

PET TALES

Saying Goodbye

The pet lover's struggle — knowing when 'it's time'

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It's the one for which there's often no easy answer: "When is the right time to say goodbye?"

Choosing to end a pet's life is the hardest decision we make when it comes to our pets, and we can tell you from decades of experience that it's a decision that never gets any easier. Your veterinarian will offer you advice and support, and friends and family can offer you sympathy, but no one can make the decision for you. When you live with an elderly or terminally ill pet, you look in your pet's eyes every morning and wonder if you're doing what's best.

Everyone makes the decision a little differently. Some pet lovers do not wait until their pet's discomfort becomes chronic, untreatable pain, and they choose euthanasia much sooner than others would. Some owners use an animal's appetite as the guide — when an old or ill animal cannot be tempted into eating, they reason, he has lost most interest in life. And some owners wait until there's no doubt the time is at hand — and later wonder if they delayed a bit too long.

There's no absolute rule, and every method for deciding is right for some pets and some owners at some times. You do the best you can, and then you try to put the decision behind you and deal with the grief.

The incredible advances in veterinary medicine in the past couple of decades have made the decisions even more difficult for many people. Not too long ago, the best you could do for a seriously ill pet was to make her comfortable until that wasn't possible anymore. Nowadays, nearly every advantage of human medicine — from chemotherapy to pacemakers to advanced pain relief — is available to our pets.

But the addition of high-level care shouldn't change much when it comes to easing suffering: If you can have a realistic expectation that a course of treatment will improve your pet's life — rather than simply prolong it — then those options should be considered. But you must also ask yourself: Am I doing right by my pet, or am I just holding on because I can't bear to say goodbye?

If it's the latter, you know what decision you have to make.

Many people are surprised at the powerful emotions that erupt after a pet's death, and they can be embarrassed by their grief. Often, we don't realize we're grieving not only for the pet we loved, but also for the special time the animal represented and the ties to other people in our lives. The death of a cat who was a gift as a kitten from a friend who has died, for example, may trigger bittersweet memories of another love lost.

Taking care of yourself is important when dealing with pet loss. Some people — the "It's



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Quality of life is everything when making decisions for an elderly pet.

just a pet" crowd — won't understand the loss and may shrug off grief over a pet's death as foolish. I find that the company of other animal lovers is very important. Seek them out to share your feelings, and don't be shy about getting professional help to get you through a difficult time.

Choosing to end a pet's suffering is a final act of love and nothing less. Knowing that your decisions are guided by that love is what helps us all through the sad and lonely time of losing a cherished animal companion. ■

Pets of the Week



>>Mars
Mars (375333) is a diminutive one-year-old beagle mix who enjoys people and other dogs.



>>Blossom
With one blue eye and one brown, Blossom (376661) is a fetching Catahoula mix with a playful personality.



>>Comet
Comet (375668) is a lively hound/pit bull mix who loves to play and would do best in a home with a fenced yard in which he could run.



>>Jake
A Labrador retriever/chow mix, Jake (377659) is a friendly boy who likes everyone.



>>Halley
Halley (375127) is a pug -- a pug/beagle mix. She is great with children and loves to cuddle.

To adopt a pet

There are many dogs and cats available at Lee County Animal Services, 5600 Banner Drive, Fort Myers. Call 432-2083 or visit the agency's Web site at www.leelostpets.com. Adoption applications may be downloaded from the site or completed at the shelter, which is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday. Please use the animal's ID number when inquiring about it. The adoption fee is \$65 for dogs and \$50 for cats.

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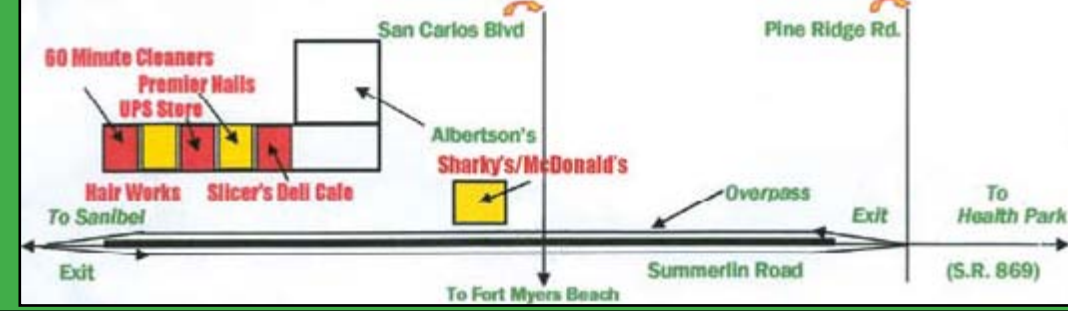
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