



THE PARROT THAT FEARS

By Lisa Desatnik

Is that “out-of-the-blue” fear really out-of-the-blue?

I have heard people talk about their parrot’s sudden neurotic, phobic behaviors (or other pets for that matter). For no apparent reason, their loving companion screams, lunges or tries to escape the hands that in the past had only been associated with positive things.

What I hope is to help people understand that actually those ‘phobic’ behaviors described above do not just happen out of the blue. No behavior occurs in a vacuum. Measurable, observable behaviors are an animal’s tools to get consequences within the context of the surrounding environment. In other words, if a parrot suddenly screams, lunges or tries to escape from a hand that it had stepped up onto hundreds of times previously, then SOMETHING must have happened to cause the parrot to form a negative association with it.

I had my first, hands-on experience doing this kind of detective work a number of years ago when my Timneh African Grey, Barnaby, who previously would

have been very happy spending his entire day with his face pressed against mine (with occasional play breaks), suddenly ‘panicked’ when he stepped onto my arm. He screamed a blood-curdling scream, breathed heavily and then took off flying back to his cage and running to the back. It was heartbreaking for me to have been suddenly thrust into a role of some evil monster, without even knowing why.

Every time it occurred, I had to go through a systematic desensitization plan to help rebuild a positive association with my arm. Because Barnaby had a history of receiving a lot of positive reinforcement from me for his behavior, we were able to work through it fairly quickly, but my education taught me there had to be a reason why this sporadically happened.

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a systematic approach to solving behavior problems that involves looking at the very specific behavior (such as a bird biting or screaming) and the related environmental

context that signals and reinforces it. We ask, “What happened *immediately* prior to the behavior (*antecedent*) to set the whole ball rolling?” And, “What happened *immediately* after the behavior to reinforce it (*consequence*)?”

With my ABA hat on, I began the process of evaluating Barnaby’s environment surrounding those ‘phobic’ behaviors. This is what I determined:

There is a window in the birds’ room that faces the street. On sunny days, when a car drove past, the light that reflected from the metal and glass made a brilliant pass from one wall to the next. If my neighbor parked her car in a certain spot at a certain time of day and Barnaby happened to be perched way up high, that same evil light hovered. Each time that Barnaby jumped on my arm, only to be terrified, that same ‘trigger’ light just happened to be coming from the street.

So, Barnaby’s fear with being on my arm in the afternoon really was not out-of-the blue after all! Purely based on my poor timing, in Barnaby’s mind, I appeared to be associated with all of those evil, scary lights coming from outside his window.

Barnaby was exhibiting two types of behaviors. One was an automatic, involuntary response to a bright light (panic scream, escape). In scientific terminology, this is called an *unconditioned* or *respondent behavior* because it wasn’t something that Barnaby had learned that generally meant only good things would follow. On the other hand, his stepping up behavior is most definitely learned. Scientists call that *operant learning*.

Now, think of the use of a clicker (a small mechanical noisemaker to mark the behavior being reinforced.) The clicker in and of itself is meaningless to an animal. It only acquires value to that animal when a good trainer repeatedly pairs the sound with a treat – a *reinforcer*. Then the click acquires reinforcing value.

This same type of association had been going on with Barnaby, only it was a negative one. Being on my arm – something that had always given him positive reinforcement in the past – was being paired with that fear response. Just as the words ‘good boy’ came to be associated with safflower seeds, his being on my arm had become associated with that scary light.

With that analysis done, my behavior modification solution was not that difficult. I used *antecedent arrangement* (I like to think of it as ‘prevention’) strategies. I tried to remember to close the shade at certain times of the day, and on days when I couldn’t or forgot to do that, I did not offer him my arm at that time. Instead, he learned to go inside his cage at that time of day.

That small adjustment meant the difference between a parrot who became instantly phobic of my arm, to one that continued to be my shoulder companion instead.

Always keep in mind that with living beings, there will always be either environmental or health issues that at any given time can impact behaviors. Taking a systematic look at analyzing it will help you to come up with the most positive, least intrusive solutions for you and your parrot. 📖



About the Author

Lisa Desatnik, CPDT-KA, CPBC, is a certified parrot behavior consultant through the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC). She is a pet trainer (working mostly with dogs, but also offers parrot behavior consulting) in Cincinnati, Ohio. She has been a student of positive behavior management and Applied Behavior Analysis since meeting and being inspired by her first teacher, Dr. Susan Friedman, Ph.D., professor emeritus, Psychology Dept. at Utah State University. Lisa is also a member of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers and the Pet Professional Guild.

Read Lisa’s behavior blog at www.SoMuchPETential.com.