

Feature > Just Friends or Just Some Ish? The Trouble with Friends of the Opposite Sex

Thursday Nov 1, 2007 — By Latoya Peterson

(Originally published by Clutch Magazine)



I never wanted to smack someone so hard in my life. A few weeks ago, I was on vacation with my beau of one year. We relaxed, spent time together, and basically spent the time recuperating from one very eventful summer. One of his old friends from college lived in the general area that we visited, so we decided to tour the city with a local. We invited her to lunch. It was a college friend, right? What was the harm in that?

Three hours into the “lunch,” I was regretting my decision. This woman tested my patience in every possible way from dominating the conversation to telling inside jokes (and not bothering to explain the meaning to me) to picking out shirts for my boyfriend when we went shopping to treating him like her own personal valet. She expected him to get her jacket, help her with her bracelet and help adjust her clothing. Throughout the day, she continually tried to get my boyfriend to eat or drink after her, even going so far as to hand him her half-finished plate of food at a reception.

By the end of the evening, I was seething. And so was she. As my boyfriend and I departed for the hotel, she gave me a cold look and told him to call her later. I expressed my displeasure back at the hotel room. At first, my boyfriend didn’t get the problem. I

felt that the friend was overstepping her boundaries. He felt like she was just unaccustomed to seeing him with a girlfriend. However, the woman later revealed her own motives - she sent a series of text messages after the weekend was over saying that she felt “replaced and ignored” and asking “Is this the end of us?”

What? The fuck?

My boyfriend was at a loss as to how to respond. He wasn't expecting the tone of the text messages, or the implications.

I just shook my head.

“See, it's just as I thought,” I told him. “You gave her friend status, but girlfriend privileges. And that is where the problems start.”

The talented [Tremaine already broke down the idea behind friends of the opposite sex in our August Issue of Clutch](#), and it is a philosophy that I subscribe to - one of my best friends is a guy. As long as I can remember, I have always had one or two good male friends who acted like my surrogate brothers and sounding boards. Their perspectives on women, sex, love, and life and general are alternately fascinating and amusing. I would not trade them in for the world.

However, all male-female friendship pairings do not flow as smoothly. All too often, members of the opposite sex in friendships have two different goals. One person may just enjoy the friendship and camaraderie. The other person is another story. Some friends want to be a little more and spend the time scheming to transition from friend to lover. Other friends may want to be friends with benefits - and then they are caught up short when the tap gets cut off. Other friends may harbor those types of fantasies like in “My Best Friend's Wedding” - one day, their friend will wake up and realize that he or she is “the one.” Others may want to date around, but since their friend is technically a catch, they want to use the friendship as a placeholder for a relationship in the not so distant future.

My best male friend tends to date around quite a bit, and I noticed that his girlfriends tend to be very cautious when they first meet me. Even though I am a low threat - an attached friend from high school - I believe it is my responsibility as a friend to make sure she feels comfortable. I spend a lot of time trying to get to know his new girlfriend and put her at ease. After all, we've all been in a relationship where you have to wonder about your partner's “friend” - as a true female friend, I see no need to add to the normal relationship drama by acting shitty.

As a result, I have had some very pleasant experiences with my friends and their girls. We've been able to spend a lot more time together since we all generally get along. Still, I have noticed that my definition of a friendship is not shared by everyone. When I got home from the weekend, I immediately told my girls what went down.

One friend, Janine, said that while she understood my frustration, she understood the other girl's perspective as well. "I hate on all of D.'s girlfriends," Janine told me.

"Why?" I asked her. "Don't you want your friend to be happy?"

"Nope," she answered without hesitation. "That person is going to take my friend away from me. I'm going to hate as hard as I can and hope she leaves."

"Even if it hurts your friend's happiness?" I asked. She didn't have an answer for that. Then again, she may be coming from a different place. One of her exes cheated on her with a "female friend" - even had the girl call her up on the phone and talk to her. She didn't find out until after the breakup that friendship was another word for regular fuck buddy.

I checked in with another friend, Monique. I wondered if I was being overly optimistic about how people defined a friendship. Luckily, Monique was ready to drop some knowledge.

