

It's so much harder to be your own vet

This month a **vet** describes dealing with the loss of their own pet and how this impacts on their work.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- Anecdotally, many vets find euthanasing their own animals incredibly hard, and uncertainty or guilt about the decision can be long-lasting. There should be no stigma about using support services such as Vetlife (www.vetlife.org.uk/) in this context.
- Seeking veterinary advice from a colleague may be logistically and emotionally difficult. Being honest with a colleague about your own pet's welfare can also be challenging. Consider using a different veterinary practice for all aspects of care of your own animals to ensure you can access more neutral advice. If possible, establish a relationship with that practice well in advance of any difficult decisions.
- People respond in different ways to the loss of their own animals. Be sensitive towards colleagues both with the language you use and the duties they are asked to perform in these circumstances.
- Consider developing practice guidance around staff animals so it is clear what is possible and how it can be arranged. This might include the logistical and financial implications of: being able to attend routine and emergency appointments at another practice during working hours; using your own routine appointment slots and facilities for an ill staff animal; and taking time off after the death of a loved animal.

I'M writing this after a bad week in our household. The dog is having a flare up with his arthritis, the cockerel has had a respiratory infection and I had to make the call to euthanase the goldfish. As a vet, you treat other people's pets every day, so why is it so much harder when it's your own?

Two years ago, the cat I had hand reared was killed on the road. A workmate drove me to the scene. I got out of the car while it was still moving, and howled like someone possessed. It was like losing a child. I regularly put other people's dead pets in a plastic bag, pop them in the freezer and go about my day but I couldn't bear doing that to her. She deserved more than that. We drove her straight down to a pet crematorium that night to be individually cremated. Was I wrong to do it to other people's pets? Do they need to know what happens? Is ignorance bliss? Lots of questions and not really any answers.

With the recent illness and subsequent euthanasia of my

goldfish I wondered how I could be so unable to make decisions, when that is exactly what I do all day. I think the stress comes from knowing that you have to fill owner and vet roles. That feels like twice the responsibility. What if my idea is awful, and there's only me to tell me that? I don't regularly make awful suggestions to owners, but they'd tell me if I did, wouldn't they? What if my desire to fix her, and try everything, actually meant I allowed her to suffer?

The sudden loss of my cat hit me hard. I'd had episodes of anxiety and stress before, but the grief meant I had to go back onto medication. Despite my colleagues trying to be supportive I still found some of the things they said insensitive. Maybe just because I know the script? I'd said the same to others. It made me acutely aware of the extreme emotions clients feel and how we as vets play a role in that.

I now find the burden of euthanasia and breaking bad news harder and harder. I'm increasingly concerned about how clients will



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cope when they leave the practice. Did I do anything to make it worse? Or maybe I made it a little easier? This could be one of the worst experiences of their lives and I have to orchestrate it.

Treating your own pets is hard because you are trying to fill two very different roles at the same time. You are reminded of all the other animals you treated, the mistakes you've made. You find yourself questioning it all. The pressure is immense. You absolutely must deal with this perfectly. There is no room for error. Your own pet must be fixed as quickly as possible, with as little intervention as possible. If our clients heaped these expectations on us, we would feel they were being unreasonable. So why do we do it to ourselves?