



## Seven Tips to Help Pet Parents Make Decisions

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It's the "exam-room sweat syndrome" -- a pet needs medical care, but your client isn't sure which course of treatment to choose. Surgery now or "watch and wait" with possible surgery later? Preventative diet change? Expensive chemotherapy? Diagnostic tests that may lead to a referral to a veterinary specialist?

As clients ponder their options, your veterinary team awaits a decision. Beads of nervous sweat gather on your client's forehead. You know your client's heart is pumping a bit faster. It's probably hard for them to concentrate, hard to breathe... they want to make the best decision they can for their pet, but they're seized by anxiety!

Experts who study how humans think say there are several ways you can help clients make better choices. Here are seven tips to *help you help clients* when they must make decisions for their pets.

### 1. Pay Attention to Emotions

Our conscious thoughts are only a small portion of what goes on in our brains. Jonah Lehrer, author of the book How We Decide, says our unconscious brains take in vast amounts of information that we're not even aware of and process it very quickly. Our unconscious brains consider factual knowledge, along with variables like body language, previous personal experiences and the opinions of significant others. Based on the brain's conclusions, it generates emotions that seem "appropriate" for the current set of circumstances. It's these emotions that often "tell" us what to do. If clients seem indecisive or overwhelmed by information, help them access this intuitive guidance by asking them what their 'gut' is telling them to do.



### 2. Challenge Memories and Personal Preferences

Recent research shows that personal memories may be surprisingly inaccurate. Thus, a client's previous experience with another pet's veterinary care may not be the most reliable basis for decision-making when it comes to this pet's care. Our own 'likes', 'dislikes' and beliefs can also limit our decision-making process. For instance, deeply-held beliefs like expensive treatments are more likely to work or an older vet would know more about this condition than a younger one aren't necessarily true. If you notice that your client seems to have an extreme reaction to a treatment option you suggest, they may be remembering the details and emotions of a past experience. Help clients separate their own (sometimes subconscious) values, beliefs and past experiences from the current reality of this pet's treatment. And, while you're at it, reassure them about your own expertise and abilities!

### 3. Be Realistic About Post-Treatment Care

Sometimes the post-treatment care required for a pet may be difficult and time-consuming. Be sure you have provided a thorough understanding of the pet's home care requirements before you ask for their decision about treatment. Explain your expectations regarding their pet's confinement, exercise requirements, and ➔

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follow-up appointments, as well as the medications or medical procedures they will need to manage during their pet's post-treatment care. Thorough explanations of after-care allow clients to determine whether or not they (and their lifestyles) are capable of providing what is required for their pet to recover.

#### 4. Answer More Questions

Many clients don't understand the 'whys' or the 'hows' of your treatment recommendations, but they don't ask for clarification. Offer to repeat information as many times as they need you to and be sure to offer explanations in different ways---and do it without medical jargon!

#### 5. Encourage Them to Gather Other Points of View

If your client seems hesitant to accept your treatment recommendations, encourage them to talk with other family members or friends who know their pet and can help them think objectively about their condition. In some instances, you may also want to suggest that your clients seek a second opinion or consult with a veterinary specialist. A confirmation of your diagnosis and treatment plan can reinforce the trust your client has in you.

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#### 6. Do Your Homework

It's smart to urge your clients to learn more about their pet's disease or condition, but you must also caution them to use trustworthy sources. There are many books, websites, blogs, and articles on the internet claiming to offer veterinary medical information and advice. Yet, each pet and each illness or injury is unique and some sites offer information that is just not credible. You know better than anyone that what worked for another may not work for your patient. So, investigate online resources and, if you find a great source, pass it the link to your clients!

#### 7. Remove the Pressure

It's hard to make decisions when people are staring at you, waiting for you to direct their next moves. It's also difficult to digest new information when you haven't had time to sort through it in your own mind. If your patient's condition is not an emergency, give clients some time to consider their options. Encourage them to leave the exam room and even the veterinary clinic, if necessary. Schedule a time later that day or the next when you will either meet again or speak over the telephone to confirm their decision.

If you've exhausted all these techniques and your client still can't make a decision, remind them that just because you can do something for a pet doesn't mean you should. Obviously, your client's financial situation is important to consider when making treatment recommendations for a pet. Reassure them that you realize their ability to pay has nothing to do with the love they feel for their pet. And, likewise, remind them that your commitment to provide high quality care requires you to charge a fair price for your services.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom<sup>®</sup> Resource Center at [www.veterinarywisdom.com](http://www.veterinarywisdom.com)