

A photograph of a beach at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange and yellow, transitioning into a blue overcast. Waves are breaking on the shore, and buildings are visible in the distance. The foreground is a sandy beach with some paw prints.

OVC Pet Trust

Preparing for the Loss of a Pet

A Support Guide

UNIVERSITY OF
GUELPH

Ontario
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College



Farewell, My Friend: Preparing for the Loss of a Pet

Preparing for the loss of a beloved pet is one of the most emotionally challenging experiences a caregiver may face. This journey may begin with a difficult diagnosis, the visible signs of aging or a noticeable decline in your companion's quality of life. As you come to terms with the reality of an impending goodbye, you may experience a wide range of emotions including guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness or even shame. These feelings are natural, human responses to anticipating the loss of a cherished companion.

Navigating decisions about your pet's care, comfort and well-being during this time can feel overwhelming and painful. It's not always easy to know what to do or how to prepare.

This Pet Loss Support Guide, developed by the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) at the University of Guelph, offers suggestions to help you explore and prepare for the loss of your pet. Its goal is to support you in planning ahead, so you feel more confident and better equipped to navigate end-of-life decisions. While this guide can be a helpful starting point, it is not a substitute for speaking with a trained health professional. If you need additional support, please see the Resources section at the end of this guide.

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Navigating Anticipatory Grief

Grief is often associated with what comes after a loss, but it can begin much earlier. Anticipatory grief arises in response to an expected loss, such as the declining health of a loved one, and it can feel much like the grief experienced after death. People may find themselves cycling through the emotional and physical responses typically linked to bereavement, even though the loss or death has not yet occurred.

Anticipatory grief – or grieving that happens before an impending or expected loss – can take many forms. You might find yourself grieving the gradual changes in your aging pet's daily habits or personality. If your pet is living with a serious illness or injury, grief may surface as you imagine the challenges and heartbreak the future might hold. During this time, it is not uncommon to feel anxiety, fear or even guilt as you try to prepare yourself for their death.

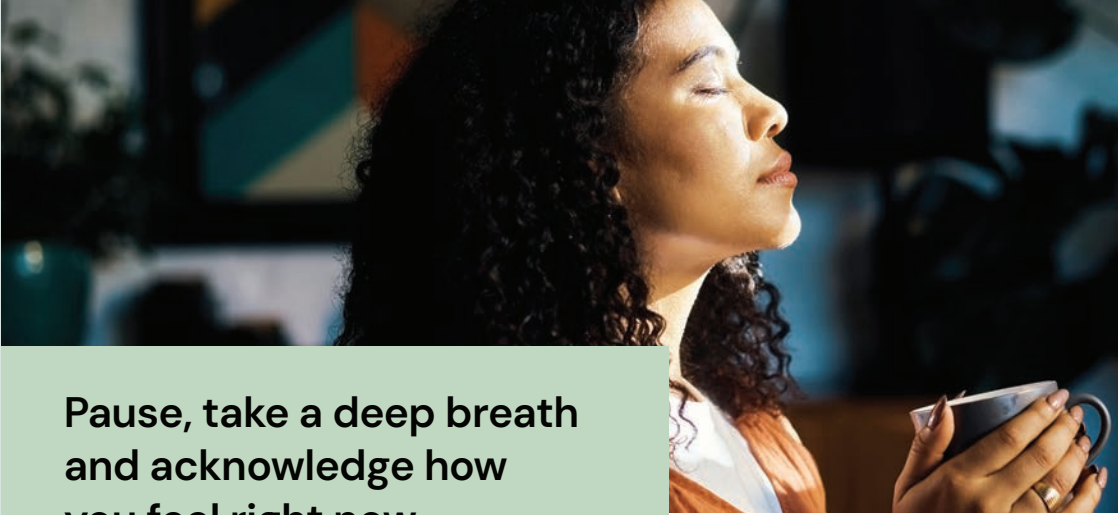
Do you ever find yourself thinking...

"How am I going to cope when my pet dies?"

"How will I know it's the right time? How do I make that decision?"

"I can't leave them alone. I feel like I have to keep checking on them. I can't focus on anything else."

