

A lick on the face would be a good starting point

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By Kathy Hedberg



UP FRONT/COMMENTARY

The marriage experts are telling us that we'd all get along better with our mates if we treated them like dogs.

While many spouses claim they've been treated like dogs for years and it's no picnic, that's not what the experts mean.

People are often more forgiving, patient and loving with the furry beasts with whom they share their household, they say, than with their mates. Pets throw up on the couch, pee in the house and steal food from the countertop. Yet while we get angry, we seldom let such misbehavior erode our adoration for the neurotic mutt.

Our mate leaves the toilet seat up, strews his underwear on the floor and belches in public and we bellow: "Hey, Hagar, you want to live like a pig, move out to the garage."

What the experts tell us is we are less likely to hold grudges against our pets, assume the best about them and greet our pets with a happy, animated hello even on bad days than we are our mates. The point is that if we can be that generous with creatures who shed, chew up our new shoes and pass gas in front of company we should at least be that charitable toward the human beings we live with.

I'm hearing this advice, but I also have to wonder if the difference between how we treat our mates and our pets has something to do with expectations.

I didn't get my dog expecting her to fulfill my need for deep conversation or heart-to-heart sharing. I don't get my hopes up that my dog will call and make reservations at a nice restaurant and show me a night on the town for my birthday. It just doesn't work that way. As long as she doesn't make a mess in the house or bite people who come to the door I'm pretty happy.

Call me demanding but I have higher hopes than that from a mate. Not only do I not want him to bite my visitors, it's nice to know he is thoughtful and will listen to me when I need to talk. And if he doesn't chew up my shoes or dig holes in the lawn that's a bonus. So the deal calls for a little higher level of interaction.

On the other hand I would agree people could learn a lot from our pets and the unconditional fondness they have for us. Everybody appreciates knowing he has someone who will love him, no matter how stupid he may behave at times. And if all it takes to make somebody feel special is to greet them at the door and lick them in the face, I say go for it.

*Hedberg may be contacted at
khedberg@camasnet.com or (208) 983-2326.*