



The CHARA-CTERISTICS *of* JOY

Text and photos by Grace Tan

Frankly, if I had a choice, I would own dogs or cats, but my parents aren't fond of furry animals roaming around the house shedding fur and possibly destroying furniture. A friend of mine suggested for me to own a pet and shared her experience of owning two birds. I was intrigued and after getting the green light from my parents, I got a pet bird with the help of another friend with experience caring for lovebirds. I ended up committing to owning a budgie, whose name remains as Chara despite me finding out that he's male shortly after (oops!). "Chara" is Greek for "joy" and he has indeed been bringing me joy since.

As medical students, we sometimes neglect caring for ourselves, let alone our pets. Thankfully, pet birds are rather low maintenance and easy to care for. Chara's non-stop chirping when the television is on, or when I have guests over and we are busy chatting, is a cheery backdrop to have, and the short interactions with him – letting him perch on my finger, feeding him millet and bribing him to walk along my arm – can be therapeutic and calming after a long day in the wards. He's ridiculously cute, or perhaps cute because he looks ridiculous with his small beak, large

head and small body (which appears small when he flattens his feathers, and puffy when he fluffs up to keep warm). His habit of scratching himself with one foot while still perched strangely resembles a dog, and his morning stretches shed light on why the “bird dog stretch” is so named.

Birds are good companions to have, and Chara listens when I rant or sing in attempts to get him to chirp – which in turn has positive implications for my mental health as it abates loneliness and relieves stress. Furthermore, he does funny things every now and then that make me laugh. Occasionally, I will spend time just observing him in his habitat, not unlike people-watching but with more animal behaviours. One must not forget the aspect of care involved – cleaning the cage, changing water and feeding him, bathing and getting

toys for him, deciding when to get his claws trimmed and considering who can care for him should I get too busy (birds can get depressed too!). It is a reminder that just as I am responsible for providing these basic needs (food, water, sleep and play) to keep my bird happy, I am also responsible for my own mental well-being amid the busyness. Yet, Chara now also plays a small part in my mental wellness in return and that is something to be thankful for.

During this COVID-19 season and the circuit breaker, my parents and I are at home most of the time. This means more attention, increased chances of someone turning on the television or tap in the kitchen and much more talking with all the Zoom video conferencing meetings going on. Chara has grown chirpier, and he has been adding background noise to distract whoever I am talking to or

even presenting to during lessons! Sometimes he seems to demand attention by screeching loudly even when there is no noise. I get to see him playing with his toys more, and he occasionally plays on his swing with glee as I work out a sweat and question why I chose to torture myself so. It’s been encouraging to hear my mum talking to him and having her own imaginary conversations with him or my dad telling me that I forgot to bring “my friend” outside in the morning (we place his cage in a darker room at night to sleep) or after a Zoom conference he should not be interrupting. Though the circuit breaker has made life more monotonous and we are all cooped up at home, I think having Chara around does add some life, chatter and brightness to our lives, relieving some of the boredom with his silly antics chasing the bell or fluffing his feathers. ♦

Legend

1. Always able to be bribed with millet!
2. Chara’s favourite swing where he can be found taking a nap or swinging happily
3. “Why don’t you like me?” vs “Go away, human!”

Grace is a fourth year student from the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, Class of 2021. She believes that healthcare providers must first be emotionally, mentally and physically healthy to better care for others. Animals, babies and children never fail to bring a smile to her face.

