I hold it true, whate’er befall;  
I feel it, when I sorrow most;  
’Tis better to have loved and lost  
Than never to have loved at all.

—In Memoriam A. H. H.  
(from Canto 27, 1849)  
by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Imagine the following: During an already hectic day, one of your best clients calls you and simply says, “Doc, it’s time.” You agree, reschedule your other appointment, and drive to the farm quickly, knowing the scene that awaits. Your client’s 35-year-old Thoroughbred gelding, Skip, has been losing weight and falling down recently. Until now, the owner has been able to help Skip stand. But now Skip is recumbent and listless, so the owner has decided to have him euthanized.

or

During an already hectic day, one of your best clients calls you, crying, and says, “My daughter’s horse, Breeze, jumped out of the paddock, ran into the road, and was hit by a car. Please come quickly.” You jump into your truck, knowing the grim scene that awaits as the mother and daughter try to comfort their dying horse.

Are you prepared to handle these situations? Would you know what to say to the owners? In the case of Skip, could better planning have helped avoid disruption in your chronically packed schedule?

This article on grief and euthanasia addresses some common questions equine veterinarians have when counseling owners before and after having their horses euthanized.

In veterinary school, we are trained in the science of veterinary medicine. We learn how to diagnose, treat, and prevent various maladies, but we cannot learn the art of veterinary medicine until we begin to practice. After graduation, we quickly realize how vital it is to effectively communicate with clients to achieve the goal of treating equine patients properly. It can be daunting to simultaneously handle

At a Glance

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the equine patient’s medical problem and the owner’s emotional concerns. When we deal with a tense situation such as euthanasia, the need to communicate effectively becomes even more critical. While personal communication styles differ, the information in this article can help even the most seasoned veterinarian handle euthanasia and grief more easily.

**Critical Point**
In veterinary school, we are trained in the science of veterinary medicine. We learn how to diagnose, treat, and prevent various maladies, but we cannot learn the art of veterinary medicine until we begin to practice.

**Practice Being “The Gentle Doctor”**
Our profession is held in high regard in our society, and by practicing compassionate care, we reaffirm our unique position as trusted professionals. “The Gentle Doctor” sculpture by Christian Peterson at the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine depicts a caring veterinarian cradling a sick puppy while the mother dog looks up with concern (FIGURE 1). Although this is not a sculpture of an equine veterinarian, it epitomizes the compassion we should all have toward our patients, large or small, and their owners. An especially critical time for the veterinarian–client bond is when we recommend euthanasia for a critically ill horse. We cannot eliminate our clients’ pain, but we can decrease their grief and anxiety with patience and compassion. By spending a few minutes to explain and listen, we offer owners a chance to process information before making a permanent decision to euthanize their horse. After euthanasia, this can help owners feel better about their decision.

**Remember the Five Stages of Grief**
In On Death and Dying, Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross described the five stages of grief (TABLE 1). Although not everyone experiences this process in the same way and may not exhibit each stage, these stages are common reactions to loss. The owner's emotions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>The Owner’s Reaction</th>
<th>Recommended Response by the Veterinarian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Denial²</td>
<td>The owner cannot comprehend the horse’s illness or impending death.¹</td>
<td>Give the owner time to ask questions and think about your conversation so he or she can adjust to this new reality.²</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The owner may seem dazed or confused and unable to make decisions.¹</td>
<td>Give the owner time to ask questions and process the new information so he or she can adjust to this new reality.³</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Anger²</td>
<td>The owner may lash out at you or your staff and may refuse to pay the bill.¹</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guilt may accompany this stage.¹</td>
<td>Give the owner time to ask questions and process the new information so he or she can adjust to this new reality.³</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Bargaining²</td>
<td>The owner may ask for a second opinion or wish to pursue unusual treatments to attempt to gain control over the situation.³</td>
<td>Listen to the owner, acknowledge his or her feelings, be sympathetic, and explain treatment options so the owner can participate in the decision.⁴</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Depression²</td>
<td>This is the true stage of bereavement, when the owner mourns the loss of the horse. This stage is marked by periods of crying and extreme grief.³</td>
<td>Listen to the owner, be sympathetic, and treat the horse with compassion.²</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Acceptance²</td>
<td>The owner finally accepts the loss and may remember the horse with sadness but does not cry uncontrollably.¹,²</td>
<td>—</td>
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depend on whether the loss is sudden and tragic (as in the case of Breeze) or involves gradual deterioration of the horse (as in the case of Skip). Many owners are deeply attached to their horses and may have owned them for 20 years or more. Owners may view their horses as companions whose loss will leave a large void in the owner’s life. The situation is even more complex if the horse is loved by a child and the parents look to you for comfort and advice. When speaking with your clients, remember that they may be experiencing a variety of emotions. If they are considering having their horse euthanized, they may need some time to adjust to the idea. If the horse is not critically ill, it may help them to think about the decision to euthanize and to call family and friends before giving permission.

