfortable in the meantime?
- What counts as an emergency, and who do I call out of hours?
- Can this be done at home, and what would that involve?
- What decisions will I need to make on the day — and can I make them now instead?

Judging quality of life

Quality of life is far easier to see over a fortnight than in a single afternoon. Keep a short daily note — a tick or a cross against the handful of things that matter to your particular animal: eating, drinking, moving about, staying clean and comfortable, and whether they are still interested in you and in what is going on around them. The pattern will tell you far more than a good hour on a bad day, and most practices have a quality-of-life scale they can give you to make it easier.

> **The question underneath the question**
> It is rarely whether they still enjoy anything at all. It is whether what they still enjoy has come to be outweighed by what they have to endure. Watching over time, rather than deciding in a single frightened afternoon, also protects you from the two things that distort judgement most: hope, and exhaustion.

Sorting the practical parts now

- Ask whether you can settle the bill in advance, or be invoiced. Standing at a reception desk afterwards is something people remember for a long time.
- Check your insurance — some policies contribute towards euthanasia and cremation costs.
- Decide who will drive. It is not a journey to make alone if that can be avoided.
- Tell one or two people who will not ask you to justify how much this matters.

Choices you can make in advance

Once you have decided, tell the practice and ask for it to be noted on the file.

- Where — at the practice, or at home if a vet near you offers home visits.
- When — a quieter appointment, first or last of the day, and somewhere to wait that is not the waiting room.
- Who — who will be there, who will drive, and who will hold them.
- Before — a familiar blanket or bed, an unhurried morning, a meal they have not been allowed for years.
- Afterwards — whether you stay with them, and for how long. There is no wrong answer and no clock.
- Aftercare — home burial, individual cremation with the ashes returned, or communal cremation. Ask about cost and timings.
- Keepsakes — a paw print, a clipping of fur. These have to be asked for beforehand.

Making the time you have count

What people find comfort in afterwards is usually the last ordinary morning, not a final grand outing, and a frail animal often pays for a long day out. Let them set the pace. Take a short video with the sound on — the particular noise they make is what people miss and cannot call back later. Notice the small things now: how they greet you, where they choose to sleep.

When the waiting is long

A slow decline brings its own exhaustion, and it is common to catch yourself privately wishing it were over, then feeling wretched for the thought. That wish is about the strain, not about love. Let other people take the driving, the phone calls and the shopping.

Children and other animals in the house

Tell children in advance, in plain words: dying, and died. ‘Put to sleep’ on its own is confusing and can make bedtime frightening. Where it is appropriate, offer them the choice of being there — children who are never offered it often mind about that later. Other animals may search or unsettle; steady routines help.

> **When to reach for more support**
> If the dread has taken over — if you cannot sleep, or find that every hour with your animal is spent rehearsing losing them — you do not have to carry it alone. Your GP, or a therapist experienced in pet loss, can help you stay present through the time you have left.

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Free support, resources & articles

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