If these thoughts resonate with you, you're not alone. This time of uncertainty filled with decisions, caregiving and emotional ups and downs can be overwhelming. The weight of loving an animal at the end of their life can bring fear, anxiety and deep sadness. That's a natural response to anticipating death, the biggest unknown of all.



“How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.”

— A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*

Pause, take a deep breath and acknowledge how you feel right now.

If you’re noticing that these feelings are starting to take over your day-to-day life, it’s a signal to check in with yourself and try to find some balance.

Here are a few gentle reminders and strategies that might help:

Your pet is with you right now.

Animals live in the present—join them there, even for a few moments at a time.

Talk it out.

Share your thoughts with a trusted friend, family member or professional. Speaking your thoughts out loud can help put them in perspective.

Be informed.

It’s natural to want to avoid thinking about your pet’s death. But many people find that planning ahead, for example, by asking the veterinary team questions and learning about end-of-life options, can help them cope better and find meaning in the experience. Understanding what to expect during death or euthanasia can reduce fear of the unknown and help you feel more prepared.

Find a Realistic Hope to Focus On

Even if your pet’s treatment isn’t curative, there can still be hope — just in a different form. Talk with your veterinarian about what a realistic hope looks like for your pet. For example, if your cat has kidney disease, a cure may not be possible, but your veterinarian might help you focus on maintaining their appetite and energy for as long as possible. This kind of goal offers something tangible and meaningful to work toward, even when the condition itself can’t be reversed.

Focus on what you can control.

It may help to ground yourself in small certainties. For example:

“I know Fluffy is getting the medications he needs today.”

“I know the veterinary team will help guide me when something changes in Fluffy’s health.”

Take a moment to jot down a few things over which you know you have control:



Recognizing Caregiver Strain: Caring for Yourself

If you're caring for an aging or ill pet, you may find yourself physically, emotionally and mentally stretched. This experience is familiar to many, and it can happen as a result of supporting loved ones, including children, elderly relatives or companion animals.

You might be asking yourself:

“I feel like I just need a break... Is that okay?”

Yes, it is.

In fact, it's necessary. When you're grieving or anticipating loss, you might feel guilty for doing things that bring you comfort or joy. But allowing yourself small breaks, moments of peace, laughter or even distraction is not avoidance. It's part of surviving, healing and continuing to show up with compassion.

Self-care doesn't have to be elaborate.

Start with the basics:

- Are you getting enough sleep?
- Are you eating regularly and nourishing your body?
- Are you staying hydrated?
- Are you finding ways to be active?

These core needs often fall by the wayside during caregiving, but they are essential.

A gentle invitation:

What is one small thing you can do today to care for yourself?

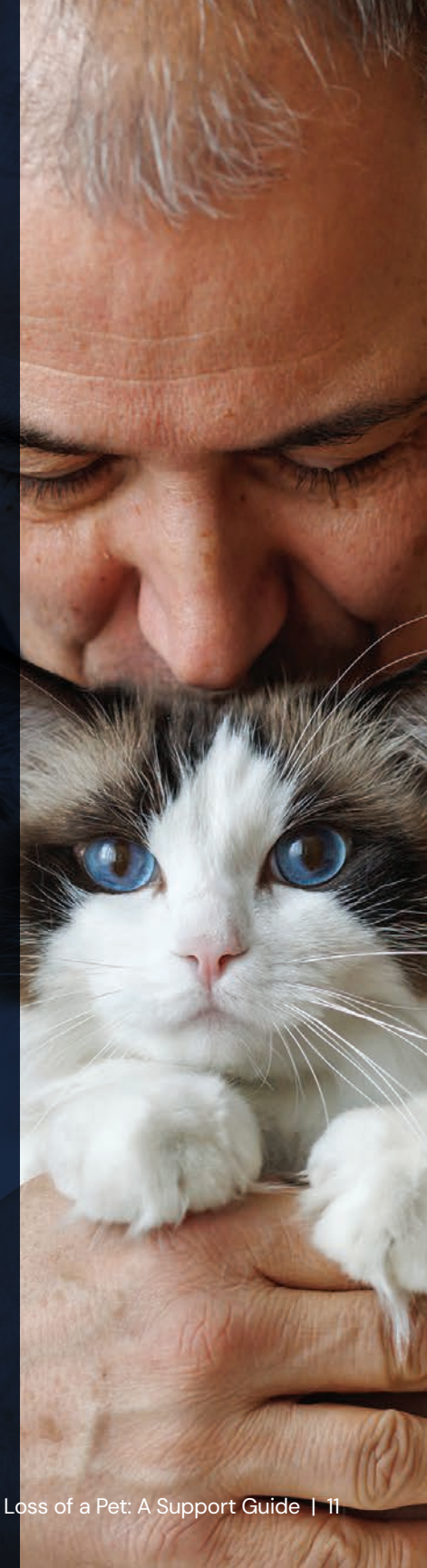
Write it here and commit to it, just for today.

