

Stop the Panic

Accidents will happen. Your best defense is to remain calm and then to formulate a plan. If you portray serenity then your bird will too.

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

"Liz, Help!" My friend's voice on the phone was panicky. I instinctively shifted into "Crisis Counselor Mode" and tried to calm her down.

"Take three deep, slow breaths, Morgan, and then tell me what is wrong." In a wobbly voice, she explained that her African grey, Oliver, had fallen and broken the tip of his beak. Blood was everywhere.

Emergency first aid was well covered in previous issues, so I won't reiterate it, but there are little tricks that might be useful before, during and after a frightening episode like this.

With hemostasis (stopping the flow of blood), having the right tools makes a huge difference. All bird owners should have nontoxic clotting powders or gel, which often contain anesepic, available within easy reach (sold in pet stores). If necessary, flour or corn starch can also help blood to clot. Ice may also be applied. (Clotting powders and gels are not for use on skin — mammalian or avian. With soft tissue wounds, hemostasis should be achieved with a sterile bandage and applied pressure.)

Stay Calm

The most crucial step for the human is to calm down. I learned this the hard way (the only way I learn anything, sometimes). Years ago, I was trimming my blue-and-gold macaw's nails very early on a Sunday morning. Sam has always been good about grooming, needing no restraint at all. This particular morning, however, she shoved her nail forward into the clipper just as I was cutting down. The result was a nail that was sliced off much too short, and it started bleeding profusely.

I, as an experienced veterinary technician, responded with the true aplomb of the consummate professional when dealing with her own animal — I completely fell apart. My reaction panicked Sam, and she instantly took flight, screaming at the top of her lungs as she circled my living room, dripping blood everywhere. I quickly realized my fear was not helping matters, and managed to sufficiently calm myself to settle Sam.

As it turned out, the blood flow was so profuse that the clotting powder was washed away without helping clot formation. At a loss for to what to do next, I phoned an avian veterinarian friend and awakened him from a deep sleep. Mumbling something about scraping the nail into a bar of soap, he went back to sleep and to this day, my friend does not recall that early morning conversation.

Thanks to the trick with a regular bar of bath soap, hemostasis was finally achieved, and Sam and I both lived through the incident. In retrospect, I realized how much my own fear exacerbated the situation. Terror, undoubtedly, increased her blood pressure, which then increased the rate of her blood loss. Therefore, my unbridled response made the entire incident much worse than necessary. I learned a valuable lesson.

Years later, I put that knowledge to work when I discovered fresh blood in Sam's cage. Mindful of my failings in the past, I immediately clamped down on my emotions before approaching the macaw. This enabled me to pick her up and calmly do a physical exam. I stayed composed, so Sam, too, stayed unruffled. As we chatted amiably back-and-forth while I rummaged around in her feathers, I identified the source of the bleeding — a damaged blood feather. Because Sam was so relaxed, I was able to gently wrap her in a towel (which she really likes) and stop the bleeding.

I then cleaned the blood off Sam's perches and replaced the stained cage substrate with clean white paper. This way, I could easily see if the bleeding resumed when I returned her to her cage. Without the panic, the outcome was quite different.

Before I knew her, my highly trained and experienced nurse friend, Crazy Peggy, encountered a life-threatening situation with a bird when her pin-feather-covered baby cockatiel had a serious night fright and achieved a new world record of 49 broken blood feathers at once. In an understandable panic, she called a friend who was an emergency technician and

aviculturist.

“What’s your heart rate, Peggy?”

Immediately snapping into “Nurse Mode,” Peg checked her own pulse and found it was pounding along at a dangerous rate. “Take a few deep breaths and slow down, Peg,” was her friend’s advice, and Peggy did as she was told. Now calmed, she was able to handle the situation, slowing the bleeding sufficiently to get the little bird safely to an avian veterinarian. The baby ‘tiel survived and 15 years later, Boy-Boy still lives happily with Peg.

Morgan, too, did just fine once she had calmed a little. Holding pinches of clotting powder in her fingertips, she was able to get a sufficient amount on the tip of Oliver’s beak to assist clot formation. She then cleaned the blood off his perches and cage bars, changed the cage paper and temporarily removed his water bowl so he wouldn’t wash the clot away. [Avoid getting clotting gel or powder in the oral cavity. It is toxic if ingested and will burn internal tissue. — Eds.] After an hour without fresh bleeding, she offered him some warm oatmeal – one of his favorite things. Another life-and-death crisis averted!

Having a hemostatic powder or gel within reach is very handy. But more importantly, the human must stay calm in the face of psittacine blood loss. As I told people who called our veterinary hospital in panic situations, “You can always fall apart later. Right now, your animal needs you to stay calm.”