Fare Thee Well

How to help owners (and yourself) deal with the death of a beloved pet*

I hold it true, whate’er befall;
I feel it, when I sorrow most;
’Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

—In Memoriam A. H. H.
(from Canto 27; 1849)
by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Imagine the following:
During an already hectic day, one of your best clients calls your office and simply says, “Doc, it’s time.” You agree, reschedule your other appointment, and wait for the owner to arrive, knowing the scene that awaits. Your client’s beloved 12-year-old Labrador retriever, Buddy, has recently been losing weight, and you diagnosed lymphosarcoma as the cause. Now Buddy is recumbent and listless, so the owner has decided to have him euthanized.

or

During an already hectic day, one of your best clients calls you, crying, and says, “My daughter’s cat, Holly, jumped out of our yard, ran into the road, and was hit by a car. We are coming right over.” You and your staff know the grim scene that awaits as the mother and daughter bring in their critically injured, beloved cat.

Are you prepared to handle these situations? Would you know what to say to the owners? In the case of Buddy, could better planning have helped avoid disruption in your chronically packed schedule? This article on grief and euthanasia addresses some common questions small animal veterinarians have when counseling owners before and after they have their pets euthanized.

In veterinary school, we are trained in the science of veterinary medicine. We learn how to diagnose, treat, and prevent various maladies, but we cannot learn the art of veterinary medicine until we begin to practice. After graduation, we quickly realize how vital it is to effectively communicate with clients to achieve the goal of treating our patients properly. It can be daunting to simultaneously handle a pet’s medical problem and the owner’s emotional concerns. When we deal with a tense situ-

At a Glance

◆ Practice Being “The Gentle Doctor”
Page 515

◆ Remember the Five Stages of Grief
Page 515

◆ Recall the Veterinarian’s Oath
Page 516

◆ Express Your Sympathy
Page 516

◆ Seek Assistance
Page 517

◆ Avoid Burnout
Page 517

*Adapted with permission from Compendium Equine 2009;4:267-273.
ation such as euthanasia, the need to communicate effectively becomes even more critical. While personal communication styles differ, the information in this article can help even the most seasoned veterinarian handle euthanasia and grief more easily.

**Practice Being “The Gentle Doctor”**

Our profession is held in high regard in our society, and by practicing compassionate care, we reaffirm our unique position as trusted professionals. “The Gentle Doctor” sculpture by Christian Peterson at the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine depicts a caring veterinarian cradling a sick puppy while the mother dog looks up with concern (FIGURE 1). This beautiful sculpture epitomizes the compassion we should all have toward our patients and their owners. An especially critical time for the veterinarian–client bond is when we recommend euthanasia for a critically ill pet. We cannot eliminate our clients’ pain, but we can decrease their grief and anxiety with patience and compassion. By spending a few minutes to explain and listen, we offer owners a chance to process information before making a permanent decision to euthanize their beloved pet. After euthanasia, this can help owners feel better about their decision.

*Remember the Five Stages of Grief*

In *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross described the five stages of grief (TABLE 1). Although not everyone experiences this process in the same way and may not exhibit each stage, these stages are common reactions to loss. The owner’s emotions depend on whether

**TABLE 1** The Five Stages of Grief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>The Owner’s Reaction</th>
<th>Recommended Response by the Veterinarian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Denial</td>
<td>The owner cannot comprehend the pet’s illness or impending death.</td>
<td>Give the owner time to ask questions and think about your conversation so he or she can adjust to this new reality.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The owner may seem dazed or confused and unable to make decisions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Anger</td>
<td>The owner may lash out at you or your staff and may refuse to pay the bill.</td>
<td>Give the owner time to ask questions and process the new information so he or she can adjust to this new reality.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guilt may accompany this stage.</td>
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<td>3. Bargaining</td>
<td>The owner may ask for a second opinion or wish to pursue unusual treatments to attempt to gain control over the situation.</td>
<td>Listen to the owner, acknowledge his or her feelings, be sympathetic, and explain treatment options so the owner can participate in the decision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Depression</td>
<td>This is the true stage of bereavement, when the owner mourns the loss of the dog or cat. This stage is marked by periods of crying and extreme grief.</td>
<td>Listen to the owner and be sympathetic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Acceptance</td>
<td>The owner finally accepts the loss and may remember the pet with sadness but does not cry uncontrollably.</td>
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QuickNotes

