

# Euthanasia: 7 coping strategies for veterinary team members

By Michelle Hainer

Obviously, euthanasia is one of the most difficult aspects of your job. But a long-term relationship with a patient can actually offer some comfort when the time comes to say goodbye, says Kyle Palmer, CVT, practice manager at Silver Creek Animal Clinic in Silverton, Ore. "I think about how we've taken a pet through every stage of their life and now we need to be here to perform this one last service," Palmer says.

The need to serve his clients helps keep his emotions in check. Here are a few more ways to ease the pain you might be feeling about euthanasia.

## 1 It's OK to cry

Holding back your sadness not only wreaks havoc on your psyche, but it also does your clients a disservice. "People tell me they want to learn how to not cry during euthanasia," says Coleen Ellis, founder of Two Hearts Pet Loss Center in Greenwood, Ind. "It is not unprofessional to cry. The family wants to know that you've built a relationship with their pet as well."

## 2 Plan ahead

At Silver Creek Animal Clinic, staffers struggling with a specific euthanasia are reassigned to an area where they can be distracted. "We allow them to take an extended break or let them leave for the day," Palmer says. "Those who might be most affected are identified in advance and do not participate." This is especially important if a client's pet reminds team members of their own pet.

## 3 Grieve as a team

"It's best to schedule times to get together as a staff to remember those special pets that died during the month," Ellis says. At Windsor Veterinary Clinic in Windsor, Colo., practice manager Sharon DeNayer holds a group debriefing after particularly difficult pet deaths. "The United States has a mourning avoidance culture," DeNayer says. "I choose not to be a part of that."

## 4 A token of affection

Helping honor the deceased pet's life can be as beneficial for you as it is for the clients. If they express a desire to hold a funeral, direct them to a funeral home in the area that specializes in pet deaths. And attend if you were particularly close to the pet. Many clinics give clients some type of item that memorializes their pets. For examples, visit [dvm360.com/euthanasia](http://dvm360.com/euthanasia).

## 5 Discuss the possibilities

DeNayer begins the euthanasia discussion before any employee is hired. "If they have strong feelings against euthanasia ever being done, they will not fit into our clinic culture and will not be able to effectively carry out all of their job responsibilities," she says. However, DeNayer's clinic doesn't euthanize healthy animals, which relieves stress on the whole team. On the other hand, if you're the one looking for a job, be sure to ask in the interview whether the practice performs "convenience" euthanasias.

## **6 Crack a book**

Grief counseling can help team members and clients. For this reason, DeNayer keeps a copy of *Healing Your Grieving Body: 100 Physical Practices for Mourners* (Companion Press, 2009) in the staff library at her practice. To help pet owners and team members who've lost their own pet DeNayer and Ellis both recommend *When Your Pet Dies: A Guide to Mourning, Remember, and Healing* (Companion Press, 2004).

## **7 The ties that bind**

Rather than pretending the euthanasia never occurred, keep the client relationship going and try to acknowledge the situation in a more positive light. This helps you and clients cope. To honor the pet and show you still care, Ellis suggests acknowledging the pet's birthday with a note that says something like, *Today we celebrate the day that your life was changed. Remembering Mico and honoring her life.* "You could also send a card on the anniversary date of the pet's first veterinary visit but most certainly remember the anniversary date of the pet's death with a special card and message," Ellis says.