

None of us want to consider life without our dog. It's painful to think about and normal to avoid talking about.

An end-of-life conversation is one that no one who lives with a dog wants to have, but that everyone who loves a dog will eventually need.

When faced with an emergency, after receiving a life-limiting diagnosis or when making end-of-life decisions, it's easy for a dog's person to become overwhelmed, feel unprepared and experience a range of emotions. With 7 – 8 million dogs estimated to die in the U.S. this year¹ that's a lot of anxiety, fear, pain, loss and grief.

As a life coach, I often talk with people navigating unresolved grief, guilt and regret over things they wish they would have asked, decisions they wish they'd made differently or the belief they waited too long or acted too quickly. I want your experience to be better.

WE ARE ALL PATHMAKERS

We hope for many more healthy years with our dog. The reality is that life and death decisions may need to be made on a moment's notice or over an extended period of time whether our puppy is 3 months old or our dog is 13 years of age. We simply don't know what lies ahead. And there is no right, wrong or single way forward.

Poet Antonio Machado (1875-1939) wrote "Pathmaker, there is no path. You make the path by walking. By walking, you make the path." We must each make our own path and decide

TALKING NOW HELPS LATER

how to begin the conversation
about the end of your dog's life
before you need to
and why it matters

Tracey Brant MS, PCC

how to walk it alongside our dog. We are all pathmakers.

Beginning the conversation about the end of our dog's life before we need to is difficult and different for all. Our first reaction is often resistance in which fear and inaction thrive.

Over time, talking invites courage and courage allows movement forward in the face of fear. Still, some of us may not be ready today, and that's ok. We start from where we are. Even talking about not wanting to talk about it can bring relief!

JOY AND GRATITUDE

After talking, many people report more joy and gratitude for life in the present; for themselves, with their dog and with others. What a gift!

Being in conversation about the end of life *while we're living it* is a gift that keeps on giving because it allows us to practice over time. Both talking to ourselves and with others helps us move forward.

We may hold back and believe talking about death will hasten it, or convince ourselves that the

mere thought of death is a betrayal. Neither are true.

We're not being dismissive or cavalier about life by talking about death or doing anything to dishonor our dog or our relationship with them through conversation.

Instead, we're gifting ourselves time and valuable insight. Time to consider our worries, wishes and wants while we're not under pressure. Time to seek information and learn more. Time to think through scenarios with a clear mind. Time to make simple decisions and consider more complex ones. Time to get clear on our priorities and learn from others.

Talking now leads to new discoveries, new information and possible new solutions to draw upon later.

"Our involvement at the end of our dog's life is a covenant we enter into the moment we call them ours." -Tracey Brant

A CALL TO ACTION

There seems to be more pain and suffering when we avoid talking about the end-of-life, and less when we do. By talking sooner than later we benefit through claiming our roles and responsibilities within our individual circumstances.

We benefit further by deciding where we stand on our dog's comfort and their quality and quantity of life and through discovering our capacity to make humane and loving

decisions when there is “no hope for improvement and before our dog has been drained of all the spark of life.”²

Conversation can ease our burden and help us avoid the endless loop of anticipatory grief now and suffering the could-have’s, should-have’s or would-have’s later.

Endings are part of life. They are always with us. While this can be a frightening thought, it’s also an important, life affirming call to action:

DON’T WAIT.

The death of our dog is a transformational loss under the best of circumstances. And if we’ve made these decisions before we may easily be able to recall our experience.

We remember what went well, reflect on things we wish had gone better and review choices made at the time. This puts things in perspective which helps us later to navigate new and different circumstances.

THE GOOD NEWS

Once we begin, we’ve begun. Anytime is a good time to start the conversation and there’s no better time to begin than now.

“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

- Winston Churchill

There’s a growing network of help and support available to us when our dog has received a life-limiting diagnosis, as we companion them through their end-of-life, and also for us as we grieve or support others.

The veterinary profession has grown to include life extending alternative therapies, palliative care, hospice services and veterinary social workers. Much has been written about pet loss and grief with pet loss hotlines and support groups now widely available. New on the scene are companion animal doulas who provide compassionate support to people and pets as they navigate their journey between life and death.

The cyclical nature of life invites us to begin the conversation now, before we need to; to start while there’s time to sort out our thoughts and wishes and consider our circumstances, priorities and resources. There’s no need to wait until we’re making decisions that can’t be changed.

Talking before we need to can help us make better decisions when we have to.

And that’s important because the decisions we make at the end of our dog’s life will be with us for the rest of ours.



WHEN YOU’RE READY

Beginning the conversation is highly personal. You may have beliefs, a philosophy or an inner calling that guides your life. Inspiration may come from music or reading, a walk with a friend or from your dog.

Quiet reflection opens new possibilities for choice. Movement can get things flowing. Others may share helpful wisdom and still we must each walk our own path.

Write down all the things you love and that drive you crazy about your dog (the swizzles, the toilet paper escapades or that ear-piercing bark)! What makes them happy? Favorite toys, treats, people or places (yes, the couch counts!)? What do you most enjoy doing together? What new things or places do you want to do?

Next, ask yourself what you need before you feel ready to begin. List specific concerns and curiosities you have right now. You can even write a letter to your dog including promises you declare in a covenant with them. It’s ok to simply begin to think about it – you’re beginning.

TO INVITE SOMEONE TO TALK

*“I need your help with something.”
“I was thinking about what happened to X’s dog, and it made me realize....”
“My dog is good right now, but I’m worried about...” “I wonder what I would do if...” “Will you help me think through what I want for my dog? I hope it’s a long way off, but I want to start thinking about it.”*



Tracey Brant has been a member of the GSMDCA for 24 years. She is a Professional Certified Coach and Organizational Ombuds.

Tracey is trained in Grief Recovery and as an End-Of-Life Doula (for people), and Companion Animal Doula (for people and their pets).

She holds a BS in Animal Science from Cornell University and MS in Animals and Public Policy from the Cummings Veterinary College at Tufts University.

Tracey is on a mission to help people who love dogs begin their own conversation. She has created a 14-page booklet with questions and prompts and is currently hosting a pilot program for the GSMD community.

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¹ “A Comprehensive Evaluation of the dog Population in the U.S. Supply and Demand from 2018-2050. Roger Haston, PhD, 2/25/21. (youtube.com/watch?v=znp8foZUAuQ&feature=emb_logo)

² Adapted from Dr. Susan McMillan, Old North End Veterinary Clinic. (oldnorthendvet.com/hospice.html)