

Dementia in Senior Dogs

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When I talk with people who are struggling with the decision to let their senior dogs move on to their next expression of spirit the issue of dementia often comes up, but I've found that people are sometimes unwilling to consider euthanasia if the problem isn't physical. Somehow it's easier (well, actually I know it's never easy) to come to terms with the fact that a dog is suffering physically and needs to move on than it is to



understand that mental and emotional suffering need to be taken into consideration as well as physical problems. My experiences with my own dogs, as well as many conversations with people about their dogs, has brought me to several thoughts that I'd like to share with you.

1. My bottom line is always **quality of life** when I'm talking with people about end-of-life decisions for their dogs. Dementia is an insidious and relentless condition that is very difficult for a dog to handle ... and for you to deal with if you're the person who loves the dog. Here are some behaviors to look for if you have concerns about your dog's mental/emotional health:

A) Pacing, anxiousness, movement that doesn't seem purposeful, disorientation

B) Staring for long periods of time, getting lost in corners, standing on the wrong side of a door waiting for it to open, unable to figure out the next step, acting dazed, seeming to be lost in familiar places

C) Peeing/pooping in the house: Seniors with dementia may forget to go outside to do their business, but it's important to rule out a medical problem (urinary tract infection, gastrointestinal problems) before assuming the problem is related to dementia.

D) Withdrawing: A dog with dementia often won't seek out human companionship, sometimes will even walk away while being petted, and often won't greet family members when they come home.

E) Barking for no reason: The dog may no longer recognize people, or the dog may be lost in the yard or behind a door, or is generally confused ... which could cause barking, especially at night.

F) Appetite changes that manifest in either losing interest in food or always being hungry

G) Sleeping pattern changes: A dog with dementia may sleep more than normal, or have night and day reversed—sleeping during the day and awake and confused at night.

H) Not responsive to your voice : You need to first rule out hearing loss, but if that isn't the problem, the dementia may be interfering with your dog's ability to process what you're saying and act on your request, or the dog may even be confused about his or her name when you call it.

I) Any other behaviors that might be unusual for your dog.

If you notice some of the above signs I'd suggest you keep track of what behaviors you've noticed so you can determine how often they're occurring. Then, make an appointment with your vet to discuss what's going on. Your vet may prescribe medications/supplements that can be helpful with dementia in its early stages, but you need to be mindful of the fact that often some medications are aimed at just reducing anxiety and you may end up with a dog that is not only confused, but also tranquilized and barely responsive, which means you're trading one unhealthy state for another.

2. Don't buy the tee shirt "**Denial** Ain't Just a River in Egypt." If you've read through the above list of common symptoms of dementia you may find yourself trying to explain away any symptoms your dog is experiencing by saying things like: "He'll be better tomorrow." "She's just having a bad day." "I don't think she really minds being confused; after all, people are confused all the time." "He isn't in pain." Please don't rationalize what's going on mentally or emotionally with your dog. Like people, dogs function on many different levels and like us, they like to be in control of their minds and bodies. Don't compare your senior moments to what your dog is experiencing with dementia. When you walk into a room and forget why you're there that's often a momentary lapse caused by distraction on your part. Or, if you find your socks in the refrigerator, you just laugh and chalk the misplacement up to not paying attention. Your dog isn't laughing when he can't figure out how he got stuck in a corner. And ... dementia is painful on an emotional and mental level.

3. Is the **light** still there in your dog's eyes? I do understand that if your dog is blind or is vision impaired it's difficult to tell whether or not the light is still there, but even with blind dogs you can sense whether it is or isn't. The light I'm talking about sometimes isn't so much a tangible thing as it is just a sense that your dog is still in there. If you feel like your dog isn't fully present any longer and that no one is home, the light is fading or gone.

4. **There's a big difference between existing and living.** Dogs can exist with dementia for a long time, but that existence is without joy, eventually is filled with fear, and can't be called living in any true sense of the word.

5. When your dog loses his or her sense of identity that's serious business. Recently I had to say goodbye to two of my dogs that were suffering from dementia. It was heart wrenching to watch them lose their sense of identity because dogs function on an intuitive level most of the

time and their sense of who they are as dogs is important to them. Their sense of identity gives purpose and joy to their lives and when they become confused about who they are that sense of purpose and joy is compromised.

After reading the above paragraphs I know you must feel helpless and frustrated, but if your dog is in the early stages of dementia and you aren't seeing the above-mentioned behaviors to any significant degree to cause you to consider euthanasia here are a few things you can do to help:

- Offer your dog reassurance, physical comfort, and a constant reminder that you're there.
- Dementia isn't something a dog should have to deal with alone. Be physically with your dog as much as possible.
- Trust the bond you have with your dog to hold strong. Offer your fully present self to your dog on every level.
- Provide external stimulation (rides in the car, walks, visits to the dog park, playtime with other dogs) to keep the world available to your dog.
- Look for the positive. Allow your dog to see the light in your eyes. Practice being optimistic.
- Try whatever your vet might prescribe because often you'll see some good short-term results with the non- tranquilizing meds that will stimulate brain activity. Also, there are several dog foods on the market that claim to help with cognitive dysfunction. In short, with your vet's suggestions in mind, try whatever's out there.

Ok, I've said enough. I'm sure you get my point by now. What I'm talking about here is a steady progression of what I call the "foggy boy" syndrome. What I've found with my own dogs is that initially the confusion and disorientation isn't terribly upsetting to them. They just roll with it and relax into a kind of "It's no big deal; my person will take care of me" state of mind. But, eventually the confusion frightens them, they begin to panic and become fearful. That's no way to live.

Please take dementia seriously when you're considering your senior dog's quality of life and think very hard about whether it's really in his or her best interests to just exist instead of living a happy life in which he or she is fully present.

Next week: Humans Can Learn New Tricks from Old Dogs