

Steps To De-Stress Your Bird

Follow these steps to de-stress your bird and provide a relaxing environment

By Rebecca Sweat

A bird may stress out if its owner is experiencing a stressful situation. Courtesy Gabrielle Ziegerfuss, Florida

Of course, nobody wants his or her bird so stressed that it becomes a nervous little wreck, plucked bald and on the verge of a heart attack. Even if your bird's not "acting" stressed, don't assume it isn't. If you're anxious or under too much pressure, or if any of the other stressors mentioned in this article are present in your home, chances are, your bird is feeling some tension. And sooner or later, the stress is going to start impacting its health in a negative way — if it hasn't already.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take to de-stress your bird's life and help your bird feel more relaxed, secure and happy. What follows are 12 things you can do to reduce your bird's stress levels. Keep in mind, there are many types of potential stressors, so depending on what's happening in your home, some tips may be more applicable than others.

De-Stress Your Bird Step 1 – De-stress Your Own Life

First, look at your own life. If you're tensed-up, agitated, nervous or worried, your parrot is going to soak up those negative emotions. Try to find a solution to whatever issues are causing you stress, for your own health and well-being as well as for your bird's. "One of the best ways you can de-stress your parrot is to de-stress yourself," said Florida-based bird behavior consultant Kim Bear.

When you find yourself feeling tense or upset, make a proactive effort to snap out of it. Put on some relaxing music. Watch a funny movie. Read a joke book. Exercise. Call up a friend who's usually cheerful, and chat for a while. Do some meditation or yoga. Think happy thoughts. Write a letter to an old friend you hadn't heard from in a while. Get your mind off yourself by doing something nice for someone else.

If you're in a bad mood because you've had a stressful day at work, "try to mellow out before you go home," suggested Michelle Karras, a bird behavior consultant based in Illinois. If cappuccino relaxes you, stop off at a local coffee house and enjoy a cappuccino before you go home. If your thing is sweets, swing by the bakery, and buy yourself a treat. Or stop by your favorite Chinese restaurant and get a carryout dinner so you don't have to cook when you get home.

Do whatever you can to put yourself in a better frame of mind – before you go home. If you come home in an irritable mood, "your bird's going to know you're mad as soon as you walk in the door. He's going to feel the tension, and he's going to feed off it," Karras said. "But if you're calm and collected, your bird will be, too."

Certainly, it's not always easy to stop obsessing, especially if what has you in angst is something major, such as marital problems or an over-demanding boss. Realistically, it may be a long time before things get better. In the meantime, at least be aware of the impact your emotions have on your bird, and try to make your interactions with it as normal as possible.

De-Stress Your Bird Step 2 – Quality Time

If you believe your parrot is stressed because it's been spending too much time alone, make a conscientious effort to "find" more time for it. Greet your bird as soon as you come home from work. Talk to your parrot while you cook dinner or do housework.

Let it sit on your lap as you watch television. Take the bird for a ride in the car. Let your bird take a shower with you. Start your bird on a trick-training program. Don't let a day go by without spending at least an hour of one-on-one time with your bird.

De-Stress Your Bird Step 3 – Flexible Routines

Maintain a fairly consistent routine each day in terms of when you feed your bird, when it comes out of the cage and for how long, and what time you turn out the lights at night. "This way, your bird knows what to expect and when," said Gregory Burkett, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Durham, North Carolina.

You don't have to give your bird breakfast every morning at 7:15 am on the dot or allow exactly three hours outside the

cage every day.

“Strive for a flexible routine,” Karras suggested. In other words, keep things about the same most days, but also incorporate some variations into the schedule. “This is important,” she said, “so that when something happens in your life which makes it necessary to change the routines at home, your parrot won’t become stressed.”

For instance, every couple of weeks feed your bird an hour earlier than normal. Or, maybe every couple of weeks, invite a different family over to dinner to get your parrot used to being around a lot of different people. This way, when your schedule changes or new people come into your life, your bird will better be able to deal with it.

De-Stress Your Bird Step 4 – Bird’s Cage = Safe Place

Your parrot’s cage should be its haven – its own “nest” where it can feel safe and secure. The way to do that is to give your bird some privacy, either by covering part of the cage with a towel or blanket, thus providing your bird with a hiding box inside the cage — or by covering the sides of the cage with so many toys that the bird feels concealed.

“Pet birds feel calmer and more secure when they can’t be seen while in their cage,” Karras said. This is no different than most any species of bird in the wild, she noted. If you go outside, most of the time you can’t see all the birds that might be hiding in a tree, but you can sure hear them. “Wild birds feel vulnerable when they are in full view of people or other predators. Your pet bird is no different,” Karras said.

She recommends you create a “privacy corner” in your bird’s cage by weaving newspaper, paper towels, magazines or corn husks between the cage bars in one corner of the cage. “This gives your bird some privacy, but it also provides the bird something to chew and shred,” Karras said. You can hang a variety of wood, rope and acrylic bird toys on the other sides of the cage.

De-Stress Your Bird Step 5 – Low-Stress Location

“If the cage is placed such that a bird can be surprised by someone simply entering the room, a bird will be stressed in this location,” Dr. Burkett said. He recommends that the cage be placed in a location where it can see plenty of activity going on but does not feel threatened by it. A corner is often a good spot because the cage will be protected by walls on two sides.

Whether or not you should locate your bird’s cage in front of a window depends on the species of bird. “Your bird is totally exposed when it’s sitting next to a window, which can make some birds feel afraid,” Karras said.

In her experience, African grey parrots and cockatoos often get very nervous when they are in front of a window, but Amazons tend to thrive there. “Often the solution is to give the bird a partial view of the window, but not from all four sides of the cage,” she said. “Most parrots want to be able to get away from the window so they can’t always be seen.” The reason for this is because predators such as hawks, owls and stray cats often can be seen outside, and a pet bird doesn’t know they can’t come through your window.

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