When dealing with geriatric horses, such as Skip, it is often important to discuss the horse’s deterioration with the owners. Older horses in poor body condition that are not responding to treatment, feeding, or management changes often have trouble during the winter, such as slipping and falling on snow or ice. The owner may not recognize the horse’s gradual deterioration or the potential consequences. If the owner is given time to think about euthanasia and decides to have it performed, other family members might want to be present. The owners may choose to euthanize their horse on a sunny, warm day so the family can say goodbye in an optimal environment, allowing you to schedule your time appropriately to prepare for the procedure and avoid interruptions.

Each situation offers an opportunity to serve our patients and their owners.

Recall the Veterinarian’s Oath
“Being admitted to the profession of veterinary medicine, I solemnly swear to use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society through the protection of animal health, the relief of animal suffering…”

Although grief and euthanasia are difficult, we can end the horse’s suffering and bring some comfort to owners and caretakers, especially in catastrophic situations. When I (A. I. B.) was in ambulatory practice, one of my worst cases requiring euthanasia involved a beautiful, young Thoroughbred mare. She had been turned out overnight and inexplicably broke her leg in a level, open paddock. When I arrived on the farm and quickly examined her, she had shattered her left third metacarpal bone, and only soft tissue held the limb together. Although the scenario was very tragic, I was grateful to be able to end the mare’s suffering and offer comfort to the owners.

Additional Resources

1. **American Veterinary Medical Association**
   Equine euthanasia
   www.avma.org/careforanimals/
   animatedjourneys/goodbyefriend/
equineuth.asp

2. **The Argus Institute for Families and Veterinary Medicine**
   College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences
   Colorado State University
   www.argusinstitute.colostate.edu
   (Grief information for veterinarians and pet owners)

3. **Horsehair Jewelry**
   www.ponylocks.com
   www.twisteditails.com

4. **A New Paradigm for Equine Euthanasia**
   Carolyn Butler, MS
   www.aaeop.org/health_articles_view.php?print_friendly=true&id=175

5. **The Veterinary Social Work Program**
   at the Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania
   www.vet.upenn.edu/RyanHospital/
   VeterinarySocialWork/tabid/255/Default.aspx

Box 1

**AAEP Guidelines for Recommending Euthanasia**

The following criteria should be considered in evaluating the immediate necessity for euthanasia of a horse to avoid and terminate incurable and excessive suffering:

1. Is the medical condition chronic and incurable?
2. Does the immediate medical condition have a hopeless prognosis for life?
3. Is the horse a hazard to itself or its handlers?
4. Will the horse require continuous medication for the relief of pain for the remainder of its life?
5. Will the medical condition result in a lifetime of continued individual confinement?

Box 2

**Critical Point**

Our profession is held in high regard in our society, and by practicing compassionate care, we reaffirm our unique position as trusted professionals.
Express Your Sympathy

There are no perfect words to say to owners experiencing loss. Often, the best approach is to express your sympathy and listen to the owner. Sending a card and/or flowers is an excellent way to express your condolences.\textsuperscript{3,4} If you knew the horse well, write down a memory or two, and the card will be treasured by the owner. Some practices collect mane or tail hair for making into bracelets and other jewelry through various outlets\textsuperscript{4} (BOX 1). Some practices call clients to check on them a few days after their horse died or was euthanized. This can be very helpful for owners who may need reassurance that they made the correct decision. Some practices memorialize the patient through a donation to an animal shelter or a research fund and send a card to notify the owner.

Seek Assistance

The human–animal bond is increasingly recognized in our society as a powerful and unique relationship.\textsuperscript{1,4} This bond offers much-needed comfort and companionship in our hectic lives, even improving our mood and blood pressure values! However, when our beloved animals are experiencing terminal suffering, the topic of euthanasia should be addressed (BOX 2). Many veterinary schools offer a pet loss support hotline (BOX 3) and support groups for small animal owners experiencing the loss of a pet. For example, the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine offers a program for pet owners, including grief counseling and bereavement. I (C. B.) teach veterinary students to be aware of five common reactions clients may exhibit after their pet has died or been euthanized (TABLE 2). I also tell my students, “People need to want help; they will seek you out if they require more assistance.” If an owner is demonstrating a persistent need to discuss his or her horse’s disease and death, it may help to refer the owner to a health professional.