Reflecting on Quality of Life: What it Means and How to Measure it

As a caregiver there will come a time when you find yourself assessing your pet's quality of life and potentially making hard decisions because of it.

Animals live in the present. While we can't know exactly what they think or feel, current understanding suggests they likely don't conceptualize options like curative treatment, palliative care or euthanasia the way we do. These decisions may be hard for us because we are aware of what lies ahead.

Animals are often very good at hiding signs of discomfort, so the signs of pain we observe may be far less than what they're experiencing. Your veterinarian's medical training allows them to diagnose your pet and recommend appropriate treatment, including pain management when needed; however, only you can decide what's best for your family. As the person your pet relies on, it is important to weigh both their needs and the needs of your household when making decisions. When appropriate, involving children in these decisions can be helpful too. For more information see *OVC Pet Trust: Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide*.





Questions to Reflect on Quality of Life

Ask Yourself:

What core values guide how I think about my pet's health and well-being?

For example: comfort over longevity, or your personal values and beliefs regarding quality of life.

What medical information do I need to feel confident in making decisions?

Do I understand the diagnosis, treatment options and potential outcomes?

Do I feel supported and informed in this process?

Are there people—veterinary staff, friends, veterinary social workers, mental health professionals—who can help?

What are my “stopping points”? What am I able to tolerate and/or live with?

This might include physical, emotional, financial or practical limits.

What am I doing to take care of my own/my family's needs during this time?

Will I have the physical and emotional stamina to support my pet's long-term health needs? For example: getting up or staying up during the night, preparing special food/diets, maintaining a feeding tube, giving injections, caring for wounds, cleaning up and assisting with bathroom functions, lifting or assisting with walking and climbing stairs. Grief and caregiving are emotionally taxing. Your well-being matters, too.

When I look back on this time, what do I hope to feel good about?

This can help clarify what matters most in how you spend your time together. Will there be anything I regret doing or not doing?

Ask Your Veterinarian:

What can I realistically expect?

How can we work together to support my pet's comfort and wellness?

What are the available treatment options, and what are their goals?

Are we aiming to cure, manage clinical signs and symptoms or provide comfort? What will my pet's quality of life be like with treatment? What will my pet's quality of life be like without treatment?

How can I monitor my pet's condition at home?

What signs or behaviours should I watch for?

What does "quality of life" mean in my pet's specific situation?

How do we define comfort and contentment for them?

What signs will indicate that their quality of life is declining?

What might signal that it's time to reconsider our approach?
How will I know if my pet is suffering?

What palliative care options are available, if any?

How can we manage pain and maintain comfort?

What end-of-life options should I be aware of?

What are the processes, supports and considerations involved in euthanasia or natural death? What will the dying process look like?
How will I know the end is imminent?

What is a post-mortem examination? Is this something I should consider?

Often people do not know that getting a post-mortem examination is an option after their pet has died. This is a decision to think about in advance of death if possible. See *OVC Pet Trust: Reflecting on Aftercare and Memorialization – A Support Guide*.



Assessing Quality of Life

Assessing a pet's quality of life is an important role that we take on as their guardians. But how exactly do we do this? How do we know what to look for?

There are many tools available for this purpose. A popular tool is called a quality of life scale, which is meant to help you objectively track changes in your pet's health over time. There are many different versions of these scales that are available for use.