"Humans are possessive," she acknowledged, "but there also comes a point where you have to care more about the friendship than your own selfish feelings." Her best friend is a guy named Carlos. While Monique and Carlos have been friends for a few years, she makes sure that she treats all of his girlfriends with respect.

"I know when he's home, his general schedule, what he's doing - but if he lets me know he's with his girl, I get off the phone. I can always call him later. I don't want to disrespect their time."

Monique and I agreed that being women with close male friends has made us more cognizant of how our friendships and relationships appear to others. So while my best friend and I may be at the point where we eat off each other's plates, pick out each other's clothes, or spend a lot of time hanging out, we generally downplay those aspects when there is a new girlfriend or boyfriend in town. Once everyone is secure with each other, then we resume our normal behavior. The reasoning for downplaying the behavior is clear as day - why start extra drama when there really is none?

So back to my conundrum. My ex-boyfriend had once flown into a rage and demanded that I stop hanging out with my male friends because they made him uncomfortable. So, I caved, stopped calling them, and ended up isolated from one of my closest friends. After our breakup, my friend and I were back to normal - he said he knew it wouldn't last anyway - but I vowed to never put anyone else in that position.

Which leads to my current situation. At the time all of this was going down, I didn't verbalize any of my feelings. I didn't want to be the bitchy, possessive girlfriend - even if I was reacting to the bitchy, possessive "friend." So, I sat quietly until my boyfriend noticed my shift in mood. Should I have verbalized this discomfort? Should I have told her to stop trying to get my boyfriend to eat food she already put in her mouth, or to stop

asking him to try every single one of her drinks? What if his loyalty to his friend was stronger than his loyalty to me? What if he took her side? I chose to say nothing, thinking that if I was right - and this girl was going to try to piss on her territory - then she would do it soon.

And then came the text message.

Now, I have noticed that men are a little slower than women on picking up vibes or intentions. So, the text messages that I expected to come (I really thought she would call, but whatever) were a complete shock to him.

“I didn’t know she felt like this,” he said, almost to himself. “We never dated or anything - why would she act like a jealous ex-girlfriend?”

Because she’s a jealous friend with a motive. Luckily, I bit my tongue before that one slipped out.

Later on in the evening, after we had decided to go to bed, he received another text. “So, is this it?” My boyfriend was confused.

He wanted to ask me a question.

“As my partner, I trust you to help me make tough decisions. So I am asking you - how should I handle this?”

A million and one responses crossed my mind. I really wanted to tell him that she didn’t want a real friendship, that she was a bitch who put her own selfish desires over his relationship, and that he should never speak to her again.

But that’s not fair. And that’s not a real answer.

Maybe she did not realize how abrasively she was coming off. Maybe her dominating nature just leads her to do things like railroad conversations and force her opinions on others. Maybe she is genuinely afraid of losing her best friend and so she tried to make me uncomfortable to preserve their friendship. Or maybe she did not mean to make me uncomfortable at all - maybe she was just trying to prove to herself that nothing had changed in their friendship and just ended up overcompensating.

I took a deep breath and answered him as if he were my best friend, and not my lover.

I told him that he needs to talk to his friend and figure out where she is coming from. He needs to explain to her why some of things she did and said were inappropriate, and explain to her that a new relationship does not mean the end of a friendship.

He also needs to figure out what he wants out of a friendship, and if their goals are in alignment. Basically, they need to have an honest, open, heart-to-heart...you know, that thing that friends do when they want to work out a problem?

I have not yet heard of the outcome, but I hope they will be able to salvage the friendship.

[Ok, let me be real for a second - no I don't. Fuck that fake-ass friendship He has other female friends who don't act like bitches (as well as a large group of male friends) so I don't see how dropping this one from the roster is going to make a major difference. But again, I'm just being petty...]

With all of that said, I still do believe that male-female friendships can work. However, it requires some mindfulness from both parties involved to make sure that their friendship is a true one. Friendship is about supporting, loving, and caring for your friends like they are your family. And shouldn't we all do our best to make sure our friends are happy?