

Euthanasia for behavioral issues:

A complicated and difficult decision

Deciding to euthanize your companion animal may be one of the most difficult decisions you ever make. This choice is particularly painful when your pet is otherwise young and physically healthy. However, quality of life is determined by both physical health and mental well-being, and many behavioral problems cause the afflicted animal to suffer. The following suggestions may help you if you are contemplating whether or not to euthanize your pet for behavioral reasons.

Before euthanasia

If you wish to explore alternate options to euthanasia, please consider the following:

1. Rule out medical causes for behavior

Pain and illness are common causes of aggression, especially those with sudden-onset symptoms and in older animals. Seek support from your veterinarian to determine if there could be a medical cause for your animal's behavioral changes.

2. Seek professional help

An academically-trained behavior specialist should be consulted for serious aggression and/or anxiety problems. This may include a veterinary behaviorist (dacvb.org) or an applied animal behaviorist (certifiedanimalbehaviorist.com). Medications may be helpful for your pet's aggression or anxiety problem. Keep in mind that these drugs often take six weeks or more to produce an effect, so make sure to give these treatments enough time before making a decision on further actions.

A qualified dog trainer may also be helpful in implementing a training and management plan. Training methodology, unfortunately, is not standard within the industry. Some punishment-based training techniques (prong collars, "alpha" rolls) have been shown to increase aggressive behavior in dogs, and are not recommended for behavior modification.^{1,2} Instead, consider seeking the support of a trainer who utilizes positive-reinforcement techniques that have been

scientifically studied. The American Veterinary Society for Animal Behavior (AVSAB) has information on how to find an appropriate trainer:

<https://avsab.org/?s=How+to+Choose+a+Trainer>

3. Consider finding a new home for your animal

Some problem behaviors may be managed in another setting. For example, a cat that began urinating outside the litter box when a new dog was brought into the home might be okay in a single-pet household. A dog with "resource guarding" issues, such as growling over food or toys, may be more safely managed in a home without young children. If you decide to rehome your animal, you must provide your pet's full behavior history to the new owners. There is a significant ethical and legal responsibility to ensure that your pet does not hurt any people or other animals.

A safe home would include new owners who are willing to avoid physical and verbal punishment as behavior management, and able to seek help from an academically-trained behaviorist to better cope with the inappropriate behavior. In general, these homes will be difficult to find. It is likely that a move to a new environment may cause your pet to become fearful or stressed and display undesirable behaviors. Animals with behavior problems are often at great risk for abuse and neglect in new environments because they may not have a significant human-animal bond (close relationship with the new owner), which is necessary to protect them.

¹ Survey of the use and outcome of confrontational and non-confrontational training methods in client-owned dogs showing undesired behaviors. Herron, Meghan E.; Shofer, Frances S.; Reisner, Ilana R. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* V: 117 Issue: 1-2 Pages: 47-54 DOI:10.1016/j.applanim.2008.12.011 Published: FEB 2009

² American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior Position Statement, "The Use of Punishment for Behavior Modification in Animals"

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Making the decision to euthanize

1. Environmental factors

Your living situation may be unchangeable, and most serious problem behaviors require a good deal of environmental modification (avoiding triggers to aggression). Young children and elderly relatives may be more at-risk for bites, and recommended behavioral modification might be extraordinarily difficult or impossible to implement given your living situation. Liability is a concern, as well as the safety of your family and other pets. For example, a dog with aggression towards children cannot be reasonably accommodated in a home that runs a daycare. Every family has unique circumstances, and you may find that you are simply unable to provide the environmental changes that are needed to safely keep your pet.

2. Re-homing is not an option

Some animals may not be safe in any environment. For example, a large-breed dog that is aggressive towards strangers will remain a safety concern regardless of who adopts him. Most shelters will not adopt out animals with aggression, inappropriate urination (cats), or separation anxiety, and you maintain a legal and ethical responsibility to disclose this information. Elderly pets or animals with other medical conditions may be more difficult to find placement options.

