



## Defining Quality of Life

When we are forced to consider the gut wrenching choice of euthanasia, we are always advised to take our pets “quality of life” into consideration. How do we determine if our pets have a good “quality of life” or whether their level of pain and suffering are no longer acceptable?

Each pet is an individual and the decision will not be the same for all pets. The following will act as a guide while you attempt to assess their “quality of life”

**Mobility.** As pets get older often the first thing to diminish is their mobility. Dogs may not be as inclined to climb stairs or jump into the car. Cats may lose the ability to jump up on the bed. This does not mean that your pet is becoming unhealthy, it just means that they are getting old. You can make accommodations for their reduced ability.

If however your pet can barely move, that’s another matter. Can your pet get to their feet without assistance? Can it sit without collapsing? Can your pet walk? Can your cat still use the litterbox without whimpering or whining? If you answered no to three of these questions your pet is not experiencing a good “quality of life” and your veterinarian will be able to suggest ways to keep your pet comfortable in their golden years.

**Appetite/Eating Ability.** Is your pet able to eat? Are they getting adequate nutrition? Do they have trouble chewing or swallowing? Do you have to coax them to eat or do they still enjoy it? A pet needs to eat to maintain proper nourishment.

**Breathing.** Cancer is one disease that can affect the lungs; your pet may be having trouble breathing due to a build up of fluid in the lungs. You may notice that your pet is panting or their breathing is more labored. If any of these symptoms are present a chest x-ray can be taken to determine if their breathing patterns are caused by allergies, infection, and asthma or if it is due to cancer or heart failure. If no further medical intervention will relieve their symptoms little can be done and you need to consider a peaceful humane passing.

**Discomfort.** Since time began animals have learned to hide their pain for fear of been preyed upon. However, you can pick up on subtle signs that your pet may be experiencing pain, is their face furrowed and worried or happy and relaxed? Do they appear tense rather than relaxing and lying down? Another sign of pain is called “denning” an animal will seek out a quiet place away from other interactions with other pets or family members.

A more obvious indication of pain is a pet's reaction to touch. If your pet responds to touch by hissing, growling and even snapping this is a clear indication of pain.

***Incontinence.*** Many pet owners feel terribly guilty over the natural annoyance they feel when their pet becomes incontinent. They feel they should be more loving, more patient. Incontinence, however, can be stressful for the pet. As a basic survival mechanism, animals learn not to “mess where they sleep”. When your pet can no longer control where it urinates or defecates, you can be sure they are not happy with the situation.

***Mental Capacity.*** Older pets occasionally develop signs of diminished mental capacity. They may seem to “forget” things, such as where a toy is located or what a command means. This confusion can develop into fear overtime.

***Happiness.*** Determining whether your pet is “enjoying” life is certainly a subjective decision. However, if you have been a keen observer of your pet's behavior and attitude during its lifetime, you are more likely to be able to determine when they no longer seem “happy”. You will know when they no longer seem to take pleasure in its food, its toys, its surroundings – and most of all from contact with the rest of the family. Most pets are easy to please; when it no longer becomes possible to raise a purr or a tail-wag, you can be fairly certain that your pet is receiving little joy from life.

***Response to Treatment.*** We have a natural instinct to provide medical treatment to our pets when they become ill. This could mean IV fluids, chemotherapy, expensive tests. But all these treatments come with some side effects, repeated trips to the vet, sitting in a strange environment can cause your pet to become stressed but mentally and physically. Eventually, we may conclude that our efforts to treat a pet's illness are more stressful to the pet than the condition itself-and that our efforts to save a pet's life are actually diminishing, rather than enhancing, the quality of their life.

### **Making a Decision**

Assessing our pet's quality of life is an ongoing process, not a one-time decision. Initially, we are likely to attempt to compensate for the problems we see. Pain medication may relieve our pet's discomfort and improve their mobility. A change in diet may improve your pet's appetite or provide better nutrition. We may resolve that we are willing to clean up after our pet and carry them wherever they need to go, for as long as necessary. But eventually such measures will cease to be effective. The process of accessing “quality of life” is really a question of determining when that point has been reached – and what you intend to do next.

It is often tempting, at this point, to postpone a decision still longer by deciding to “let nature take its course.” Before choosing that course of action (or inaction), however, it's important to understand that, as a pet owner, you have been thwarting the “course of

nature” from the beginning. By ensuring that your pet has food and shelter and is protected from predators, you have already guaranteed that nature will *not* take its course. By providing medical treatment you have prolonged your pet's life longer than it would have survived in “nature”. In nature, an animal that becomes too ill to obtain food to protect itself will perish quickly, though not necessarily comfortably.

Nor does nature necessarily offer an “easy” death even if you choose to let it “take its course” in the comfort of your home. An animal that cannot breathe easily, cannot eat or digest food properly, cannot control its bodily functions, and can barely move or enjoy human contact because of pain, is hardly dying “comfortably.”

This is really what the “quality of life” issue is all about. By usurping nature’s role throughout the *life* of our pets, we must sometimes also accept its role in determining (and bringing about) the *death* of a pet. To accept this, we may also have to accept that, in some cases, the quality of life we are *really* trying to protect is our own: That we are allowing our pet to suffer out of a desire to avoid the anguish we know that we will experience when they die. And that, ultimately, is the most unselfish act of love we can offer: to end a pet’s suffering, we must choose to accept our own.

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