The death of Robin Williams hit me hard. Mr. Williams was a creative force and his untimely passing was apparently due to depression. Depression is a chemical state in the brain and if it becomes chronic requires treatment\(^1\). Like any other physical illness serious problems, even death, can arise if it is not treated. I have faced that problem with new birds at the sanctuary many times. Depression among birds leads to stereotypic behavior (pacing, bar strobing, repetitive motions such as cocking the head and moving in defined circles).

Perhaps Mr. Williams would still be with us had he been treated for his depression. Depending on its severity there are several treatments that can be helpful including: exercise, diet, light therapy, wake therapy, meditation, and psychotherapeutic drugs (see wikipedia footnote). It seems from the depth of his depression that therapy drugs would have been the answer, but we will never know.

Psychotherapeutic drugs seem to be feared or hated by the general public. How often I have heard someone say, “I'm not putting my bird on drugs!” My question is, “If they had a broken leg, would you fix it or just let them suffer?” Most would say that this is different, that the mind and body are not the same. I disagree. I am not a dualist\(^2\). Why? There is no evidence that the mind

\(^1\)Depressed mood may not require any professional treatment, and may be a normal reaction to certain life events, a symptom of some medical conditions, or a side effect of some drugs or medical treatments. A prolonged depressed mood, especially in combination with other symptoms, may lead to a diagnosis of a psychiatric or medical condition, which may benefit from treatment.[18] Different sub-divisions of depression have different treatment approaches.

\(^2\)In philosophy of mind, dualism is a view about the relationship between mind and matter which claims that mind and matter are two ontologically separate categories. Mind-body dualism claims that neither the mind nor matter can be reduced to each other in any way. Western dualist philosophical traditions (as exemplified by Descartes) equate mind with the conscious self and theorize on consciousness on the basis of mind/body dualism. By contrast, some Eastern philosophies draw a metaphysical line between consciousness and matter — where matter includes both body and mind. — Wikipedia

Given an accurate diagnosis of major depressive disorder, in general the type of treatment (psychotherapy and/or antidepressants, alternative therapies, or active intervention) is "less important than getting depressed patients involved in an active therapeutic program."[20]

Moderate levels of physical activity can treat depression by increasing the levels of endorphins and the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine.[21] Exercise allows individuals to improve their health while building new relationships with others and bolstering the sense of community that comes with exercising as a group.[22][23] Group activities can lower depression by increasing depressed individuals’ ability to interact with others. Exercise also increases individuals’ self-confidence by promoting social skills that people with depression often lack and interrupts the cycle of isolation from the general population that can further increase depression. Exercise fosters non-demanding behaviors while allowing people to socialize and identify themselves as part of the general population.

Lifestyle strategies that may improve depressed mood include wake therapy, light therapy, eating a healthy diet, meditation, exercise, and smoking cessation.
and body are separate and a vast store of evidence to the contrary. If a brain is damaged then
certain motor or cognitive functions are affected. Creatures, we included, are organisms and our
bodies include our brains. It’s all one package. A broken leg or a “broken heart” deserves
medical attention.

Since untreated Feather Destructive Behavior is generally a fatal disease\(^3\), we immediately
begin the medical protocols advised by Dr. Jenkins of the Avian and Exotic Animal Hospital in
San Diego and the behavioral protocols in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA).

So if a leg is broken, a blood feather is broken, a cataract is forming, or a brain is chemically
imbalanced, I treat them each as serious medical conditions.

A listing of various medical treatments can be found below. For more information on ABA see Dr.
Susan Friedman's website www.behaviorworks.org.

**Potential treatments**

**Exercise**

Paleobiologists, who were studying the evolution of flight, among avian biologists have shown
that birds expend less than 10% of their potential in anything other than flight\(^4\). For this reason,
they don’t get enough exercise unless they are given the opportunity for extended flight.

Exercise treats depression by elevating the levels of endorphins and other neurotransmitters.

**Diet**

We do not know exactly what the best diet would be for any psittacine. Studies of avian diets in
the wild have not been forthcoming. We can only make intelligent assumptions and place our
tentative trust in a good pelleted diet supplemented with fresh vegetables, greens and some
fruits. Furthermore, the issue is complicated by parrots who have been fed a diet of mostly seed
or human food (sadly heavy in sugar, salt and fat). It is apparently as difficult to change a
parrot’s bad dietary habits as it is to change a human’s. In the wild they learn from their flock
and in captivity they only have humans to look to as role models.

In the wild they forage for about 2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the early evening\(^5\).
Captive psittacines generally have food available all day, a signal to them that it is a good time

\(^3\) The BSAVA Manual for Psittacine Birds, Appendix flowchart

\(^4\) Sturkie’s Avian Physiology p. 332

\(^5\) The parrots of Luquillo: Natural history and conservation of the Puerto Rican parrot,
to mate since there will be food for their offspring. Birds that respond to mating stimuli exhibit stress from elevated hormone levels. Presumably this is exasperated by the inability to mate in captivity (as other behavioral problems will ensue). Reducing the feeding times to those found in the wild may be helpful but this has not been proven in trials to my knowledge.

**Light therapy**

The use of full spectrum light is recommended by avian veterinarians—do not use reptile lights because they can cause blindness in parrots—since it is required for vitamin D production. Light therapy in avian species has not, to my knowledge, been investigated.

**Wake Therapy**

Since this form of therapy goes contrary to what we know about circadian rhythms in avians, it seems contraindicated.

**Environmental changes**

If you can unentangle a bird from the web of things that are the seeds of depression, this can begin the healing process. Perhaps they require a bigger cage, a different cage placement, more human contact, different human contact, socialization with other birds, more toys, different toys, etc.

**Psychotherapeutic drugs**

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8 Light therapy or phototherapy (classically referred to as heliotherapy) consists of exposure to daylight or to specific wavelengths of light using polychromatic polarised light, lasers, light-emitting diodes, fluorescent lamps, dichroic lamps or very bright, full-spectrum light. The light is administered for a prescribed amount of time and, in some cases, at a specific time of day. — Wikipedia

9 Wake therapy is a form of sleep deprivation used as a treatment for depression. The subject stays awake all night, or is woken at 1AM and stays awake all morning, and the next full day. While sleepy, patients find that their depression vanishes, until they sleep again. Combining this with bright light therapy make the beneficial effects last longer than one day. Partial sleep deprivation in the second half of the night may be as effective as an all night sleep deprivation session. — Wikipedia
Haldol

Haldol, the generic drug haloperidol, has been shown to be effective in reducing anxiety and feather picking in cockatoos and some parrots. Although major clinical studies have not been done (we live in a capitalist country and there is no money in this research) anecdotal studies by avian veterinarians have clearly shown its effectiveness. Dr. Jeffrey Jenkins, a world renowned avian veterinarian, has used it with success for years. Chloe was losing weight and feathers at the same time and has been living a happy life for 3 years on the drug.

The major difficulty with Haldol is that it requires some degree of expertise or at least willingness to follow a standard protocol. After an initial dose the dose must be adjusted according to its effectiveness every two days. Generally, those without medical training cannot follow these directions even though they are not difficult. We tend to follow our heartstrings rather than protocol. Without diligent adjustment of the drug it rarely helps.

Anecdotal remedies

Remedies such as spray or oral homeopathics have not been shown to be effective. No supplement has been shown to be effective in reducing stress or FDB.

10 http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/brain-and-nervous-system/medicines/haldol.html