Children are often involved in equine activities and develop strong attachments to horses, so it can be very traumatic for a child to lose a horse. Honesty is the best policy when explaining the horse’s death to a child, but use developmentally appropriate language. The child wants to understand what happened, so use simple terms; however, do not say, “The horse was put to sleep,” because the child may become afraid to sleep. The child needs time

| TABLE 2 | Five Common Client Reactions to Pet Loss\textsuperscript{5} |
|---|---|---|
| Client Reaction | Example | Recommended Response by the Veterinarian |
| 1. Guilt | The owner may ask, “Did I wait too long to euthanize, or did I euthanize too quickly?” The owner may feel guilty months after the pet’s death and may contact you for reassurance. | Listen to the owner and reassure him or her that the correct decision was made. |
| 2. Shame | The owner may feel ashamed to tell anyone or may be afraid someone will say, “It was only an animal, you can always get another one.” | Reassure the owner that the horse is unique or special and will not be replaced by a new addition. |
| 3. Relief | If the animal dies before the owner makes a decision to euthanize, the owner may feel relief that he or she did not have to make the final decision to end the pet’s life. | — |
| 4. Loneliness | — | Be sympathetic and supportive. Provide a list of pet loss support hotlines and other resources. |
| 5. Yearning | — | Be sympathetic and supportive. Provide a list of pet loss support hotlines and other resources. |

\textsuperscript{5}Developed by Christina Bach, MSW, LSW, Director of Clinical Social Work and Pet Bereavement Services, University of Pennsylvania.
### Pet Loss Support Hotlines

- **352-392-4700**, then dial 1 and 4080; staffed by Florida community volunteers; weekdays, 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time; or **352-392-4700**, ext 4744, at the University of Florida.

- **517-432-2696**; staffed by Michigan State University veterinary students; Tuesday through Thursday, 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM Eastern time; [cvm.msu.edu/petloss/index.htm](http://cvm.msu.edu/petloss/index.htm)

- **630-325-1600**; staffed by Chicago Veterinary Medical Association veterinarians and staffs; leave voice mail message; calls will be returned 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time; long-distance calls will be returned by collect call.

- **540-231-8038**; staffed by Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine; Tuesday, Thursday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time.

- **614-292-1823**; staffed by The Ohio State University veterinary students; Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM Eastern time; voice mail messages will be returned by collect call during operating hours.

- **508-839-7966**; staffed by Tufts University veterinary students; Monday through Friday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time; voice mail messages will be returned daily (by collect call outside of Massachusetts); [www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss](http://www.tufts.edu/vet/petloss)

- **888-ISU-PLSH (888-478-7574)**; hosted by the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine; operational 7 days/week, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time from September through April and Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time from May through August.

- **607-253-3932**; staffed by Cornell University veterinary students; Tuesday through Thursday, 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM Eastern time; messages will be returned; [www.vet.cornell.edu/Org/PetLoss](http://www.vet.cornell.edu/Org/PetLoss)

- **217-244-2273 or 877-394-2273 (CARE)**; staffed by University of Illinois veterinary students; Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM Central time; [www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE](http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/CARE)

- **970-491-4143**; Argus Institute grief resources, Colorado State University.

- **509-335-5704**; Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine; staffed during the semester on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, 6:30 PM to 9:00 PM, and Saturday, 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM Pacific time; [www.vetmed.wsu.edu/PLHL](http://www.vetmed.wsu.edu/PLHL)

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**Critical Point**

Honesty is the best policy when explaining the horse’s death to a child, but use developmentally appropriate language.

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to grieve and may want to memorialize the horse by making a scrapbook, having a memorial service, or burying the horse’s ashes. It is important for parents to inform school officials that their child has lost a pet. If behavioral changes or depression are noted, the child may need to talk with a professional counselor.

Avoid Burnout
It is vital for you to maintain your mental health. You may have treated a horse for years, becoming a member of its family, so you also may experience grief at the loss of the horse. It is important to recognize these feelings and express them in your own way. Owners will be very touched to see your grief and compassion at the loss of their horse, forging a stronger bond between them and you. However, it is equally important to take time to refresh yourself and maintain perspective. See BOX 1 for additional resources to help yourself and your clients.

Conclusion
Our equine patients are often treasured members of the family and are mourned when they die or are euthanized. We hope the information in this article will help you practice the art of veterinary medicine when handling grief and euthanasia.

Critical Point
It is important for parents to inform school officials that their child has lost a pet. If behavioral changes or depression are noted, the child may need to talk with a professional counselor.

Additional Reading

References