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Bad Love

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This is a serious article about a serious issue affecting some of our feathered friends. The wrong kind of affection can become a life-threatening problem, and even more commonly a behavior problem that ruins many a bird/parront relationship. The most common bad end involves the bird screaming and biting its way into surrender, but sometimes the end is a messy and painful death.

Today you will meet Willie, an umbrella cockatoo who came to Mickaboo with his cloaca dangling out of his vent, the tissue on the verge of becoming necrotic, requiring surgical rescue that would cost Mickaboo several thousands of dollars, with perhaps a 50-50 chance of success.

We can all do things to prevent this slow-moving tragedy, and we'll tell you how.

But just for a moment, let's go for a trashy tabloid hook, a pulp novel, a bodice-ripper beginning...

I ♥ U

You come home from work. He's been waiting all day to see you. Pacing in his cage, preening his feathers, he has been thinking of all he has to say, and about how he'll nestle into your arms. As you fix dinner, his blood begins to boil with his overwhelming feelings. He begins to call.

After supper, you take him off his play stand and start off with a friendly scritch. He wants more. He is, after all, a snuggly cloud of soft, white feathers, and he wants you to appreciate all the trouble he's gone to in order to look his best for you.

It is so touching, so flattering, so heart-melting, how much this little bird loves you. He snuggles under your chin; you pet his head, scritch under his wings. He is in heaven, and so are you.

*You wonder: How could I have ever gotten along without my wonderful feathered **friend**?*

What do you mean, "friends"?

And that, right there, is the problem. Your bird does not think you are just friends, not by a long shot. In the bird world, birds rarely touch each other's bodies physically (except for head preening) unless they are in a reproductive mode. Body-petting a bird is pretty much the same experience for the bird as heavy petting in a human make-out session.

Willie came to us when a municipal animal control agency was called by an auto shop's customers, distressed about the condition of the bird who was kept as the business's pet. Willie, a naturally snow-white Umbrella Cockatoo, was gray-black with soot and grease, and had innards hanging out of his back end. The animal cops took Willie, called Mickaboo, and brought Willie to a premier avian veterinary practice, Medical Center for Birds in Oakley.

When Willie was undergoing his treatment there, I talked with Dr. Brian Speer and Dr. Geoff Olsen about rehabilitating Willie, and what we can all do to prevent such life-threatening tragedies. Each doctor had

anecdotes about birds in trouble because of bad love, as well as some metaphors to help us understand petting from the bird's point of view. They also offered advice for the conscientious parrot owner to help correct inappropriate relationships and avoid creating them.

Love, from the bird's perspective

In Birds For Dummies, co-author Dr. Speer wrote a chapter "Sex and the Single Bird." This information exists in essay form in veterinary academic journals and websites, and he has spoken about it at a number of conferences.

In one of the forums, Dr. Speer translated the bird's experience of human petting to a dating experience we could all understand. It went something like this: You have a really good friend, just a friend. Although the friend is attractive and happens to match your sexual preference, you have never been involved romantically. But one day, you go to the movies. Over popcorn, and while enjoying the movie, your friend's hand strays to your thigh, and your friend starts stroking it, jussssst right. You decide to go with it and lean in for a big wet kiss, and your friend stands up and says, "What are you doing? Bad friend!" You are understandably confused. After the incident, your friend stops sitting close to you, doesn't call very often, is distant. Now you are angry. Angry enough to scream for attention, bite when held... OK. Now we are talking about a bird. But you see the issue, right?



Let's say the friend doesn't push you off. You kiss, and regularly pet, but nothing more. You're sort of friends with benefits, although just short of the biggest benefit. You're a bird, and lacking other birds around, you are OK with it.

Dr. Olsen points out that many people simply think it's sweet and cute that the bird huffs and puffs that certain way, that the bird loves them so much it wants to be petted and cuddled, that it's a little disgusting but also adorably flattering that the bird tries to regurgitate and feed them.

Don't be flattered, Dr. Olsen says. He says he tells people flat out to imagine that their bird is a dog, and it is relentlessly trying to hump your leg. Eeeeeew. "Just think of your bird as a dirty old man," Dr. Olsen says impishly.

Costly for the bird, and for you

Willie, with his dangling cloaca, has a far-from-rare medical condition. In fact, in the few months since Willie has been receiving treatment, several more parrots were brought to MCFB for such problems. At one of Willie's follow-up appointments, Dr. Olsen told me that they had operated on a bird with a stubborn prolapse the previous day. Most often it is the females who suffer the most physical symptoms of bad love. They can become chronic egg-layers, depleting their body minerals, suffering egg binding, rupturing the oviduct, and inflaming internal body parts connected with egg formation. But males also can be affected, becoming so constantly sexually aroused that they bear down all the time until their vent stretches out and finally collapses, leaving the cloaca to dangle just like that of a hen with a blown oviduct.

