

## Dating With Dogs

### 5 ways to help Mr. Right earn your dog's trust.

*Susan McCullough*

For nearly seven years, Molly and I had been a dynamic duo. My scruffy-looking but utterly adorable Benji look-alike had been my steady companion through the ups and downs I experienced as a single woman in Washington, D.C. But now I'd met a guy named Stan whom I really liked — and I wanted Molly to like him, too.

Unfortunately, I couldn't take Molly's goodwill for granted. She'd not always seemed very happy sharing me with gentlemen friends — and at times, she would express that apparent unhappiness by unleashing torrents of high-decibel barking. Such barking would escalate to sound barrier-breaking levels if any of my guy friends tried to embrace me. I wanted Molly to react differently to Stan, but I wasn't sure how to bring about that outcome.

According to associate applied animal behaviorist Nancy Williams, such puzzlement isn't surprising. "People's misunderstanding of dog behavior is so massive," says Williams, who's from Manchester, Md. "Many dogs are easily frightened or shy. They might cower or hide from a new person entering the home. And hugging between people can make such dogs especially anxious."

Still, owners in search of mates can help their dogs accept new human companions. Here's what Williams recommends:

1. Meet somewhere else. Dogs may feel more comfortable meeting new people when they aren't on their home turf. "Meet the new person in a neutral place such as outdoors, and then walk into your home together," Williams suggests.
2. Put the dog somewhere else. Sometimes, meeting outdoors or on other neutral turf isn't feasible — for example, if your visitor arrives during a rainstorm. In such cases, Williams suggests having your visitor enter your home while your dog is in another room, in his crate — if he's crate trained — or in a gated area away from your front door.
3. Provide a diversion. Dogs who are anxious about new visitors may respond to diversionary tactics that help them forget their anxiety. "Have the visitor drop treats around the dog to distract him," Williams says. "Or have your dog sit, and reward him for that."
4. Let the dog make the first move. Williams cautions new beaus and household members against reaching for the dog, even to allow the dog to sniff a hand. "Friendly behavior does not require a hand sniff," she says. "Don't try to force the dog to be friends with someone new in the house. The dog will decide when he's ready to be friends."
5. Be patient. Some dogs need time before they'll allow themselves to make a new human friend. "It can take months for a dog to get used to a new person," Williams says.

Fortunately for all concerned, Molly and Stan ended up getting along great. Stan made a point of bringing treats for Molly whenever he came to visit (score for diversionary tactics). As we all got to know each other, we ended up spending lots of time at his place (score for getting off Molly's and my home turf). About a year after Stan met Molly and me, he and I married — and the three of us lived happily together for the rest of Molly's life.

Award-winning writer Susan McCullough lives with her husband, daughter, and dog in Virginia.