



When Euthanasia is an Option for a Behavior Problem that Can't Be Resolved

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It's one of the most gut-wrenching situations in veterinary medicine...euthanasia due to a companion animal's aggression or misbehavior.

There are several circumstances that can lead to companion animal euthanasia related to misbehavior. These include:

- dangerous behavior such as aggression
- severe or uncorrectable behavior
- lifestyle issues like chronic house soiling
- problems that seem to make some pets appear to be "unadoptable" like severe separation anxiety
- pet parents who are unwilling or unable to pursue treatment for a pet due to low attachment, unwillingness to work through recommended treatment strategies, or lack of financial resources

Whatever behavior-related reasons lie beneath the decision to euthanize a pet, the consideration of this option is certain to trigger a variety of strong emotions---in both your clients and in the members of your veterinary team. These emotions may include impatience, intolerance, frustration, anger, guilt, shame, anxiety, and grief.

When a pet parent requests euthanasia due to a pet's behavior problem, there are two questions you and your practice team should ask yourselves:

1. Can you personally justify this euthanasia and carry through with the procedure? (i.e., Do you agree that the behavior is uncorrectable or that the animal is dangerous? Do you believe your client has sincerely tried to work through the problem? Do you feel there is no other option for this pet or for the pet parents?)
2. Can you sincerely provide emotional support for the family who is making this difficult decision? (i.e., Are you able to suspend your own feelings and judgment, and view the decision through your client's eyes? Can you empathize with the family's feelings of grief?)



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If your team's answer to one or both of these questions is "no," you may choose to decline to perform the euthanasia. If you are uncertain about how to answer one or both of these questions, you may want to gather more information about the circumstances surrounding the behavior and the range of alternatives available for this pet. Often, a more honest, in-depth conversation with the pet parents can reveal details that will aid your decision and/or enable you to feel more supportive.

It's important to remember that behavior problems, like other medical problems, don't always have solutions. If you are still struggling with the decision about whether or not to agree to euthanize a pet, you may want to ask yourself, "What is likely to happen to this animal if I refuse to euthanize it?"

Always consider the stress or potential consequences for the animal if it is surrendered to a shelter, abandoned, or even worse. Also, consider the stress your refusal may cause shelter workers or other veterinary teams who may feel compelled to eventually perform the euthanasia. Sometimes, providing a peaceful, painless, and compassionate death for a companion animal who has an uncertain future is the most humane decision you can make.

*This article was reviewed by veterinarians and certified applied animal behaviorists. Adapted from Morehead D., Lagoni L., et al. *Guidelines for Bond-Centered Practice*, 2001. (Out of print.)