Dr. Olsen, Willie's treating vet and primary surgeon, said Willie's vent sphincter had no muscle tone left, no ability to constrict and close, no way to keep the fragile tissue in his body. After several failed attempts to replace Willie's tissue in his body and restore function through medication, the two doctors determined that surgery was Willie's only hope. It was a radical operation, involving opening up an upside-down T-shaped incision, stitching Willie's cloaca to his hip bones, and scoring the surface of the cloaca inside his body so that scar tissue would eventually form and adhere to his abdominal cavity. Then there was the vent; with no muscle tone left in the sphincter to keep it closed and the innards in, they would have to improvise. Drs. Olsen and Speer used stitches to gather the top half of the vent into a big pleat, mostly closing it up, and hopefully leaving a vent just large enough for Willie to pass waste.

And there was a dark warning: If this didn't work, if Willie's cloaca didn't stay attached to the abdominal cavity, if he kept bearing down and it prolapsed again, it would be irreparable. Euthanasia would be unavoidable – but we would hope it didn't come to that.

And assuming the surgical repair held, the longer-term issue was changing Willie's behavior, and the environmental and relationship conditions that encourage hormonal behavior.

Willie's parts have stayed in his body. Once the tissue healed and the internal inflammation subsided, he was able to poop around the meander of the vent, and he is thriving.

He is not out of the woods, but is doing well. The longer he goes without a prolapse, the happier everyone is with his progress.

However, Willie is now deemed a "special-needs" bird for purposes of fostering and adoption. When you meet Willie, you would not believe he was a special needs bird, or that he had a behavior problem; most of the time, a behavior problem is aggression, screaming, biting, self-mutilation, and other destructive behaviors. Willie's behavior problem is that he is too sweet, too cuddly, too nice, too fun to handle. He loves everybody – and he *loves* everybody.

We can hardly look Willie in the eye without having him cluck-cluck-cluck his appreciation. Look him in the eye while holding him and he pants with passion.

Longer-term fix, and prevention

Behavior modification is his current, long-term treatment. We have been teaching Willie that we are all just friends.

Here's what that looks like:

- Stay on the perch, not on my shoulder, not in my lap, not on my arm. Willie steps up to my arm to come out of the cage, but then he is carried to wherever we are hanging out, and onto a perch.
- Play with toys, not me. I don't think Willie had a lot of experience with toys before he came to Mickaboo's care and my home. He was afraid of toys at first, but I would pick them up and nibble on them. I left them laying around where he could see them, and then put one up in the very corner of the cage so he could see it without feeling forced into being near it. One day, he finally took a nibble. He has one toy made of medium-sized colored soft wood blocks. The other is a woven straw tube stuffed with colored bits of raffia and cornhusks. He is much more comfortable with this one, nibbling on it and pulling out the stuffing to chew and chuck onto the ground.
- No hand feeding! In the wild, birds feed their young, and feed their mates to strengthen the pair bond and indicate willingness to breed. I am not a chick, and I am not your mate. Don't let the bird eat treats from your lips. Don't give the bird pieces of soft food. That's an invitation to romance.
- Keep it lean. Don't overfeed the bird (a luxuriance of fat and flesh brings on breeding readiness).
- Treats are for training. He gets his yummys, but he works for it. Nothing in life is free! Using tiny favorite bits of food, I've done some target training with Willie, just so he can have some non-romantic fun and mental stimulation. Dr. Speer writes that training doesn't have to be just about tricks and talking. You can train your bird to play with challenging puzzle type toys, foraging toys, and toys that are just plain fun. Willie isn't ready for this yet, but in time he will be.
- No nesting in the cage. Look at your bird's cage. Does it have hiding places, boxes, or soft materials that can promote nesting? Get rid of it. The cage needs to be fun and interesting, but should not look like a place to raise a clutch. I have a new foster, a huge blue and gold macaw, who started out hissing, threatening, and actively trying to attack and bite us all, but then fell in love with me. He began shredding his rope perch, tossing it to the cage bottom, and then going down there to sit on it,



fluff it up, coo to me, and click his beak with a come-hither batting of the eye-lashes. Immediate confiscation was required. We are glad that big boy is becoming happier in the home, but once again, we are just going to be friends. See above steps!

- Control the lighting. Remember, birds live in the tropics. Most of the time in the tropics, day and night are fairly equal. Excess light brings on hormones. We have to use artificial means to provide lighting conditions as balanced as possible. During the winter months, add artificial light to provide a 12-hour day. During the summer, use dark cage covers and window blinds to limit the light to those 12 hours.

Next time you are snuggling with your BFFF (Best Feathered Friend Forever), back up and think about how your bird might be experiencing this. You can be BFFs in a lot of fun ways that don't leave your bird all twitterpated and panting.