

Who Gets Custody of the Friends?



By Kelly Rouba, GalTime.com

As the Neil Sedaka song goes, “Breaking up is hard to do.” And it gets even harder when friends take sides in the process—something Diana Young recalls all too well.

After splitting up with her longtime boyfriend RJ to pursue another relationship, Young felt abandoned by many of her friends. “RJ got all our friends in our ‘divorce’,” Young joked. But since many of their friends weren’t entirely aware of all that went on behind the scenes, Young said they were quick to take his side.

Unfortunately, this is all too common, says Stacie Ikka, a

relationship expert and founder of the dating consultancy Sitting In A Tree. “There are always casualties of war, so to speak, and the loss of friendships during a breakup is no exception.”

In Young’s case, she did manage to maintain relationships with some of the friends she had met before dating RJ. After a breakup, “(one) factor that determines the extent of the ‘fall-out’ is whether these friends were acquired by the couple together or whether the two people in the couple came into the relationship with their own friends, who then became friends with the partner,” Ikka says.

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CHOOSING SIDES

“When a couple with shared friends breaks up, it’s natural for friends to take sides. The more tumultuous or less amicable the breakup, the more divisive the ‘siding’ becomes,” Ikka explains. Typically, “it’s when breakups or divorces are contentious and one or both parties carry residual anger, resentment, hurt or disappointment that friends feel they need to pick a side. When emotions are involved, it’s very difficult for people to remain objective and fair. What happens... depends on the nature of the breakup, the two individuals involved, and how integrated their friends were in their relationship.”

If you have a friend who is going through a rough relationship ender, try not to get too involved. “Friends who take sides can add fuel to an already heated fire,” Ikka warns.

REMAINING NEUTRAL

Carlee C., of New Jersey, said she felt torn and a bit frustrated after two of her friends broke up last fall. “Amanda* asked me to stop talking to Tom* after they split up,” Carlee said. “I felt like I shouldn’t have to stop

talking to him because he was my friend before they started dating. Plus, they had only dated for a few months and since he was my boyfriend's friend, it was illogical to think I wouldn't see him again anyway. Amanda was not too happy with that decision."

As difficult as it was for Carlee to try to remain neutral, Ikka says she made the right decision.

"When friends take sides, it can further exacerbate an already emotionally trying time for the people going through the separation—especially if those friends take on any unproductive or destructive behaviors displayed by the couple. A good friend is one who offers support, an ear to listen, and a shoulder to cry on," Ikka says.

Depending on how the couple handles the split, it is possible for friends to remain neutral, Ikka adds. "There is such a thing as an amicable breakup and, although rare, in these instances friends feel less pressure...to 'pick a side.' If the separated couple is able to be amicable, or at least civil, there is less reason for the friends to feel caught up in the middle of the drama.'

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And if that isn't possible, Carolyn Kingman Javick, a married mother of two from New Jersey, says, "They should do what they learned in kindergarten—and that is to share! Otherwise, it puts friends in a very uncomfortable situation having to choose. It will pan out over time who they become closer to."

Ikka agrees. "My philosophy is that when a friendship is authentic, it stands the test of time, including breakups. And it is possible for an individual or a couple to remain friends with both parties who have gone their separate ways. It takes honest communication, a commitment by all parties and some organization and planning, but it's certainly possible."

MAKING BREAK-UPS EASIER ON FRIENDS

If you're concerned about losing friends after losing a significant other, Ikka offers a few tips to keep in mind:

Don't bash your partner in front of friends: Ikka says it is OK to talk to your friends about your experiences, feelings, doubts and fears, especially while the breakup is raw because, after all, what are friends for? However, "it would be unfair to your friends to introduce any character assassination, unnecessary negativity or untruths about your ex-partner that may influence how your friends then behave around your ex."

Stick to the facts: Although this depends on your own level of self-awareness and emotional maturity, try to "be as forthcoming and transparent as possible when discussing your breakup and/or ex."

Explain how friends can help: Tell your friends how they can best support you, Ikka says. "Sometimes, friends in this situation just don't know what to do, what's expected of them or what the 'right' thing might be. Any guidance you can provide will make the situation easier for everyone."

****Name has been changed.***