



WHEN GUY FRIENDS GET GIRLFRIENDS

If you're close friends with a guy, you may need a bit (or a lot!) of friendly advice when he gets a new girlfriend. Here it is... By Carla Calitz

If you're fortunate enough to have a good male friend – someone you can always count on, who'll change a plug for you or help you decode anything from a date's confusing behaviour to rugby's confusing

rules – you could be heading for disappointment when he gets a new girlfriend. Having been his go-to girl, you could suddenly feel more like his forgotten friend.

Can a platonic relationship survive the passion of a new romance? It isn't easy, but knowing how to deal with the inevitable changes could help.

FADING FRIENDSHIP

Khetiwe*, 28, a graphic designer from Johannesburg, was left hurting when her best friend, David*, 'dumped' her for his new girlfriend last year. 'I'd been close friends with David since varsity. We shared a "soul connection" and I always relied on him completely,' she says. 'We loved playing tennis and hiking together, and most Sundays he'd come to my house

and we'd read the newspapers together and have lunch. We were never physically attracted to each other but we were always physically comfortable together and affectionate with each other. If we travelled together we'd share a bed, but obviously never walk around naked.

'This all changed a year ago when he hooked up with one of his colleagues at a party. Gradually he stopped visiting me and he started calling less. I decided to give him his space, because I knew he was starting a new relationship. But I started getting annoyed when he began cancelling what plans we had made at the last minute, just so he could spend more time with Thandi*.

'I think he's not including me in his new relationship because she's so different to me, and he doesn't want me to judge her or point out their incompatibilities – which he perhaps presumes, rightly, I would do.'

Khetiwe feels nothing she does to try to sustain the friendship works. 'I've even tried guilt-tripping him into being my friend and begging! But he's gone AWOL. Now he only calls every two months or so, and I've given up pushing for more.'

THE GREEN CARD

It's normal to feel left out when a close friend transfers the bulk of his affection and attention to someone else, says Durban counselling psychologist Rakhi Beekrum. But, she adds, it's also natural for him to want to spend lots of time with his new romantic partner, especially in the early stages of their relationship.

Johannesburg psychologist Thuraisha Moodley agrees it's a tough adjustment. A platonic relationship is the love between a man and a woman based on 'the beauty of a person's character and intelligence, not on physical appearance or attraction,' she says. Obviously losing that hurts.

'Women most often choose male friends who are open, comforting and supportive, almost using them as surrogate brothers,' she says. 'When a third person infringes on this ideal scenario, many women feel their "protector" is being stolen away – and they may become jealous and territorial.'

Beekrum says the best way to conquer jealousy is to convert it into something positive. 'Jealousy is often the result of insecurities you have about yourself. So, rather concentrate on your own positive attributes and building your self-esteem.'

Work on being self-sufficient so you can be just as happy alone as in company, and aren't dependent on any friendship or relationship, she advises.

Also, ask yourself what exactly you're jealous of. 'Identifying the nature of your jealousy will help you deal better with it,' says Beekrum.

QUESTION TIME

Asking yourself a few questions will help. 'Are your feelings for your friend perhaps stronger than you thought?' asks Beekrum. 'Would you be feeling the same way if it was your best female friend and she had a new boyfriend?'

It's possible your feelings for your friend are after all not entirely platonic (in which case you'll want to read 'More than just good friends?' on page 136). If that's not the case, give some thought to whether your expectations are fair.

Be honest – how would you feel if you started dating someone and he spent more time with his best female buddy than with you?

What is your definition of friendship? They are supposed to be reciprocal relationships, Beekrum points out. 'You need to realise this, and that it means what he wants is just as important as what you want.'

You should feel happy, she says, that your friend has met someone who makes him happy – and you should be willing to give him the space to explore and grow that relationship. 'It doesn't mean that you have to cut off all contact with him – but don't be too demanding and overbearing.'

Moodley agrees that giving him a few weeks to focus on the initial phase of his relationship is necessary – and says that if he still hasn't called after that, you should initiate contact. 'But when you speak to him, use positively charged conversation, voicing how you treasure your friendship and that you've missed spending time with him, rather than accusing him of neglecting you, or getting sarcastic and needy,' she says.

Beekrum says you should also guard against sounding possessive. 'Remember, this is not a competition.' The worst thing you can do is turn this into a tug-of-war for his attention. This will place him in the horrible position of being forced to choose – and you are likely to lose. ▶

'Remember that the definition of your relationship changed when his girlfriend entered the picture – he is no longer an individual but part of a system, and you need to respect this,' says Moodley.

