

Life With A Special Needs Bird

Take time and enjoy every day with your pet bird

By Chris Davis

You may not know how much time you have left with your bird, that has a chronic illness, so enjoy each day. Courtesy Jack Messick, Idaho

Live Each Day To The Fullest

One of the philosophies that I have embraced relatively late in life is to live each day as if it was my last. By adopting such an attitude, I hope to never regret having left my feelings unsaid at the time of my passage or the passage of someone I love, regardless of whether they are human or animal.

Looking at the more realistic side of chronic illness, many conditions are such that we do not know when a bird might pass on. Although I believe in always letting the bird know how much it is loved, in cases where the chronic illness is severe, tell your birds that you love them on a more frequent basis. Offer your birds their favorite foods and activities, and spend more time with them in shorter, more frequent sessions to accommodate the fatigue that often accompanies chronic conditions. I suggest this not just for the bird's well-being but for the sake of the owner. The feeling of guilt over what was not done is always greater after the opportunity is gone forever.

A chronically ill pet bird may not have much energy and will require more rest than a healthy pet bird. Make sure your bird gets the amount of sleep she needs, including little naps. Keep the cage partially covered to give your bird the option of ducking behind it for privacy when your bird tires.

Make life as comfortable as possible for your bird. Try to look at the world from its point of view. What activities or experiences would your bird enjoy that are not possible due to its condition? How can you provide a similar experience for her?

A client of mine had a young African grey parrot that was born with a crippled foot. He was nervous and nippy because he had been falling off his perches most of his life. My client tried to make him comfortable by placing a perch close to the floor of his cage, but the bird was not happy there because he felt more vulnerable in that location and still had difficulty staying on the perch.

We fashioned a perch of 14-inch mesh wire and made it about 8 inches wide to allow the bird to actually sit on it. We covered part of the perch with old toweling, so that he had a softer surface to stand on. We placed a box in the bird's cage to raise the bottom to within two inches of a normal perch height. We covered the box with a couple of old towels to create a cushion and placed a stack of newspaper over it so that it almost touched the perch. The bird loved it! The bird knew he could not fall farther than a half an inch and that the perch was wide enough for him to completely relax and enjoy himself.

Handle With Care

One of the most stressful aspects for both the owner and the chronically ill bird is when your bird needs regular medicating or uncomfortable handling. Work with a companion bird behavior consultant to determine how to make the procedure as comfortable as possible. Training the bird to accept those procedures often helps.

When I used clicker training for performing birds more than 30 years ago, I never dreamt that it would progress to such a positive tool for medicating and examining animals. As I have taught many clients throughout the years, the voice can replace the clicker especially in companion birds, but the principles are the same. Remember that positive reinforcement, timing and consistency are important components of the bird training process and need to be implemented carefully.

It is important to your bird that you remain as calm as possible. Do not become so focused on your bird's condition that you forget to be kind to yourself. Our pet birds are so closely aligned with us; when we lower our stress levels by releasing the worry, guilt, resentment or anger we feel because of their condition, it also lowers their stress levels, which can allow our pet birds to heal faster. If the condition is such that complete recovery is out of the question, it allows your bird to maintain a more comfortable physical and mental state of being.

Is caring for a challenged little one easy? No, not always. It can, however, be one of the most rewarding and insightful experiences of your entire life. Those of you who take on such a task with as much care, grace and humor as possible are

a very special breed of human. I feel great love and respect for you and your willingness to go that extra mile for another being. I personally thank each of you and know that your birds thank you, too.

BirdChannel Squawk Back

How have you handled caring for a challenged bird? What thoughts and advice would you like to share? Leave a comment and share your experience.