

## Pet owners struggle with euthanasia decision: When's the right time to put down a beloved companion?

By RUTH BASHINSKY Saturday, July 9th, 2011



Enid Alvarez/News  
Maria Vizzi holds up a photo of her late dog, Chico, surrounded by her other pets.

Saying goodbye to your pet is never easy.

Maria Vizzi can tell you firsthand what a heart-wrenching experience it can be. Sixteen months ago, Vizzi put her beloved pet down. Chico was a 13-year-old Chihuahua that Vizzi, 46, had cared for since he was 10 weeks old. When Chico became incontinent and was unable to walk, she knew that it was time. "He had a certain look in his eyes that showed he was suffering and his movements were impaired," says the Bronx resident and business owner. "I had never put a pet down before. He was part of our family. It was one of the hardest things I ever had to do."

Ann Hinshaw can relate. The

Manhattan account supervisor helped Jake, her 6-year-old Jack Russell Terrier, pass with dignity after he suffered from kidney failure for years. "Jake did remarkably well for about 10 months with treatment," Hinshaw, 30, says. "The time did come when I could tell that he and I both became exhausted fighting the good fight, so I gave him permission to let go. Sounds cheesy, I know, but I swear that dog was holding on for me, not for him."

Vizzi and Hinshaw represent pet owners across the city who clearly needed to make the difficult decision to euthanize their four-legged friends. For others, such a decision may not be as clear. According to Dr. Yaron Schmid, director of shelter medicine for the Humane Society of New York, a dog or cat may not show any signs of pain at all.

Cats in particular tend not to show signs until they are in an advanced stage of illness. Reduced appetite, nausea accompanied by vomiting, weight loss, infected tumors and extreme weakness are all signs indicative of decline. "We don't put any of our animals to sleep unless they are really very sick patients," says Schmid, who euthanizes two to three animals per day.

Talking to pet owners regularly about euthanasia, Schmid shares his compassion and expertise. "The first thing I tell people is to think about their pet and not themselves. The pet's life quality. We want our pet around so we have company because it is hard for us to say goodbye. They are the ones who are suffering, though, and we have to keep that in mind."

He also advises pet owners not to let their pet die at home. "Many people want their pet to die at home and it may happen, but many die suffering and that is not a good quality of life, either. What is different from human medicine is that we can help those animals and save them from their misery while human medicine does not have that benefit. We love our animals so much, and we need to make that decision for them."

Stacey Wolf's decision was made for her when her 14-year-old poodle Bichon Frise mix, Duncan, suddenly died. "It was shocking. He had a stroke in his sleep," says Wolf. "I always say Duncan took the decision away from me,

which made it harder and easier."

But when her 14-year-old gray tabby, Tigger, stopped eating and drinking, she knew she had to make the decision for her furry companion. "When you have a geriatric animal and you are going to outlive them, part of the joy of having an animal is stepping up and making sure that you help them die with dignity and in the right way," says Wolf, an astrologer/author from the upper West Side. "You never forget putting your animal to sleep. It is not easy, but it is important to find the strength in yourself to do what is right for your pet."