Of course, it also has to work for you. You have to decide what you will and won't accept in the new version of your friendship, says Beekrum. 'However, be mature and realistic about it. For example, insisting that you and your friend go out every Friday night is unlikely to be feasible – and demanding it is likely to leave you disappointed and dejected.'

MAKING FRIENDS

Giving a little thought to how you'd feel in his girlfriend's position may also help you handle this transition constructively. She's quite possibly feeling uneasy too – about you.

'His girlfriend could well feel insecure or jealous, given that her boyfriend has known you for longer than he's known her,' says Beekrum.

'She may not directly put pressure on him to stop hanging out with you but he'll be able to pick up on cues that she's not happy about it,' she says, adding that, not wanting to jeopardise a new relationship, he's likely to go along with her wishes.

'Of course, if you befriend her, it will make life a lot easier. If you're genuinely happy for your friend and supportive, his girlfriend will be accepting of you. Also, if she gets to know and like you, she's less likely to see you as a threat and probably won't mind you spending time with her boyfriend.

'You, on the other hand, may get to see what your friend finds attractive about her and may even gain a new friend. And your friend won't have to choose between you!'

But don't do this if your heart isn't in it. If you really don't like her, or think she is bad news for your friend, you'll have to take a different tack.

WHEN THREE'S A CROWD

The first decision to make is whether your friendship matters enough to you to spend at least some time with him and his girlfriend, putting your negative feelings about her aside, says Moodley.

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'If he's a good friend, and if he realises you're making the effort for him, he should appreciate that and make an effort in return to spend time with you without his girlfriend there.'

Deciding what to say if you believe she's 'bad for him' is trickier. As a friend, you should raise genuine concerns – but you will have to do it gently and diplomatically, and you will have to respect what he chooses to do with your input, says Moodley.

Once you've made your feelings known to him, it will be harder to pretend to like his girlfriend – and there is a risk that he will not want to see you at all.

Or you may feel your differences come between you, as Claire*, 31, a materials developer from Durban, experienced when Sean*, who had been her best friend for 15 years, got involved with a woman she mistrusted.

'Our friendship had always been based on complete honesty,' says Claire, 'but that changed when Sean met Gail*. In the beginning I also thought she was amazing, and it was great seeing him so happy and in love. But then I started realising she was not as sweet as she makes out. She manipulates Sean and takes advantage of him financially.'

'I've tried discussing my concerns with him, but he's so in love with Gail he defends her and lets her get away with anything.'

'Now it's got to the stage where he doesn't confide in me any more, as he feels I'll judge him or her badly. I'll always be there for him, but our friendship isn't what it used to be now that we can't be open with each other.'

ALTERED STATE

Instead of focusing on what you lost when your friend's girlfriend came into the picture, work on finding a new way of being friends with him.

If you both miss your time together – as is likely – discuss that openly and work out a solution together that neither jeopardises his new relationship nor costs you yours.

'Discuss the effort you will both put into spending time with each other,' suggests Moodley. That should sometimes be with his significant other (and yours), but it should also sometimes not include others – for everybody's sake. It's healthy to spend time away from our significant others, says Moodley, so a well-handled platonic friendship can actually be good for our romantic relationships! □

* NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

More than just good friends?

Sometimes it takes your best male buddy falling in love with someone else for you to realise you feel more than platonic love for him. But you may just be confusing initial jealousy and insecurity for romantic feelings, so you need to take a step back to figure out whether you are really in love with him, warns Johannesburg psychologist Thuraisha Moodley. 'Distance yourself for a while and try moving on with your life,' she advises. 'Evaluate if you truly love him or if you simply care about him. Put your feelings on paper – what you love about him and why; what you consider his negative and positive qualities. Ask yourself honestly what you want out of the relationship. It may help to talk to someone you trust about your feelings, just to say it out loud and make it more real.'

If you do want more, you'll have to be open with your friend to see if this is a possibility. 'You can do this in a letter, which will give him time and space to assess his feelings, or you can do it verbally. Explain how you have tried to deal with your emotions responsibly – but don't pressurise him for a response. Be prepared for the friendship as you know it to end. He may not feel the same way and then you can't continue to be friends. Can you live with this? If he doesn't feel the same way, put distance between you and him, and allow yourself to move forward. When you're at a good place in your personal life, you may try to rekindle the friendship.'

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