In veterinary school, we are trained in the science of veterinary medicine. We learn how to diagnose, treat, and prevent various maladies, but we cannot learn the art of veterinary medicine until we begin to practice.
the loss is sudden and tragic (as in the case of Holly) or involves gradual deterioration of the pet (as in the case of Buddy). Many owners are deeply attached to their companions and view them as beloved members of their family. They may have owned a pet for 10 years or more, and its loss will leave a large void in their lives. It is also common for a pet to represent a special time in a person’s life. For example, when single people who own pets marry and begin a family together, the pets live in that family for years and are often living reminders of the special history shared by the family. The recent hit book (and movie) *Marley and Me* is an excellent representation of this scenario. The situation is even more complex if the dog or cat is loved by a child and the parents look to you for comfort and advice. When speaking with your clients, remember that they may be experiencing a variety of emotions. If they are considering having their pet euthanized, they may need some time to adjust to the idea. If the dog or cat is not critically ill, it may be helpful for the clients to think about the decision to euthanize and to call family and friends before giving permission.

When dealing with geriatric pets, such as Buddy, it is often important to discuss the pet’s deterioration with the owners. Older dogs or cats in poor body condition that are not responding to treatment, feeding, or management changes often have increasing trouble walking and may slip and fall. The owner may not recognize the pet’s gradual deterioration or the potential consequences. If the owner is given time to think about euthanasia and decides to have it performed, other family members might want to be present. The owners may choose to euthanize their pet when all can be present, so the family can say good-bye together. This offers an opportunity to schedule your time appropriately to prepare for the procedure and avoid interruptions.

Each situation is an opportunity to serve our patients and their owners.

**Recall the Veterinarian’s Oath**

“Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering...”

Although grief and euthanasia are difficult, we can end a dog or cat’s suffering and bring some comfort to owners and caretakers, especially in catastrophic situations. When I (A. I. B.) was in private practice, one of my worst cases requiring euthanasia involved a handsome, young chocolate Labrador retriever puppy. He developed acute renal failure and did not respond to treatment, so the owners decided to euthanize him. Although the scenario was very tragic, I was grateful to offer some small measure of comfort to the family at a difficult time.

**Express Your Sympathy**

There are no perfect words to say to owners experiencing loss. Often, the best approach is to express your sympathy and listen to the owner. Sending a card and/or flowers is an excellent way to express your condolences.3, a

If you knew the pet well, write down a memoir...
ory or two, and the card will be treasured by the owner. Some practices call clients to check on them a few days after their pet was euthanized. This can be very helpful for owners who may need reassurance that they made the correct decision. Some practices offer ways to memorialize the patient for the family, such as a paw print casting or lock of hair; additional options include making a donation to an animal shelter or a research fund and sending a card to notify the owner.

Seek Assistance
The human–animal bond is increasingly recognized in our society as a powerful and unique relationship. This bond offers much-needed comfort and companionship in our hectic lives, even improving our mood and blood pressure! However, when our beloved animals are experiencing terminal suffering, the topic of euthanasia should be addressed (BOX 1). Many veterinary schools offer a pet loss support hotline (BOX 2) and support groups for small animal owners experiencing the loss of a pet. For example, the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine offers a program for pet owners, including grief counseling and bereavement. I (C. B.) teach veterinary students to be aware of five common reactions clients may exhibit after their pet has died or been euthanized (TABLE 2). I also tell my students, “People need to want help; they will seek you out if they require more assistance.” If an owner is demonstrating a persistent need to discuss his or her pet’s disease and death, it may help to refer the owner to a health professional.

