get sued!” or “How can you keep a dog that has bitten someone?” When these particular comments come from within the owner’s family, or from someone whose opinion they respect, the remarks carry even more weight.

Sometimes it helps to write things down. One of my first suggestions to people who are stuck in the decision-making process is to get it down on paper. It may be easy to list the bad things about an animal, but the good things need to be listed as well. After all, it’s the good things about the pet that make the decision a difficult one; and those factors need to be considered as part of the overall picture. Several people have reported that actually making a “pro and con” list helped with the decision making process, focusing their attention on the important issues involved.

After all the evaluation, walk away from a while, then come back and check for a “gut reaction.” In general people will have one of two reactions. One group will feel strongly that they “have to do all they can.” In that case, perhaps they should, if only for themselves. Even if things don’t work out and they end up euthanising the dog, they may feel much more comfortable with the decision. The other group may say (as one of my clients did), “I just can’t have a dog like this.” In which case, they probably should not keep the animal.

Often during conversation, you can hear one or the other of these sentiments expressed repeatedly. You can gently point out that fact to the owner and suggest that they listen to themselves, as they may have already made the decision subconsciously.

Don’t make a hasty decision.

While a longer decision-making process may be painful, in some cases a hastily-made decision to euthanize made quickly after an aggressive incident can lead to later regrets. One owner called me after his dog had already been euthanized after a single biting incident. He reported that the immediate reaction of the animal professionals he consulted had been to euthanize the dog, with no other options bring discussed. Perhaps, he thought, it was because of the dog’s breed (Pit Bull). In order to help him work through his feelings, he wanted to talk to a veterinary behaviorist. He regretted his quick decision and wanted to know what else he could have done for the problem.

“I wanted to be a good citizen,” he said. “And so I did what everyone told me I should do.” In his case, not thinking the decision through lead to feelings of guilt, intense grief, and thoughts of suicide.

Owners whose dogs have just bitten someone, are often in the type of shocked state that one might experience after being deeply hurt by a human loved one. They may say, “How could he have done this to us?” or “It’s like she is a stranger; I just don’t know her anymore.” A friend of mine who is a dog trainer, described this feeling of shock after her dog bit someone. She said that while she did euthanize the dog, waiting for the shock to pass before choosing the euthanasia option made her feel that her decision was based on careful consideration rather than solely on emotion.

The decision you make is not for now, but for later. As mentioned, whether the owners decide to keep the dog or not, there will be some sadness and mourning. The decision made is one they will want to be comfortable with after the period of mourning is over.

Unfortunately, no one can or should make the decision for you. This does not mean that if the owners are comfortable with the advice someone gives them, they shouldn’t act upon it. Some people appear to be content with this, saying “Our veterinarian (trainer, breeder) said we should put the dog down, so we did.” The key here is comfortable; if there are any doubts or questions in the mind of the owner, a decision based solely on someone else’s advice can come back to haunt them.

After reading this, you may be thinking, “When am I going to find the time to cover all of this?” You should quickly cover the main points then send them a more detailed handout. As this is a very important decision, you might want to encourage the owner to make an appointment to come in and see you or discuss these options during a telephone consultation. Schedule the appointment for a time when you can spend a little extra time with the owners. You might even suggest that they not bring the dog with them during the appointment, as you want them to go through the decision-making process you have outlined before taking any step such as euthanasia. This would also be the time to discuss possible training options or a referral to someone knowledgeable in animal behavior counseling and therapy. As you see trends developing in the interview, it may be a good time to discuss your feelings on euthanasia. Every veterinarian, during their practice lifetime, has come to grips with their own criteria used to make decisions about whether to euthanize a particular animal. I have heard positive things from clients whose veterinarian was honest about his or her feelings on the subject.

You may also feel that such support is not necessary in your practice. Most of your clients seem to accept your judgement when it comes to dealing with aggressive dogs, so why go to all the trouble? Your methods may indeed work quite well most of the time, but there may be a few clients who disappear afterwards. Some of my clients have indicated that they wouldn’t go back to their veterinarians because they were upset with how this situation was handled. Often, it isn’t that euthanasia was suggested which upset them so but that it was the only option given, without the veterinarian discussing it with them or referring them to someone who would. You may be losing more clients than you realize simply because they feel you don’t take the time to consider their feelings. Conversely, when a client mentions that they really appreciated their veterinarian’s help with their dog, they often focus on the time the veterinarian spent with them in helping them make such a decision.

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