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Understanding & Working With Phobic Parrots

By Sally Blanchard, Editor of The Pet Bird Report

“Sudden” Frenzy

As a person working with the behavior problems of companion parrots, my most frustrating phone calls are about parrots who have become afraid of just about everything. Although in some cases, factors that influenced this drastic change in behavior may be evident, in others the causes can remain quite puzzling. The parrot often becomes terrified of the very person he was most strongly bonded to. If he accepts any attention at all, it is usually from a person in the family who has previously shown him the least amount of concern. In some cases there is an identifiable traumatic event—an obvious cause for the initial fear response. Others seem to be a total puzzle. The owners, usually overwhelmed by the behavioral changes, either become afraid of their pet because it went into a fear biting frenzy or concerned about causing the parrot more harm when it thrashes around in its cage. Since parrots are so tuned in to their owner's energy, this can escalate their fear even more. Consequently, if a parrot has a traumatic episode, it is extremely important for the owner to remain calm. Otherwise the proverbial ‘vicious circle’ occurs with the bird becoming afraid of the owner, the owner uncomfortable handling the bird, the bird sensing fear from the owner and reacting with increased fear. In some cases, the situation can become so serious that the relationship is permanently damaged.

The Importance of Veterinary Care

In any situation where there is a drastic change in a parrot's behavioral patterns, he should be taken as soon as possible to a qualified avian veterinarian. The presumption should not immediately be made that the changes are purely behavioral in nature. In many cases, sudden changes in personality can be a result of disease or injury. I've examined more than one parrot who didn't want anyone around them because he had a damaged blood feather, impacted feather follicle, sprained wing or leg or some other not readily apparent physical injury. One of the most frequent direct causes of a phobic episode for young parrots is a traumatic fall in or off of the cage. Keeping young birds low and padding the bottom of their cages will help prevent injury until they have developed their balance skills,

Malnutrition (particularly calcium deficiency) can play a contributing factor in some drastic personality changes. Young birds who are forced weaned by deprivation during the time when abundant nutrients are needed for proper development may exhibit both physical and psychological problems. There is evidence that some birds may have psychological disorders based on chemical or hormonal imbalances. Although treatment with mind-altering drugs is still considered experimental, some avian veterinarians claim positive results with their use. Of course, any treatment should be prescribed and closely monitored by your parrot's veterinarian.

Change As A Contributing Factor

The owner often uses the words “for no reason at all” and can’t usually come up with anything specific that could have caused overwhelming fear in their pet. Although normal changes in routine by themselves should not threaten a well-socialized parrot, sudden change may terrify a bird who has not been taught to accept change as a normal part of life. The triggering event may be so subtle that the owner is not aware of what happened while the bird perceives it as a significant disruption. It can also be a small change in a series of confusing events that is “the straw that breaks the camel’s back”. In some cases, there was a change in the cage location, the cage area or there could have been a specific traumatic event. Although some disruption in the bird’s routine may have occurred, it is my opinion that **it was not the change alone that caused the phobic episode**. The disruption is usually only the trigger that sets off “an accident waiting to happen”

Bonding And A Betrayal Of Trust

A young parrot who is strongly bonded to the humans in its environment depends on them for security and protection. During the time they are developing their social and survival skills, handfed babies look to the people in their lives for guidance. Nurturing and teaching become even more important as a young bird starts to explore. Encouragement and reassurance are essential for the young bird to establish a degree of independence. Parrots are prey animals and perceived abandonment by the primary person the bird is bonded to can be very traumatic during these periods of time. For example, I have found a strong cause and effect correlation in the onset of African grey feather picking (and phobic behavior) when the owners leave their parrot for a day or more when he is between 5 to 8 months old –an important independence stage. This is the age when encouragement seems to be most needed for the bird to develop a healthy sense of security and independence.

It is imperative to prevent traumatic experiences in a young bird’s life. No one should be allowed to handle a bird in an aggressive manner. Strangers should not be allowed to approach the bird in his perceived territory. They should be introduced away from the cage and should be allowed to handle the bird only if the owner’s handling rules are followed. Parrots may perceive a “betrayal of trust” if we, as their “surrogate parents”, are not there to protect them from traumatic events whether it appears that we cause them or not. Overprotecting a phobic bird from any change or new experience is unrealistic and will just increase the problems. The key is to gradually introduce these adventures with continual reassurance so the young bird feels safe and secure.

