

## Helping Clients Assess Quality of Life

Throughout your career, clients will ask you the question “How will I know it’s time to euthanize?” turning to you for support and assistance in determining the quality of their pet’s life. **Quality of life** is the degree of well-being felt by the animal. It consists of two components: physical and psychological. Here are some suggestions to guide and support your clients facing difficult assessments and decisions.

Encourage the client to define quality of life from the animal’s point of view:

- Does he eat and drink normally?
- Can he relieve himself on his own?
- Can she move around on her own?
- Is she interested in the activities around her?
- Is he withdrawn much of the time

Provide your client with the following ideas to gain a deeper, more objective understanding of their pet’s daily quality of life.

- Create a list of your pet’s unique qualities, i.e. chasing a ball, playing with other pets, scratching on a post, rubbing on your legs or barking at a neighbor. As the disease progresses and these qualities fade, mark them off the list. Decide early on which and how many traits can go before too much quality diminishes from the animal’s day to day life.
- Keep a good day/bad day calendar.  
Evaluate what a good day would be for the pet, and also what a bad day looks like. Each evening, recall the day and decide if it was a good or bad day, marking a calendar with a ☺ or ☹. Decide how many bad days in a row occur before quality is compromised.  
  
This activity can be achieved with a jar of marbles also. Start with an empty jar. Add a marble for a good day, remove one for a bad day. Decide how many days with few or no marbles occur before quality is compromised.
- Keep a journal or daily record of events in the pet’s life. This can be helpful in looking back to reflect on changes that occur and how the client’s life is affected.

It can be helpful to educate your client so they can understand the differences between pain and suffering as they are making assessments of quality in their pet’s life.

**Pain** is a physical and emotional sensation that can be complicated to assess. Keep in mind, a pet’s reaction to pain is dependent upon its personality and the degree of pain it’s experiencing. It is important to inform your client what signs their pet may display to indicate pain.

**Suffering** is more than physical attributes, and involves the ability to enjoy living life. Use the above tools to help your client decide if important qualities are diminishing or are no longer present in their pet’s life. These may help them to define what suffering would be for their pet and together you can create a plan to prevent or limit suffering.

There is no doubt that these discussions can be difficult, for both you and the client. How end of life conversations are conducted has the potential to strengthen your relationship with your clients, enhance client satisfaction with your services and promote your own professional fulfillment. Creating an appropriate setting, establishing rapport, offering compassion and understanding the client’s perspective are some of the vital components to this challenging conversation.