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Healthy Pets

Your Partner vs. Your Pet

What to do when couples struggle with pet issues, pet allergies, and pet behavior.

By Roxanne Hawn

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Reviewed by [Elizabeth A. Martinez, DVM](#)

Pets allow couples to practice teamwork. They also create relationship proving grounds, where romantic partners decide household rules and negotiate rough spots. Whether it's a fuss over pet behavior or allergies, pets need not push couples to the brink, forcing someone to shout, "It's me or the dog/cat!"

If you and your sweetheart butt heads over a pet, here's expert advice on what to do to avoid a showdown over pet bonding, pet behavior, or pet allergies.

Pet Bonding: When Fear Looks Like Hate

Sophia Yin, DVM, a veterinarian with San Francisco Veterinary Specialists and author of several books, including *How to Behave So Your Dog Behaves*, says that if a dog or cat seems not to like someone, the real issue is pre-existing fear of new people or situations.

Fear/stress behaviors can worsen during courtship, hitting critical mass when couples move in together, especially if pets:

- Hide and/or soil inside the house
- Bark, whine, or fuss
- Get overexcited

Yin says counterconditioning, in which the pet learns to link someone or something with food or play, can ease pets into a more comfortable relationship.

Pet Behavior: When Household Rules Get Set

Couples also argue over household rules related to pet behavior, such as:

- Whether to allow pets on the furniture or in the kitchen
- How pets should behave inside the home, including at mealtime, playtime, and bedtime
- Whether to allow the pet to kiss or jump on people as signs of affection

Even if the couple agrees, getting the dog or cat to comply may be another matter. If you have never trained your pet to respond to requests, Yin says the ensuing frustration can trigger people without any pet training experience "to be mean to the dog or cat and make things worse."

Pet Allergies: When Pets Make You Sick

Pet allergies have become increasingly common in the last 60 years, because of lifestyle changes and jumps in pet ownership, from 56% to 62% since 1988.

Yet, J. Allen Meadows, MD, a board certified allergist and member of the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, tells WebMD that 20% to 30% of his clients technically aren't allergic to anything; it takes an allergy test to tell for sure.

And, your partner may not be allergic to all dogs because each one may carry just two or three of 20 possible allergens. "With cats, it's the opposite," Meadows says. "Your lions, your tigers, your kitty cats, all carry the same allergen."

If your partner is allergic to your dog or cat, the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology recommends taking these steps:

1. Replace carpeting with hard surfaces.
2. Limit or remove fabric upholstered furniture.
3. Make the bedroom and closets pet-free zones.
4. Wash bedding and curtains regularly with one of three techniques:
 - Use 140-degree water, which is 20-degrees hotter than scalding
 - Wash at any temperature with two rinses
 - Wash in a steam washing machine
5. Use tightly woven materials for all bedding, including mattress and pillow covers.

Pet Conflict Resolution

Catherine Hastings, PhD, a marriage and family therapist in Lancaster, Pa., says couples' disagreements about pets are ultimately about differences in tolerance -- be it for shedding, noise, self-control, or boundaries.

"If it's your pet, and you say, 'I see that shedding bothers you, so I'm going to do the cleaning', that's respecting the other. If you're saying, 'If it bothers you so much, then you clean it,' I think that's sending a bigger message," says Hastings, a former board member of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy.

When conflicts arise in a relationship, Hastings recommends using these communication and resolution techniques:

- Be honest about your feelings and frustrations.
- Be empathetic to the other person's concerns.
- Be respectful and take responsibility for solutions.

Hastings advises couples facing a breakup over pets to ask, "Is this issue bigger than us?"

In some cases, the answer is yes. In others, Hastings watches as pets bring struggling relationships together. "It makes me think about how comforting pets are to couples," Hastings says, "especially those who are under some kind of stress in their lives."

If At First You Don't Succeed...

Keith Brown of New York first tried humor when he and DeAnne Merrey argued over their English Pointer (Bundy) regularly urinating in Merrey's home office. Brown denied it being the dog's fault. He teased that maybe he or Merrey's young son had done it. "I tried to diffuse the situation with humor," he says, "but it didn't really work."

When Bundy continued to bark during conference calls, chewed her way out of a crate, and caused endless distractions in Merrey's day, Brown says, "We had several pretty nasty fights."

Brown tried another tactic. He enrolled Bundy in Running Paws Athletic Club, which sends Bundy home exhausted each day. "Doggy daycare kind of salvaged our relationship," says Brown, whose December 2009 wedding to Merrey went ahead despite Bundy's ongoing behavior challenges.