Children are often very attached to the family pet, so it can be very traumatic for a child to lose a dog or cat. Honesty is the best policy when explaining the pet’s death to a child, but use developmentally appropriate language. The child wants to understand what happened, so use simple terms; however, do not say, “The dog or cat was put to sleep,” because the child may become afraid to sleep. The child needs time to grieve and may want to memorialize the beloved animal by making a scrapbook, having a memorial service, or burying the pet’s ashes. It is important for parents to inform school officials that their child has lost a pet. If behavioral changes or depression are noted, the child may need to talk with a professional counselor.

Avoid Burnout
It is vital for you to maintain your mental health. You may have treated a dog or cat for years, becoming like a member of its family, so you also may experience grief at its death.

### TABLE 2 | Five Common Client Reactions to Pet Loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Client Reaction</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Recommended Response by the Veterinarian</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Guilt</td>
<td>The owner may ask, “Did I wait too long to euthanize, or did I euthanize too quickly?” The owner may feel guilty months after the pet’s death and may contact you for reassurance.</td>
<td>Listen to the owner and reassure him or her that the correct decision was made.</td>
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<td>2. Shame</td>
<td>The owner may feel ashamed to tell anyone or may be afraid someone will say, “It was only an animal, you can always get another one.”</td>
<td>Reassure the owner that the pet is unique or special and will not be replaced by a new addition.</td>
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<td>3. Relief</td>
<td>If the animal dies before the owner makes a decision to euthanize, the owner may feel relief that he or she did not have to make the final decision to end the pet’s life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Loneliness</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Be sympathetic and supportive. Provide a list of pet loss support hotlines and other resources.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Yearning</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Be sympathetic and supportive. Provide a list of pet loss support hotlines and other resources.</td>
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*Developed by Christina Bach, MSW, LSW, Director of Clinical Social Work and Pet Bereavement Services, University of Pennsylvania.*

QuickNotes
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Box 2

Pet Loss Support Hotlines^a

- **352-392-4700**, then dial 1 and 4080; staffed by Florida community volunteers; weekdays, 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time; or 352-392-4700, ext 4744, at the University of Florida

- **517-432-2696**: staffed by Michigan State University veterinary students; Tuesday through Thursday, 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM Eastern time; [cvm.msu.edu/petloss/index.htm](http://cvm.msu.edu/petloss/index.htm)

- **630-325-1600**: staffed by Chicago Veterinary Medical Association veterinarians and staffs; leave voice mail message; calls will be returned 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time; long-distance calls will be returned by collect call

- **540-231-8038**: staffed by Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine; Tuesday, Thursday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time

- **614-292-1823**: staffed by The Ohio State University veterinary students; Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM Eastern time; voice-mail messages will be returned by collect call during operating hours

- **508-839-7966**: staffed by Tufts University veterinary students; Monday through Friday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time; voice-mail messages will be returned daily (by collect call outside of Massachusetts); [www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss](http://www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss)

- **888-ISU-PLSH** (888-478-7574): hosted by the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine; operational 7 days/week, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time from September through April and Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time from May through August

- **607-253-3932**: staffed by Cornell University veterinary students; Tuesday through Thursday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time; messages will be returned; [www.vet.cornell.edu/Org/PetLoss](http://www.vet.cornell.edu/Org/PetLoss)

- **217-244-2273** or **877-394-2273** (CARE): staffed by University of Illinois veterinary students; Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time; [www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE](http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE)

- **970-491-4143**: Argus Institute grief resources, Colorado State University

- **509-335-5704**: Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine; staffed during the semester on Monday through Thursday, 6:30 PM to 9:00 PM, and Saturday, 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM Pacific time; [www.vetmed.wsu.edu/PLHL](http://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/PLHL)


QuickNotes

Honesty is the best policy when explaining the pet’s death to a child, but use developmentally appropriate language.
It is important to recognize these feelings and express them in your own way. Owners will be very touched to see your grief and compassion at the loss of their pet, forging a stronger bond between them and you. However, it is equally important to take time to refresh yourself and maintain perspective. See Box 1 for additional resources to help yourself and your clients.

**Conclusion**

Our companion animal patients are often treasured members of the family and are mourned when they die or are euthanized. We hope the information in this article will help you practice the art of veterinary medicine when handling grief and euthanasia.

**References**