

Names are change to honor client confidentiality

Act Like a Dog

“I’m competing with a dog.”

Karen, 53, would like to take a little weekend trip with her husband, Sam, “but he doesn’t want to leave the dog,” she said. “I don’t even think he’d mind if I went by myself.”

“Is he worried about the dog?” I asked in our counseling session. “Is there a health concern over the dog?”

“Nooo,” she said, shaking her head. “I feel strange saying this ... but the dog acts needy, and Sam gives in to him. He’s there for the dog more than he is for me.”

“So, what’s the dog doing that you’re not?” I inquired.

“I have no clue,” she replied.

But after a few moments of pondering, she realized something: “Maybe he’s more obvious about letting Sam know what he needs.”

“Good call,” I said.

There’s a lesson here: If we want others to be sensitive to our needs, perhaps it’s wise to get more dog-like about it. This isn’t to suggest we should all go around acting like needy dogs in order to get what we want. But we can learn a thing or two by observing an animal’s instinctive techniques.

“So how did you make your desires known to Sam about the weekend trip?” I asked.

Karen admitted to broaching the subject in a matter-of-fact fashion. She simply told him, “I think it would be nice if we went somewhere this weekend.”

I pointed out how her delivery was both indirect and passionless.

Clearly, the dog has the edge.

Not surprisingly, Karen has been running into this problem full force for some time. And despite her obvious advantages—the fact that she’s human, intelligent and married to her husband—she feels reduced to second-class citizenship in her own home.

She gave numerous examples of Sam doting on the dog.

“If the dog wants to play,” she said, “Sam drops everything and plays with him.”

Mid-sentence interruptions are common. The couple can be immersed in an engrossing conversation and all it takes is a certain whimper or a wet nose placed strategically on Sam’s lap and suddenly his full attention switches to the dog.

She’s offended by Sam’s rudeness, but mostly she’s just plain lonely.

“Never—ever!—did I anticipate the day I’d be jealous of a dog,” she said, “but here I am.”

So, Karen and I embarked on a quest to change how she expresses herself to her husband. It was time for her to learn assertiveness, not in terms of calling the shots, but assertiveness in honestly communicating what she needs and desires out of the relationship.

I explained that in order to reach Sam’s heart, her requests cannot be flat and unemotional. She needs to show some emotion.

Too many people, as with Karen, choose to conceal their emotions, and then suffer when those same hidden feelings aren’t acknowledged or even noticed.

Karen’s challenge is to express her feelings directly, just as the dog does. Without thinking twice, he shows uninhibited eagerness, desire, sadness and disappointment.

As a result, empathy is evoked in Sam. Simply put, his heart is moved.

Empathy is occurring when we sense what is going on in others—pets and human beings, alike. Not only do we feel for them, we feel *with* them.

Latest research reveals that empathy, more than intellectual understanding, connects us to others; it draws us close.

Karen was raised to put her needs on the back burner and to stifle her feelings, so she has some unlearning to do. Our sessions will address that.

After Karen learns to truly speak her heart, hopefully the dog will find himself naturally relegated to the position of a beloved family pet. And hopefully, Sam will learn to see the loving wife he has beside him; this includes the need she has for his love, attention and affection. Yes, whimpers are persuasive, causing us to willingly fork over doggy treats by the dozens. But

there's a vast difference between manipulation and showing our true emotions. I'm not talking about using guilt as a method of getting what we want in our relationships.

And we can't expect our partner to intuit our needs, either.

I often hear women say: "I shouldn't have to tell him what I need," or "He should know what I want." But this kind of thinking will almost always lead to a confused male and a disappointed female.

Males have come a long way evolutionarily, but they cannot—to our frustration—read minds.

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