However, the most valuable and important tool for assessing quality of life is your veterinary team.

Your veterinary team will be able to discuss with you what to look for, including the basic needs of eating and drinking, ability to rest and sleep comfortably, absence of pain or nausea and the ability of your pet to interact with their family.



Veterinary teams often encourage their clients to think about what defines a “good day” for their pet, such as going for a walk, playing, enjoying a favorite treat or watching the birds. Reflecting on whether your pet can still take part in the activities they normally enjoy can help you assess their quality of life and identify changes over time. In some cases, palliative care or environmental adjustments can help them continue doing what they love. Keeping a simple daily journal or using happy and sad faces to track your pet’s day-to-day can be a helpful way to notice patterns and support decision making.

Quality of life isn’t just about survival; it’s also about whether your pet is still enjoying the things they love. There’s a big difference between “getting through the day” and “having a good day.” Know your own limitations and be realistic about what you are able and not able to do to support your pet. Ensure you have considered your own self-care and support so that you can manage their care as well as your own.

“I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you; but instead, I am deeply honoured knowing you spent the rest of your life with me.”

— Camille Marcotte

Quality of Life Journal Page

Use this page to make daily notes about your pet’s comfort, joy and challenges. Over time, these reflections can help you and your veterinary team notice patterns and support you in making the best decisions for your pet.

Daily Check-In

- What brought my pet joy today? (walking, playing, snuggling, eating treats, watching birds, etc.)
- What seemed difficult for my pet today? (eating, drinking, moving, resting, interacting with family, etc.)
- Circle one to capture the day overall: 😊 ☹️

Reflection

- Happiest moment of the day: _____
- Hardest moment of the day: _____
- Concerning things I noticed: _____
- Questions for my veterinary team: _____

Weekly Reflection (use at end of week)

- This week, were there more 😊 days or ☹️ days? _____

- Happiest moments this week: _____

- Hardest moments this week: _____

- What changes might help my pet have more good days?

Planning for End of Life: Honouring the Bond

Planning for our pet's end of life can feel strange, uncomfortable and unnatural. It's a unique aspect of caring for an animal, one that often includes the responsibility of deciding when it's time to say goodbye. This may feel very different from our experiences with humans who are nearing the end of their lives. While we may sometimes know or discuss a person's wishes before they die, our pets can't tell us what they want.

Even so, we often know them intimately and it's through that bond that we can honour them, making thoughtful, loving decisions on their behalf when the time comes.

"I think it's almost time... but where do I start?"

Planning ahead can help ensure that when the time comes, you can focus on what matters most — being present with your pet. Consider the following:

- How would I like our last day or days together to look?
- Where would I like it to happen: at home or at the veterinary hospital?
- Who do I want to be present?
- Who will perform the procedure?
- What happens after euthanasia?
- When can I or should I start thinking about aftercare and memorialization?





Euthanasia: Understanding the Process

What is euthanasia?

Euthanasia, the process of humanely ending a pet's life, is a well-established and widely accepted practice in North American veterinary medicine. It is often recommended when an animal's health or behaviour is causing significant discomfort, distress or a poor quality of life. The decision to euthanize a beloved pet is very difficult. Everyone has different beliefs, cultural influences and life experiences that shape our choices. It is important to remember that death itself is inevitable; the pain and suffering come from the condition or challenges the animal is experiencing, not the act of euthanasia. By choosing euthanasia, we are deciding how and when our pet's life will end, ensuring it is as peaceful and comfortable as possible. For many guardians,

understanding this distinction can help ease the guilt or emotional burden associated with making the decision.

It is important to have an open and honest discussion with your veterinarian about what choices are available for care leading up to the end of a pet's life and euthanasia. In many cases, palliative care focusing on patient comfort can help ease the end of a pet's life.

What if I let them go too soon?

Some caregivers may feel guilt or discomfort; some even express that they feel like they are "playing God" by choosing euthanasia. Not only does proceeding with euthanasia minimize or prevent suffering, but it also lets caregivers make choices about what their pet's final moments may look like. In most situations, dying will happen no matter what. Deciding to pursue euthanasia allows families to decide when, where and how euthanasia will happen and will give a beloved pet the most peaceful experience possible, surrounded by their loved ones.

