



## The Top 3 Tips for Helping Grieving Clients During the Holidays

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Many years ago, my colleague and I invited a panel of veterinarians to talk to our third year Colorado State University veterinary students during a course called “Managing Client Grief.” During the question and answer phase, the discussion turned to helping clients whose pets are gravely ill during the days leading up to the holidays. One of our students had recently dealt with a client who experienced tremendous anxiety due to the decisions she had to make. Our student wanted to know how she could have dealt with her client more effectively.

Her questions were good ones. Should I have done everything humanly possible to keep the pet alive until the holidays had passed? Since my client was leaving town to visit relatives, should we have agreed to board her cat at our clinic so it had proper medical care, even though our practice doesn't provide that service? If the cat had “crashed” on Christmas Day, should I have given up my own personal plans to be with our client when she needed me the most?

A veterinarian from the panel, who defined himself as “old school,” told the students he always provides the same solution in this case—immediate euthanasia. “Why prolong peoples’ suffering?” he asked the class. “I tell them to be rational about it and to let the animal go now, before the pet or the family has to experience any more pain,” he explained. “Let them get it over with before the holiday so death isn't always part of their memories.”

Another veterinarian disagreed with that plan. “I think clients trust us and will often do whatever we ask them to do, even if that decision isn't the right one for them,” she countered. “We have to be careful that we don't push them into decisions that they'll regret later. We can *guide*, but we shouldn't ever *tell* them what to do.”

Since most of the students felt comfortable with the idea of *guiding* clients, we ended the class with a brainstorming session about what ‘*guiding*’ might look like. Here are the student's Top 3 Tips:

### 1) Be clear about your own limits and schedule.

Most clients realize that you have a personal life, but they can be caught off guard if their expectations of you don't match your willingness to “be there” for them 24/7. If they know ahead of time that you are unavailable during certain hours or days, they'll consider your availability as part of their decision-making process.

Some clients will “test” the boundaries you set and ask you to make exceptions for them. While you need to assess each case on an individual basis, in most cases, you can feel comfortable about referring clients to your back-up resources when you know you have been clear about your availability from the beginning.

### 2) Get a grip on your own feelings of anxiety.

Knowing the holidays are approaching makes everyone a bit more jumpy when it comes to caring for a seriously ill pet. Sometimes it's tempting to lead clients toward a more rapid decision, believing that waiting will only prolong feelings of stress and anxiety. Yet, people have different tolerances for emotional pain and, for many, feeling they euthanized a pet too early, before they were emotionally ready to say good-bye, is worse than the indecision that is present before a pet's death.

If you feel yourself growing impatient with a client's indecision, gently remind them that feelings of grief will come with their loss, whether their pet's death occurs today or two weeks from today. Explore their reasons for waiting to treat or to euthanize with them. Is there a valid reason to wait or are they truly trying to avoid the grieving process? Remind them again of your own limits and schedule so your own anxiety about being pulled back into their case during your own holiday celebrations won't be a factor.

### 3) Help clients project ahead to a time after their pet has died.

What choices and decisions can they make now that will be comforting to them later? Which ones might cause them to feel regret? For example, if your client is agonizing about leaving town to visit relatives because she will need to leave her very sick dog behind in the care of a pet sitter, gently ask her if it would be possible for her to stay home with her pet this year. Ask her to take a moment to search her heart to discover which will might regret more in the years ahead—disappointing her relatives or not being with her pet during the last few days of his life?

The answer is different for each client and neither answer is ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ When people are distressed, they often cling to familiar rituals and routines simply because it's what they've always done. As your clients' emotional care *guide*, you can help them make conscious and deliberate choices that will impact their futures in more positive ways.