Poor Early Socialization

I believe there are many factors that can contribute to phobic behavior. The most significant of these is poor early socialization. One fact is undeniably true –too many parrots are raised in captivity with very little knowledge (and too often, very little concern) about their natural ways. I believe that if we paid closer attention to the parenting process and socialization of young parrots in the wild, we would be able to understand why so many captive raised birds develop such serious behavioral dysfunction as they mature. There is no doubt in my mind that the “production raising” of young parrot chicks without any concern for their psychological development is the major behavioral cause of these personality disorders. Parrots are clearly intelligent and much of their behavior is shaped by early learning. Without parental guidance (whether from parrots or people), parrots do not learn their social and survival skills. The resulting behavioral dysfunction can certainly lay the foundation for phobic behavior as a happy reaches his independence stages clueless on how to function in the artificial environment he lives in as a pet. They may seem

content and emotionally healthy but behavioral dysfunction only becomes obvious as young birds mature and reach their independence stages.

Weaning Traumas

Change is normal in the routine of any household and, by itself, should not be a threat to a secure, well-socialized parrot. In many cases, constant disruption of routine combined with lack of guidance in a young bird's life can result in confusion and phobic behavior. A parrot that is not physically healthy as a bappy will be more likely to exhibit phobic behavior as they mature. Constant trips to the vet for medication, especially long-term stays, may result in insecurities. Lack of early nurturing, infrequent handling plus improper handfeeding and weaning techniques (poor nutrition, not enough food often enough, gavage (tube) feeding for expediency, and weaning trauma due to being force-weaned through deprivation) will cause significant damage to the developing psyche. Sudden change can be very threatening to a parrot who already has behavioral dysfunction because these highly sensitive parrots are often the ones that develop sudden phobic responses.

People Who Make Their Birds Crazy

Our goal with any young parrot should be to create a safe, non-threatening environment. Establishing a bond with nurturing guidance should not include punishment. When a parrot misbehaves, discipline with a quick disapproving look or a sharp "NO" is far more effective and less threatening. Aggressive "punishment" can cause serious problems in the developing psyche of a young bird. In some cases, it is clear to me that people may be acting in ways that are contributing to their parrot's phobic behaviors. There are many types of people who own birds. Some owners have a personality that meshes beautifully with that of their parrot, others have to work to alter their moods for a successful relationship. People who are incapable of setting rules or providing clear guidance rarely have parrots that function well as human companions. Households where there is constant arguing and antagonism can be emotionally "toxic" to both the people and their pets. Parrots mirror the moods of their owners and will not stay gentle when they are owned by aggressive or hostile people. Other people are just too busy to maintain a consistent dependable relationship with their bird. Parrots need to be part of the social structure of the household and need some "in-your-face" time everyday. Unfortunately, too many people who are not able to maintain a positive connection with their parrot place the blame with the bird instead of acknowledging their own complicity. As a behaviorist, it is very difficult to work with people with their own behavioral dysfunctions if they can not acknowledge that their parrot's behavior may be at least partly effected by their own.

Bonding Myths & Misunderstanding

The general belief that a person must hand-feed a baby parrot for it to establish a lifelong bond is nonsense. If a young bird is nurtured by its hand-feeder, the human/parrot bond that has been established can be transferred easily to a new person if that person is comfortable with the young bird and ~an continue the nurturing. It is also erroneous to believe that once a parrot bonds to someone, the bond is "engraved in stone" and can not be changed. Parrots bond and rebond on different levels to people throughout their lives. People have to continually work to maintain the bond their parrot has with them. A major misconception is that parrots provide their owners with unconditional, undying love. I have seen many situations where parrots have virtually transferred their allegiance from one person to another overnight for "no reason at all" Of course, the parrot probably has a reason -we just can't always figure it out

As a young bird matures the bonding level will change. At first, a bappy may perceive one person in their life as a parental figure and another as a clutchmate or sibling playmate. The

youngster depends on the parent figure for protection and instruction. Later the bond may change so that a person becomes the “flock leader” or just a friendly member of the flock. Parrots may actually bond to someone as a potential “mate” long before the bird is even sexually mature. At some point the bird may clearly have chosen one of its owners as its mate. But even that may change with the bird suddenly taking a fancy to someone else. I have known of many examples where parrots who are strongly bonded to a person or another bird have transferred that bond readily to another.