Remember: You are your pet's guardian in life; you are also their guardian in death. You know them intimately, and are well equipped to make decisions for them, especially the hard ones. Many caregivers view euthanasia as one final act of love — giving their companion the gift of a "good death".

What if I want a natural death for my pet?

Many caregivers express that they are waiting for or hoping that a natural death occurs for their companion animal. It is important to know that allowing a pet to die naturally is not always easy, comfortable or peaceful.

Often, the reality of a natural death means that caregivers find themselves in situations that are distressing and painful for their pets, which may leave them with upsetting and disturbing memories of their animals' final moments.

If you are considering a natural death, it is important to have an open conversation with your veterinarian about what it might involve.

Some illnesses or disease processes can make a distressing death likely—such as seizures or severe breathing difficulties. In these cases, your veterinarian can often predict what may occur and may be motivated to discuss euthanasia as an option to prevent unnecessary suffering.

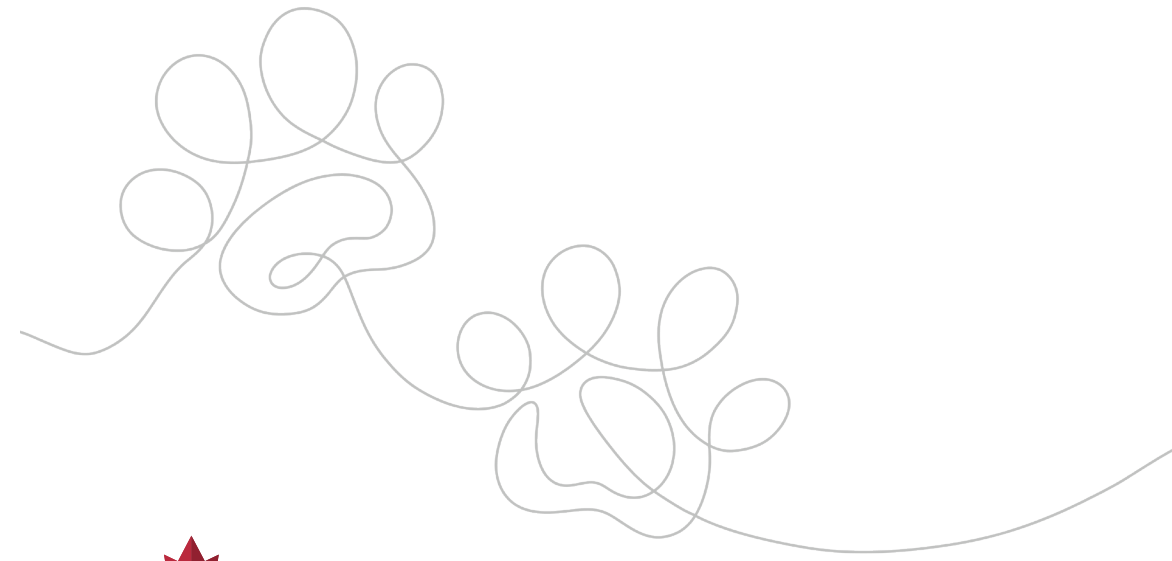
Other situations are less predictable, and some people may have personal or cultural beliefs that do not support euthanasia. It is important to share these beliefs openly with your veterinarian so that you can explore the realities of a natural death together.

Honest conversations, questions and collaborative problem solving can help you prepare for what to expect and help you make a compassionate decision for both you and your pet.

Remember that choosing to assist your pet in dying can provide more control over the process and allow you to bring your beliefs and culture into creating meaningful goodbyes. Veterinary professionals are guided by an oath to prioritize animal welfare. Your veterinarian's goal is always to support your pet's comfort and dignity while respecting your values.

The veterinarian's role in end-of-life care

One of the most important parts of a veterinarian's role is to help people understand end-of-life care for pets. It is their job to diagnose illness, detect pain and help with medications, nutrition and care to make animals more comfortable. It is also their job to have honest conversations with caregivers and guardians when they feel that a beloved pet is nearing the end of their life and discuss when euthanasia could be considered. These conversations can be emotional and difficult, but supporting families through end-of-life choices is an important part of providing excellent care.



