

End of Life options. When to plan

Dr. Oakley says that no matter what stage of life your favorite four-legged family member is in, it is never too early to have a plan.

This time of year, is one of my favorites with the crisp weather, but my least favorite in terms of the number of losses of friends that I experience. Fall and winter bring closure to many of my friends struggling with illness, which is what reminded me to talk about having a plan.

Why do you need to be prepared? Sadly, catastrophes happen. It seems that whenever an accident happens that requires a suffering animal to be euthanized...it isn't during business hours.

I recall quite a few years ago, the Zickmanns were having the office floors redone in the reception area on a Sunday to avoid business closure. A man pulled up in a pickup truck in a panic because his normal vet was closed and his dog was struggling to live. He asked if we would euthanize him. Dr. Z immediately examined the old dog in the truck who was clearly in the final struggling stages of life and agreed...but where to do it? The kind men who were redoing our floors overheard our struggle in the parking lot and respectfully took off their hats, exited the building and told us to take all the time we needed to attend to the suffering dog.

Panic happens if you don't have a plan. Will your vet open after hours to euthanize a pet? Will they come to your home? Will your entire family be present? Will you cremate or bury at home? All of these decisions have to be made and the best time to think them through is BEFORE the emotional ending.

Dr. Z has taken his trusty headlamp to people's homes and met them in their gardens at dusk, a quiet corner of the living room and even in their pickup truck, if that's what they want. Find out what services your vet provides. If special arrangements are desired, traveling vets might be an option but have the names, contacts and relationships before it's urgent.

To bury or to cremate...it's a tough and personal question. I know here at the Z's house; they have done both. Apparently, Mrs. Z's terrier, Mattie, was so bonded to her and became stressed at leaving the property, that Mrs. Z wouldn't send her out for cremation. She was buried at home. Actually, the terrier's housemate at the time had passed a year before so Mrs. Z held onto his ashes and buried them with Mattie so that the two would always be together.

The Zickmann family has collectively planted trees in remembrance of other pets and then scattered their ashes around that tree. Mrs. Z says that she has a Mother's Day tree that reminds her of her two legged loves and trees around it that remind her of her four legged loves. Some pets are marked with special stones, or cairns. Their endings and resting places are as unique and individual as they were.

Saying goodbye to our four-legged family members is never easy but we can take some of the stress out of it if we understand what to expect and make a plan. Talk to your vet, ask what services they provide and think about how you think your special friend would want to be remembered after they leave us.

I look around the Z's home and yard and I see traces of the pets that lived before me. It makes me sad to know that they have had so many losses but heartwarming to know that after I'm gone, I won't be forgotten either. I'll be remembered and treasured long after my days here are over.

Peace,

Dr. O