Pressure To Maintain A Strong Bond

Since parrots bond on different levels throughout their life, I believe that some phobic behavior in young birds may be, at least partly, the result of owners trying to maintain too strong a dependency during the stages when the bird may naturally form a looser bond with others in its life. For example, there is a time when young Rose-breasted cockatoos are naturally abandoned by their parents and form a looser bond with a flock of other juveniles. A conflict may be created for the parrot if, during this time, the owner does not allow more of a sense of independence to develop.

This, of course, can be a very difficult concept for owners to understand or adjust their behavior to. I believe that the important preventative aspect is for the owner to encourage a proper balance between dependence and independence in their companion parrot. This is done with consistent parenting, rule setting and behavioral guidance. As I have stated many times, it is not the amount of time spent with a bappy that determines whether they will become over-dependent. It is what is done during that time. While physical affection and cuddling are critically important for young parrots, a high percentage of time should be spent with instructive play.

It is also important for parrots to learn that temporary separation from their human flock is not abandonment. They should be encouraged to entertain themselves by playing in their cage for periods of time. I have found that establishing a cage time routine where the bird knows that he must be in the cage, even if the owner is there, is an important step in creating a healthy independence. When the young parrot calls out, if the owner gets into the habit of simply saying something like “you’re OK” or “are you having fun?” instead of running over and giving the bird attention or bringing him out, he will be more likely to be comfortable with time spent separated from the people in his life.

“Nurturing Submission”

While I devoutly believe that setting rules, providing guidance, establishing control and using verbal commands are the key to a well-behaved parrot, once a bird becomes phobic, he may be very threatened by this type of control from his owner. If a parrot is suddenly threatened by the people in its life, trying to maintain a strong control may be counterproductive to the relationship. For this reason, I recommend that people whose have become phobic practice what could be called “nurturing submission” around their traumatized bird. Doing the exact opposite of what parrot behaviorists usually suggest will give the parrot more power and a stronger sense of security.

Allow the phobic parrot to be higher than you even if you have to be on your knees when you feed him. Soften or suspend the use of verbal commands. Do not make direct eye contact with him. Make soft “cat eyes” by looking at him indirectly and then lowering your head in submission. Always lower your energy, calming yourself down before you approach him. Let him come out of his cage on his own and do whatever he wants to as long as he is not in danger. Bribe him out or back in his cage with favorite food or by playing with one of his favorite toys.

Move slowly, being careful not to encompass him or tower over him. Lie down on the floor and talk, hum, or sing to him softly with indirect eye contact. Avoid any confrontation.

The Keys To Earning Back Trust

Long-term patience, a calm non-threatening demeanor, consistent nurturing attention, and dependability are the keys to winning back the trust of a phobic bird. Being too demanding, trying to move too fast, or expecting overnight miracles will only create more problems. Once he starts to accept attention again, slowly and gradually start to establish nurturing guidance by using softly spoken verbal commands and starting to guide his life a little more each day -one step at a time. Pay close attention to his behavioral cues and responses. Work at his pace. Moving too quickly may threaten his trust and negate the progress you have made. Expect the process to take several months and if he starts to trust you sooner, count your blessings.

It is also important to realize that once a bird has exhibited serious phobic responses to his normal environment, he may have a tendency to respond with similar behavior if he becomes threatened again in the future. For this reason, it is essential, once the bird starts to relax and trust again, to gradually and patiently introduce him to safe and secure changes in his routine and environment. While acting as a protector and providing constant calm reassurance, slowly introduce new situations or objects in a neutral room (away from the cage). Don't push him. Go one step at a time paying close attention to his body language. When he starts to exhibit any stress, take a few seconds and then let him resume his prior comfort level. Giving in to his fears and by protecting him from any changes in life's normal routines will only guarantee continuing problems. However, protection from traumatic and sudden change will most likely always be necessary for these sensitive parrots.