

Help your dog

die peacefully

in her own home.

# A natural transition

COURTESY: ELLA BITTEL, DVM

When Momo, a German Shepherd Dog mix, reached the ripe age of 17, it was clear that she'd nearly reached the end of her life. But her owner, veterinarian Ella Bittel of Buellton, Calif., realized she had no clue how to ease her dog through the natural process of dying.

"Veterinarians are not being taught how to be there for dying animals, rather than just shortening their suffering, or what we perceive as their suffering, through drugs," Bittel says.

Unfamiliar with the dying process, Bittel did not approach Momo's final hours with calm and tranquility as she later wished she had. "I grabbed her and put her in the car to get her euthanized, and she died in the car," Bittel remembers. "To move an animal that's in the act of dying is just the opposite of what you want to do."

The experience made Bittel determined to learn how to support a beloved animal through the stages of dying — a subject she now lectures about across the country.

She poses this question: "How can we provide quality of dying?"

Here's how:

**Think ahead.** Take stock of how you would handle things if tomorrow your dog — even your puppy — were diagnosed with a terminal condition. "If they are not prepared, very frequently people are so emotionally overwhelmed that they cannot process any new information or change their perspective in any way," Bittel says.

Ask your veterinarian if he or she is open to helping you give hospice care to your dog.

Bittel recommends finding out if your vet is willing to make house calls or send a vet tech to show you how to administer pain medication or subcutaneous fluids, if appropriate.

**Re-examine euthanasia.** Because veterinarians have a tool to provide a quick, painless passing for terminally ill animals, animal hospice care is often a blind spot for them, Bittel says.

The problem with offering euthanasia as a reflexive response is that it doesn't take into account the animal's individuality.

"It's easier to follow technical guidelines than to actually tune in to the animal and perceive whether it is OK with the process, whether it still wants to be here, even when it can no longer give signals we are used to, like a wagging tail," she says.

**Learn about the dying process.** Many animals will lose their appetite, and this can lead to considerable weight loss. "Of course, you can try to offer a change in what they're eating, as well as the texture and temperature," Bittel says. "But there can also come a point where a dog will no longer eat. That's just something to accept."

Similarly, a dog may reach the final stages where she can no longer get up or move around. "At that point, someone really needs to stay with the animal," she says. You need to factor this in if you have a busy lifestyle or a job that does not afford you much flexibility.

**Recognize the final stages.** Bittel's mad rush at the end of Momo's life resulted from seeing body movements that frightened her. "We think it may go on, but it's just an indicator that the last minute has arrived," she says. "If you don't know that, you can easily panic."

**Turn down the input.** Dying animals have heightened senses. Once they refuse food, remove it between offers — just a whiff can bring on nausea. "You want to provide a really quiet environment," Bittel recommends. "It's best to dim bright lights and avoid loud or sudden sounds."

Recognize, too, that this can extend to the sense of touch. "Some people have this romantic notion of a loved one dying in their arms," but that might not be comfortable for the animal.

Cultivate internal quiet. A good death is a peaceful one. "It requires a very calm mind that's not caught up in our emotions," Bittel concludes.

BY DENISE FLAIM

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