THE CANADIAN VETERINARY OATH

"As a member of the veterinary medical profession, I solemnly swear that I will use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society.

I will strive to:

- promote animal health and welfare,
- prevent and relieve animal suffering,
- protect the health of the public and the environment, and
- advance comparative medical knowledge.

I will perform my professional duties conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.

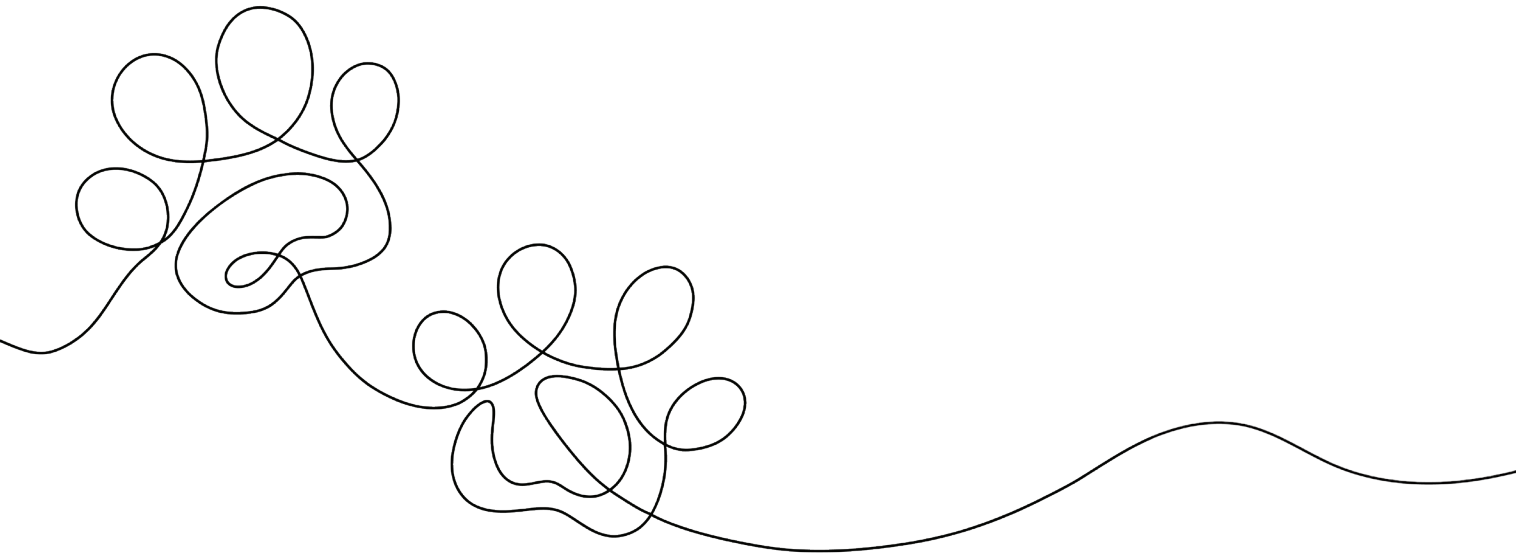
I will strive continuously to improve my professional knowledge and competence and to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards for myself and the profession."

Canadian Veterinary Medical Association

Euthanasia: Helping Children Understand the Process

Learning to understand and accept illness, injury and death is an important part of life. Although we never want to say goodbye to our pets, these moments can open the door to meaningful conversations with children about love, loss and what it means to grieve. This is also true in preparing a child for an impending loss. Every child is different, but often, being involved in family discussions about a pet's end of life and even in parts of the decision-making process can be valuable for them.





Help young children understand why euthanasia is necessary in words they can understand.

Old age:

“When animals get very old, their bodies wear out and stop working.”

Terminal illness:

“Fluffy is dying because he has a disease called cancer. The cancer is in his body, and we can’t fix it. It wasn’t anyone’s fault that he got cancer.”