3. Suffering

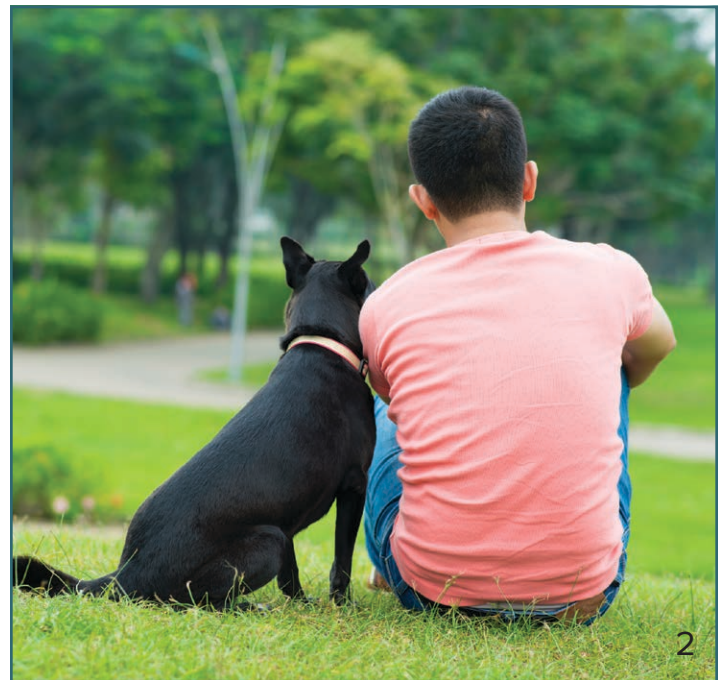
Animals with behavioral problems have underlying fear, anxiety, and distress, and the owners of these pets often report sharing these feelings as a result. Mental suffering may not be as visible as physical pain, but detracts from your pet's quality of life. Ask yourself: Is my pet having more bad days than good? Can he still enjoy his favorite activities? Is he able to spend time with his people, or does he need to be isolated for safety? Additionally, these pets can create significant stress and anxiety for their human family members. Many people find it helpful to create a quality-of-life log for both themselves and their pet to assess the emotional toll the behavioral problem(s) may be causing.

4. Severity of the problem and progression of signs

Dogs do not reach "social maturity" until two to four years of age, and it is common for behavioral problems to worsen until this time if the underlying causes have not been addressed. Similarly, behavioral problems that begin to generalize (start with a few specific triggers and progress to many common triggers) will be increasingly difficult to manage. Many behavioral problems occur along with others, and sometimes the treatment for one is not possible because of the other. For example, it will not be effective to isolate a dog with both separation anxiety and stranger-directed aggression when guests visit.

Behavioral Medicine Clinic

The Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center Behavioral Medicine Clinic offers services to owners of companion animals with behavioral issues, including human-directed aggression, inter-pet aggression, separation anxiety, inappropriate elimination, fears, phobias, compulsive behaviors and cognitive dysfunction. We are experienced in addressing the behavioral problems of dogs and cats and the concerns of their families. The goal of a behavior appointment is to help you understand your pet's behavior and to help you and your pet live together more comfortably and safely. For more information about behavioral services, please visit: vmc.vet.osu.edu/services/behavioral-medicine





Finding emotional support

Remember that you are the one who is living with the behaviors and the animal. You are also the one who has a strong enough bond with your pet to be willing to look at all of the options and make the decision that works best for you, your animal and your family.

Sometimes, it is hard to find support from others without feeling judged. Making such a difficult decision should not be complicated by the unsolicited opinions of others. If you want advice or thoughts from others, you are welcome to ask for it, just as you are welcome to ignore opinions for which you did not ask. It will be important to find support from those who recognize that these are terribly difficult decisions you are facing. If you'd like additional support, you may reach out to a staff member with our Honoring the Bond (HTB) Program. The HTB team is here to support owners making difficult decisions. Their role is to provide support for you in the most non-judgmental way possible.

Again, the decision whether or not to euthanize due to behavioral issues is extraordinarily difficult and personal. If you choose euthanasia, you may feel guilty for some time. You may also feel a sense of relief afterward. Many pets with behavioral issues must be so carefully managed that you may not realize the emotional toll until you no longer have to manage them. This sense of relief may also cause you to feel more guilt. This is a normal emotional response, and does not mean that your choice was wrong. In choosing to euthanize your pet, you have given them peace and allowed them to die humanely and without suffering.

The Honoring the Bond program at The Ohio State University Veterinary Medical Center

The mission of the Honoring the Bond program is to recognize and honor the human-animal bond by providing support to companion animal owners. Honoring the Bond program services are available, at no cost, to clients of the Ohio State Veterinary Medical Center.

Our social workers can assist in the following ways:

- Act as a liaison between you and the veterinary medical team
- Provide crisis intervention during difficult situations
- Assist in processing difficult decisions (quality-of-life assessments, treatment decisions)
- Be present before, during, and/or after euthanasia
- Facilitate family discussions with children
- Provide assessment and referral for further follow-up counseling, if needed
- Provide resources, including reading lists, websites, counselor and pet loss support group referrals, cremation/burial resources, memorial ideas, etc.

If you would like to speak with someone from the Honoring the Bond program, you may:

- Ask your clinician, student, or client services representative to contact us
- Contact us directly at (614) 247-8607
- Access our website and email at:
vmc.vet.osu.edu/services/honoring-the-bond

Honoring the Bond is a nonprofit program, relying on the generous donations of owners, veterinarians, and businesses. If you would like to donate to Honoring the Bond (fund #309011) you may send a check to the following address:

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You may also donate online at:

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