

Love Me, Love My Dog

For the single dog owner, the ideal relationship has room for three.

By Maureen Kochan

Stephanie Alleman was looking for Mr. Right. But too often, the Maryland dog lover found herself with Mr. Barely-Right-Now. “The one missing part of my life had been a relationship with someone who understands the connection I have with my dogs,” says Alleman, who owns Tibetan Spaniels Travis, Kiri, and Toby.

The wakeup call came when a former boyfriend gave Alleman an ultimatum: It was either him or the dogs.

Alleman chose the dogs. “He finally realized that the dogs were family to me,” Alleman says. “That wasn’t going to change.”

Illustrations by Tom Kimball

The breakup forced Alleman to examine what she really wanted from a relationship. “I decided there would be no more relationships unless the person I was involved with had a clear-cut respect and understanding for the fact that the dogs are my life,” she says.

Alleman’s strong feelings aren’t surprising. Eight in 10 dog owners consider pets “family,” according to a recent American Kennel Club study. A British survey found that 25 percent of dog owners would choose a pet over their mate if forced to make a choice.

And while you may not fall squarely in the camp that would boot a guy over a dog, it’s clearly in everyone’s best interest to get along. Here are some strategies for making that happen.

Must love dogs?

Do you need someone who matches your enthusiasm for dogs, or would you be OK with a cat lover who has never set foot in a dog park? Deciding on your preferences now will help clarify your needs, and hopefully save hurt feelings down the road, says Bethany Marshall, Ph.D., a marriage and family therapist and author of “Deal Breakers: When to Work on a Relationship and When to Walk Away” (Simon Spotlight Entertainment, 2007). But remember, it’s OK to have differences — even significant ones — with a partner. “You are dating a man, not a mini-me or a twin,” she says.

To tell or not to tell

It’s up to you to decide what to reveal and when, Marshall says. If you’d rather not tell your date how much you spend on your dogs every month or about the time you drove 1,000 miles to pick up a puppy from a breeder so he wouldn’t have to fly on a plane, that’s your business. That said, intimacy requires disclosure. So if you hope to get serious, don’t play everything too close to the vest.

Master the meet-and-greet

First impressions count — not only for people, but for dogs, too. Jean Donaldson, director of the Academy for Dog Trainers at the San Francisco SPCA, suggests introducing your dog and your guy on neutral ground, like at a nearby park. Keep your dog on leash and put him in a Sit-Stay or Down-Stay. Ask your guy to feed him a treat while saying hello in a calm, quiet voice. If your dog responds well and remains relaxed, reward your dog’s good manners with extra treats and verbal praise.

If your dog is skittish around new people, ask your guy to avoid making eye contact, which some dogs may interpret as threatening. Other calming signals that he can try include approaching your dog by walking in an arc, which is how friendly dogs greet each other, sitting or squatting during the greeting (again, sideways is best), and yawning.

Stick to the usual

Cozy nights cuddled on the couch watching “Grey’s Anatomy” with a new man sounds fun for you. But the change to your dog’s routine — not to mention the presence of a new person in the house, especially if you live alone — can lead to anxiety and jealousy in even the most confident and independent of dogs.

Help minimize problems by keeping your dog's routine as regular as possible. That means feeding and exercising him at the same time as always, and if you find yourself away from home more often, hiring a dog walker or asking a friend to visit when you're away.

You may also want to step up the frequency and duration of exercise because a tired dog is usually a happier and better behaved one, Donaldson says. That means taking your dog for a long, tiring walk if you're going to be out all evening. And when your guy comes over, don't forget to lavish praise and treats on your pooch.

That way your dog won't associate getting less attention with your guy's presence, Donaldson adds.

Easy does it

Love doesn't happen overnight for people, and it won't happen that way for your dog. Give him space and time to accept the new man in your life. In the meantime, include your dog on outings with you and your guy whenever possible. Make a date out of a strenuous hike or a casual walk around the neighborhood. Donaldson also recommends introducing special games for just the two of them to play. Your dog will start to anticipate the special games that seem to magically appear when your guy arrives, helping to lay the foundation for a sincere and lasting bond.

Alleman, for one, is glad she kept looking for the right man for her — and her dogs. After several dates with not-quite-right guys, she joined AnimalAttraction.com, a dating website for animal lovers. That's where she met boyfriend Steve, who now shares her home and her passion for dogs. He has two mixes, Mr. Jake and Mr. Tee.

"It's a relief and a thrill to know there's someone out there who shares my values," she says.

Meet your match

Looking for a dog-loving mate? Here are a few ideas that just might do the trick. Volunteer. Whether you're cleaning out dog runs at the local shelter or serving on a dog park's board of directors, volunteering for an organization that helps animals is the quickest way to find other dog-loving people.

Take up a dog sport. The possibilities are endless: rally, obedience, agility, tracking, flyball. If you have a dog who would rather spend Saturdays on the couch, borrow a friend's high-energy pooch.

Hit the town with your dog. Most cities, even smaller ones, offer plenty of places to hang out with your dog — and other dog-loving people. Check with local restaurants, outdoor cafes, even art galleries, which often hold special events that cater to dogs and dog lovers.

Take a breather. Get outside with your dog. Head to the dog park, dog beach, or go for a walk along a popular shopping street. Strike up a conversation with the good-looking guy holding the funny-looking mutt. Perhaps your dog is a "guy magnet."

Join an online dating service for animal lovers. Learn if a potential date likes dogs, cats, ferrets, or all of the above before you even go on a first date. Some options include AnimalAttraction.com, DateMyPet.com, and PETPeopleMeet.com. Maureen Kochan, the former editor of DOG FANCY, is a freelance writer and editor who lives in Southern California.