

EUTHANASIA: HARD DECISIONS

by Dr. Laura Harris

When is the right time? This decision is very difficult because it encompasses so many aspects of horse ownership: economic concerns, quality of life issues, love of the animal, personal loss, grieving, and even religious beliefs.

Many circumstances can force us to make the difficult decision to euthanize a horse. Quite often, catastrophic illness or injury will force an immediate, unexpected decision. In other cases, we have the luxury of time during which to plan for a suitable day or situation for euthanasia. In any case, the entire difficult, traumatic process will be more comfortable if we take time well in advance to closely examine our feelings and construct a plan to follow when euthanasia becomes necessary.

Define your economic limits. Be realistic. Consider surgical / medical insurance for your horse(s). Set reasonable personal financial limits on medical and surgical care for each horse. (Successful colic surgery often costs between \$5,000 and \$8,000. A prolonged eye treatment with an ophthalmology consult can exceed \$5,000.) If a horse has more than one owner discuss financial limits of treatment in advance. If you travel, or cannot be reached at times for any reason, be sure to write down (and sign) your expectations for treatment and leave a copy with the horse's caretaker, your office, and your family. If your horse has medical / surgical insurance be sure that information is readily accessible to all concerned parties.

Examine closely your personal beliefs about quality of life. Decide what levels of comfort, mobility, and responsiveness in your horse define quality of life for you as the owner or caretaker. If a horse is either acutely or chronically ill, examine the expected eventual quality of life. What is the expected outcome of treatment? Is the "best case" outcome acceptable? How long will illness and recovery last? Does the expected outcome justify continuing the current treatment situation? These are personal decisions that will be easier to make if you examine them before you are faced with an immediate difficult situation.

Most horse owners have a strong emotional bond with their horses. When euthanasia becomes necessary, grief is a normal response. Understanding the grieving process will help you work through a difficult time while remaining emotionally intact and functional. The stages of grief processing are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Individuals who experience loss must go through all these steps and each person will progress at their own pace. Awareness of the stages of grief will help you manage them more effectively in yourself and those close to you.

The horse's life span is shorter than ours – if you own horses eventually you will experience a loss. Denial is a normal first step in grieving, but loss (and euthanasia) are integral unavoidable aspects of owning horses.

Anger is an expression of the seeming unfairness of loss. Anger is normal, but it is nonproductive. Allowing yourself to be angry for a short period of time is healthy, but continued anger is destructive and will stop you from progressing to resolution of grief. Blaming yourself or others for loss does nothing to change the loss.

Bargaining, or playing “what if” is the next normal phase in grief processing. Trust yourself. If you make informed, well considered decisions through your horse's lifetime you can trust yourself to make good choices when faced with your horse's euthanasia. Trust that you as the owner and the people that you chose to help you made the best choices available.

Depression is expected after a loss occurs. Allow yourself to feel sad; be kind to yourself. If, however, you become so depressed that you cannot function in your daily life it might be helpful to seek support from family, friends, congregation or formal grief counseling.

Finally, acceptance occurs. With acceptance, you are able to acknowledge the loss you have experienced and can accept the loss as a sadder aspect of the overall joy that comes with horse ownership.

The decision to euthanize a horse is never easy. Preparation for making this decision should be done by establishing realistic economic guidelines, by examining personal beliefs, by understanding the grieving process, and by discussing your wishes with those that provide support in your life. If you prepare for making a euthanasia decision, you will be more comfortable making choices when the need arises.

*** If you would like more information about the actual process of euthanasia please contact Dr. Harris by e mail or telephone. ***