

Tails Of The City

[« The right whale's... | Main](#)

There's never a good time to say goodbye

When a pet dies, the void they leave behind can feel as devastating as losing a family member.

Betty said goodbye to her 20-and-a-half year old cat Bessie last October. She woke up one morning to discover that Bessie couldn't walk. When the vet examined her beloved cat, he diagnosed Bessie with severe osteoporosis and two broken hind legs, probably due to a fall or mistimed jump sometime during the night. Because of Bessie's age and the brittleness of her bones, the vet advised against having her legs put in casts since they would have difficulty healing and would likely only break again in the future.

The vet kept Bessie overnight while Betty weighed her options. Bessie had lived a long and happy life. She was deaf and mostly blind, but up until her fall, she had been completely mobile. Knowing that Bessie was now in pain and could no longer get around on her own helped Betty come to the difficult decision to put Bessie to sleep.

She drove to the vet's office to see Bessie one last time and held her frail body as the vet first injected a sedative and then a drug that stopped her heart.



My childhood dog Sage, died in my brother's arms on the way to the vet, so the option of

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AUTHOR
Amelia Glynn [\[bio\]](#)

CONTACT
pets@sfgate.com

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[Breed of the Week](#) (5)
[Cats](#) (49)
[Celebrity Pets](#) (13)
[Contests](#) (12)
[Dog Walkers](#) (2)
[Dogs](#) (89)
[Euthanasia](#) (3)
[Events](#) (33)
[Favorites](#) (8)
[Fringe Pets](#) (10)
[Health and Safety](#) (43)
[Holidays](#) (12)
[Horses](#) (5)
[Kids](#) (3)
[Newsworthy](#) (33)

euthanasia was never fully discussed. But unfortunately, this is more the exception than the rule. It's rare that sick or elderly pets slip away peacefully in their sleep. Rohnert Park veterinarian and author of [Speaking for Spot](#), Dr. Nancy Kay says that 98 percent of us who open our hearts and homes to pets will need to face this decision.

Dr. Kay offers this advice for helping us navigate one of the toughest choices of our lives:

Who should make the decision? "No one is better suited to make the decision about euthanasia for your pets than you," says Dr. Kay. We know our pets habits and expressions and things that bring them joy and comfort better than anyone. "Although well-meaning friends and coworkers may offer their advice, it's important to remember that you are in the driver's seat," she advises. Our pets are our buddies and constant companions, which is why we are the ones with the most insight into the quality of their lives. But of course, deciding whether or not to put a pet to sleep is never without angst. "If it's not a struggle, you're not letting yourself go through the process and fully explore your feelings," Dr. Kay says.

When is the right time? "One of the most common questions I'm asked when clients are contemplating euthanasia is, 'Is my pet in pain?'" says Dr. Kay. "But the way animals express pain can be inconsistent. That's why it's important to also take other factors into consideration." Your vet can help you determine if your pet's quality of life has diminished, whether because of pain or another kind of suffering. Dr. Kay also recommends asking yourself these questions: Do the good days still outnumber the bad? Does your animal still get excited by the words you usually have to spell out (p-a-r-k, t-r-e-a-t, etc.) or the jangle of the car keys or the grind of the can opener? "At the risk of sounding too 'wacky-Northern-Californian,' it really boils down to this: when you get down on your hands and knees and look into their eyes, do you still see that familiar spark that lets you know they want to keep going?" says Dr. Kay. Although her clients' greatest concern is often, "Am I doing this too early?" she says the problem is more commonly waiting too long and the guilt that can accompany prolonging a hopeless situation. "It's better to err on the side of too soon," she says, but also admits that there's no exact "science" to making this decision. "It took me a full year to figure out what to do when my 17-year-old dog got sick," she says. Dr. Kay equates making this tough end-of-life decision with pay back for all of the tail wagging and unconditional love our pets have given us throughout their lives. "They need us to rise to the occasion," she says. "They are counting on us to be advocates for their happiness and quality of life."

Once I decide, what are my choices? You can absolutely choose to be present with your pet at the time of euthanasia — something Dr. Kay wholeheartedly encourages. She views a veterinarian's refusal to honor this request as "unacceptable" and says pet parents should not take no for an answer. "I believe that pets derive profound comfort and security from the presence of their beloved humans," she says. But she adds that if the thought feels too overwhelming, you can consider asking a friend or family member to fill in on your behalf. She also recommends being super upfront with children about their pet's euthanasia. Although it may or may not be appropriate for them to be present (depending on their age, etc.), children can be helped to understand the respect, love and humaneness behind such a decision.

Where and how should it take place? Keep in mind that euthanasia doesn't have to happen in a clinical setting. Many vets make house calls, so if you and your pet are more comfortable at home or in the family van, don't be afraid to voice your preferences. Once you've made the decision to let your pet go, Dr. Kay encourages her clients to carve out some closure time. "Take that last trip to the beach or share a burger from the drive-thru," she says. Closure can occur in just a few moments in the event of a sudden crisis or accident, or can take place over the course of a week. "When my clients tell me their crazy, fun, decadent stories they are usually smiling and I feel like laughing and crying at the same time," she says. "They've watched their pets experience fun and joy at the end of their lives."

What can I expect during and after the procedure? When a pet is euthanized, the vet administers an overdose of an anesthetic agent. It's a surprisingly fast process —

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- [Pet Specialist Showcase](#) (9)
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- [Pet Trends](#) (38)
- [Pleo Diaries](#) (6)
- [Politics](#) (9)
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there is typically a quick, quiet and pain-free loss of consciousness within 10 to 20 seconds of administering the injection. Some vets prefer to sedate the animals first. For people who are opposed to euthanasia for religious, philosophical or moral reasons, hospice care can help make a terminally ill animal and her people as comfortable and at peace as possible.

How should I care for the remains? Most people opt for cremation with return of the ashes, but some people have the means to accommodate a home, backyard burial for their pet. Many vets have standing arrangements with local pet cemeteries and crematoriums. Taxidermy is also an option, that while creepy to some, might appeal to a select group of pet parents.

For more information about pet euthanasia and making the best out of a difficult situation, pick up a copy of [Speaking for Spot](#) or check out [Dr. Kay's blog](#). You can also listen to Dr. Kay's recent interview with Terry Gross on [NPR's Fresh Air](#).

Have you ever had to put a pet to sleep? What helped you decide? How did you cope with your loss?

Posted By: [Amelia Glynn \(Email\)](#) | March 23 2009 at 03:30 PM

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