



## Is your wingman (or woman) in your way?

By Christine Champ

When Anna, a single gal from Seattle, WA set out to find a boyfriend, her friend Kim offered to act as her “wing woman” during her search for an entire year. At first, it sounded like a fabulous idea — but just one month later, Anna “fired” Kim. You see, whenever the two met a single man somewhere, Kim turned into a flirting machine: tossing her hair, giving seductive sideways glances...she stole the spotlight every time away from Anna, even going so far as to physically block her friend out of some conversations by standing in front of her! Whenever Anna asked Kim if she was interested in these men herself, she’d deny it. Instead of a boyfriend, all Anna acquired during her short-term experiment was self-doubt, frustration and confusion. As Anna describes it, all her experience managed to do “was clip my *own* wings.”

Mark Fitzgerald, 36, from Sacramento, CA recalls the time he asked his longtime friend to size up the cute retail clerk he’d been mustering up the courage to ask out. Instead of returning from the recon mission with his stamp of approval, Mark’s friend came back with the retail clerk’s phone number — and plans to date her himself.

So — (frenemies aside, obviously) — why would a friend, sister, brother or other close comrade get in your way when you’re looking for love? We’ve come up with a few reasons that take malice out of the equation entirely.

**Five reasons why good friends can sometimes make bad “wingers”...**

**1. They feel obligated to make chivalrous chit-chat on your behalf and end up shifting the target’s attention in the wrong direction.** Fitzgerald has been on

both sides of the wingman block himself; once, when a friend's flirting turned into floundering, he felt responsible for keeping the conversation going so the woman his friend was interested in wouldn't leave. Fitzgerald now realizes that commandeering the conversation might actually intimidate a tongue-tied buddy, so he makes an effort to tread carefully when helping cultivate initial small talk before excusing himself from the conversation entirely.

**2. Their own insecurity drives them to try and "win" every perceived competition... even if they lose your friendship in the process.** For some people — single or not — the subconscious urge to compete with their peers trumps everything else. It's about proving they can win the guy or girl's attention, even if they're not looking for a relationship themselves. Dr. Diana Kirschner, Ph.D., author of *Love in 90 Days*, observes that often, insecurity is what's really behind these competitors' outward show of confidence and flirting — along with the drive to demonstrate they're desirable, regardless of the cost to their friendships. Sometimes, adds Dr. Kirschner, "scarcity consciousness" can also make people worry "there's not enough to go around" when it comes to finding potential dates.

**3. They're addicted to being in the social spotlight.** Ron Geraci, author of *The Bachelor Chronicles*, notes that some people simply "cannot stand the fact that someone else is getting attention." But, adds Geraci, don't condemn these attention hogs *too* harshly; basking in the romantic limelight gives a "shot of adrenaline to their ego" that boosts their own low self-confidence.

**4. Some people have trouble choosing their own romantic partners, so they aren't helpful in scoping prospects for you, either.** A recent University of Indiana study suggests that people note the preferences of others — regardless of whether they're friends or strangers — to make their own search for a mate more efficient. This stems from the idea that "who others like might be a good choice for ourselves," according to Skyler Place, a researcher in UI's Department of Psychological and Brain Studies who coauthored the study, along with Peter M. Todd, a professor in the university's Cognitive Science Program. Frank Kermit, relationship coach and author of *From Loser to Seducer*, cites another reason: sometimes people don't trust their own judgment when it comes to finding someone else attractive.

**5. You're hunting for a date, but your friend's a natural-born poacher.** University of Texas psychology professor David Buss coined the term "mate poaching" to refer to people's tendencies to try to steal romantic partners away from others. Geraci believes the principle applies equally to singles on the prowl, saying that "it's a convenient way to find a mate because someone else is doing a lot of the work." Singles should use caution when choosing wingmen or wing women; watch out for those friends who exhibit potential poaching tendencies and avoid going out with them when you're looking for dates. After all, when you've engaged a prospect that piques your pals' interest, "it's like bringing your kill into a pack of hyenas," warns Geraci.

## **Mending a “broken wing” relationship**

Before you try to mend your relationship with a failed wingman or wing woman, make sure you’re not misreading any signals — like the silent cues that your tall, dark and handsome (or blonde and beautiful) target sends that indicate your attraction isn’t mutual after all. According to matchmaker and etiquette coach Joy Nordenstrom, the three biggest clues that your flirting is indeed being reciprocated include: direct eye contact, mirroring (i.e., your crush copies your body movements) and leaning in to get physically closer to you.

If it’s still obvious your friend’s crossed a boundary, here’s one solution: exclude him or her from social situations where you might connect with someone romantically. Advises Tina B. Tessina, Ph.D., author of *The Unofficial Guide to Dating Again*: “that’s how you teach people that they’re socially unacceptable,” though she considers an intervention to be worthwhile if you believe your friend’s bad behavior is unintentional. If you do decide to stage an impromptu bathroom meeting to interrupt the offender’s advances, Kirschner recommends keeping it positive — like asking your cousin to tell the ladies about your smooth salsa moves, then adding that you’ll be ready to take the lead on the dance floor right after the next song begins.

## **Establishing the rules of engagement**

If you really want your wingman or wing woman to “rise to the occasion,” says Nordenstrom, establish some rules of engagement first so that it’s clear “you’re playing on the same team.” Start by clarifying your goals for the outing, and have your friend do the same. Agree to put each other in the best light possible throughout the evening — from subtly pointing out the broccoli in your friend’s teeth to bragging about his or her tennis skills. Think of flattering stories to share about your friend or make a mental note of his or her most attractive features before you go out together. Mutually agree on a code word (like “yesterday”) to indicate you’re interested in someone so both of you don’t end up inadvertently flirting with the same person. If you end up eyeing the same hottie without realizing it, take a beat by yourselves to discuss and compare your desire levels on a scale of 1 to 10. A good wingman or wing woman knows when “to step back,” but as Tessina also cautions, “every person you meet isn’t Mr. [or Ms.] right” — so choose your showdowns wisely!

## **Flying solo: is it an option?**

The insights we’ve shared here should help you choose a wingman or wing woman that brings out the absolute best in you — because, according to Nordenstrom, when your romantic radar reacts, you often “have a very short window to make a

strong impression.” Or, try flying solo — Kirschner believes you may unleash your “inner charisma” when you’re forced to conquer your shyness and/or social anxiety. If you attempt a solo recon mission for scouting dating prospects and spend all night cowering next to the bathroom instead, finding a friendly co-pilot you can rely on is definitely the better way to fly!

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