Unexpected or accidental:

“A terrible thing happened to Fluffy (for example, hit by a car). Our pet’s body was badly hurt, and it could not be fixed.”

Explain euthanasia in a developmentally appropriate way. Let children know that their pet will be helped to die peacefully and without pain.

“We wish we could have Fluffy stay with us forever, but he is very old, and his heart doesn’t work well anymore. His veterinarian wishes she could make him better, but she can’t. It isn’t anybody’s fault. He is having trouble breathing and he isn’t eating any more. He is dying. So, the best thing we can do for him is to help him die peacefully. We will take him to the veterinarian, who will give him special drugs that she only gives to animals who are dying. He will be comfortable and not feel anything. Then his heart and breathing will stop and he will die. He won’t be with us anymore, but he won’t be in pain. Since we have to say goodbye to him, this is the best way to help him.”

Avoid the common phrase for euthanasia, “put to sleep”. Since we go to sleep nightly, associating this act with death may create anxiety and might lead to disruptions in sleeping routines or behaviours. It can also cause fear over surgery and anesthesia.

Read more in *OVC Pet Trust: Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet – A Support Guide*.



Making the Most of the Time You Have Left

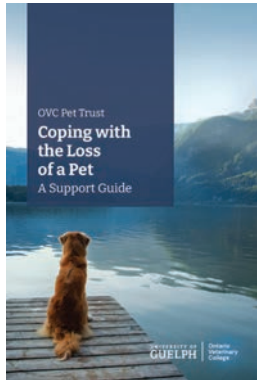
Spending meaningful time together can be incredibly healing for you and your pet. Here are some ways to create memories and celebrate the bond you share:

- Spend meaningful time together by engaging in the activities your pet loves most. If possible, take a walk or hike in a favourite place that holds special meaning for both of you. Simply being outdoors, breathing in fresh air and sharing the sunshine can be comforting. You might also cuddle, play a favourite game or enjoy their toys and special treats together.
- Arrange a professional photo session or commission a piece of artwork to celebrate your pet's unique spirit.
- Capture photos or videos of your final time spent together.
- Write a letter expressing what they mean to you, how they've touched your life and filled it with joy.
- Host a living memorial with friends or family who are a part of your pet's life.
- Create keepsakes like paw print art using non-toxic paint, a lasting remembrance that captures a tangible piece of your pet.
- Share stories, memories and special moments together.
- Create meaningful memorials while your pet is still with you, finding special ways to include them in the process.

Write down some ways that you can spend meaningful time with your pet:

Resources

Also available in this series:



OVC Pet Trust

Coping with the Loss of a Pet

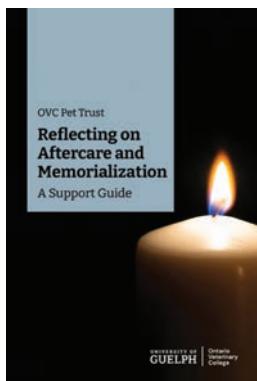
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OVC Pet Trust

Helping Children with the Loss of a Pet

A Support Guide



OVC Pet Trust

Reflecting on Aftercare and Memorialization





A Support Guide

Visit

OVC Pet Trust's Pet Loss Support Digital Resource Centre

at pettrust.ca/petlossresources

to access support, including:

-  *Always Near Me: Navigating Pet Loss*, a six-part video documentary series of individuals and families who share their experiences with pet loss and healing through memorialization.
-  An online video library of expert interviews on the topics of pet loss and grief.
-  Information about the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) Veterinary Social Work Service.
-  Additional resources (not affiliated with OVC): support groups, books, podcasts and mental health supports.

This resource is a collaborative effort between OVC Pet Trust and the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC), University of Guelph.

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OVC Pet Trust was founded in 1986 at the University of Guelph's Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) and is Canada's first charitable fund dedicated to the health and well-being of companion animals.

OVC Pet Trust supports innovative discoveries, health care and education that improve the prevention, diagnosis and treatments of diseases of pets.

OVC Pet Trust's Pet Memorial Program provides an opportunity for people to honour the special relationship they have with their companion animals.

Learn more about how OVC Pet Trust improves life for pets and the people who love them at ***pettrust.ca***.



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