

Loving Geeks

The Unsung Heroes of Romance

geek (gēk) *noun. slang.* An expert or enthusiast in an analytical field such as technology. Once used as an insult, it is now considered a badge of honor among technical people.

A geek-lover's perspective

I never thought I'd love a geek, never in a million years.

I had absorbed the idea that desirable men hit home runs or wrote love songs. I believed that there was nothing sexy about solving an equation or writing code. So when I found myself romantically involved with a geek, I had to revise all sorts of prejudices about what sexy is. In fact, I unexpectedly found myself immersed in the love I'd always wanted—sincere, generous, resilient and satisfying.

I am lucky. My guy is not just any geek. He wrote the book on the subject. (*Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology* by Paul Glen – so well written, I went out on a second date with him!). Paul has helped me understand what makes geeks tick. The more I learned about geeks and geek culture, the more I realized that the very geekiness that I had so scorned was exactly what was making me happy.

Dozens of interviews

So I set out to investigate this phenomenon, and after interviewing scores of people who love analytical types, I discovered

several frequently-mentioned advantages to loving geeks.

What makes geeks such great mates? Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I'd like to count the ways. And, in order to please my geek readers, I'm going to numerically categorize each point.

What follows are the 10 reasons that geeks make the best mates.

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10 Reasons Geeks Make the Best Mates

1. Rational → Solid commitments
2. Logical → Steady and stable
3. Devoted to truth → Honest
4. Problem-solving → Competence
5. Sensitive → Kind
6. Independent tastes → You're beautiful
7. Curious → Interesting
8. Attentive → Supportive
9. Intellectual ego → Loyal
10. Experimental → Great in bed



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1. Geeks make rational decisions, which makes their commitments rock solid.

Don't think that sounds romantic? Think again. Commitment is a fundamental condition for intimacy and lasting love. If you think that love is that yearning clutching panicky desire, then you have not been burned by it. I have written and received love poetry, whispered desperate desire in stolen moments and been serenaded with giddy love songs on subway platforms. And this is terribly exciting *at the moment*. It's an expression of real deep burning emotions that are occurring at that specific point in time.

But bubbly feelings are fleeting things, and often new circumstances give rise to new feelings. We don't like to think about this, because passion is so delicious, but the sad truth is, intense emotions are temporary.

Now, geeks put little stock in feelings, and less in talking about them. So when he declares his love, you can be sure it is based on a rational well-thought-out commitment to you, your character, your track record of compatibility, the risk of your leaving them, the ratio of positive interaction to negative interaction, a forecast of how those will trend in the future, and lastly, how you make him feel.

This makes for some pretty rock solid commitment--the kind that may take years to fully appreciate. After almost a year of dating, I was trying to get my uber-geek boyfriend to say out loud that he loved me. To that he stated, "I'm here, aren't I?" At first that seemed like a cop out, like the most unromantic thing I'd ever heard. For a long time I teased him about it as a sorry excuse for affection. But now, basking the glow of years of committed, caring, supportive experiences, that statement, "I'm here, aren't?" seems like a sweet, frank, tender expression of love.

2. Geeks are logical, not sway to their emotion, which makes them steady and stable.

The geek preference for clear reasoning and logical thought has pros and cons. The downside is that they never say explicitly say their feelings. The upside is that he's not likely to be the source of escalating screaming matches. If you can wean yourself off the drama that you thought was the substance of romance, you'll discover that your geek can show up for some very deep, productive and supportive conversation.

And sometimes the most eloquent statements don't use words at all. My friend Lorraine tells the story of how one day, during a period when she felt overwhelmed with serious issues cropping up around work, family and friends, she was about to load up her car to make a dreaded but necessary visit to her mother. Her live-in boyfriend, Steve, was moping and sulking and, in true geek fashion, not being direct about how he felt abandoned by her impending trip. She lost her cool and exploded at him. "What is your problem?!?" He remained silent. She pressed on. "Can't you see that I am at my wits end? I'm trying to hold everything together, and I'm really disappointed that you don't recognize that." Steve didn't say a word. He seemed to be considering what she had said. He calmly picked up her bags and carried them downstairs to load the car. Before she got in the car, he hugged her and kissed her, and quietly said, "I'm sorry." Lorraine said that with that gesture, it was done. Over. He had wanted to comfort her and apologize, and he did. They never had to discuss it again.

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3. Geeks are devoted to truth, which makes them honest and trustworthy.

One of the greatest aspects of geeks is their commitment to truth. Geeks prefer objective reality over subjective experience. In fact, being connected to objective reality makes them feel right, unassailable, and safe. So for them lying is very grave sin.

That means that you'd better be on your toes about what you say. You can trigger a geek's discomfort by exaggerating or using hyperbole. You can evoke scorn if you assert that something is true when you don't absolutely know that it's true. And woe unto to her who gets caught in an outright lie by a geek, for she will be harshly judged.

But the good part is when you've got a guy who is constitutionally incapable of lying, you can be pretty sure that he won't cheat on you, and if he does, he will probably tell you right away.

The downside to this one is that geeks really, really, really want to be right. And sometimes it can be maddening, but it helps to know that the need to be right comes in part from their abiding commitment to truth.

Just make sure not to ask him if that dress makes you look fat.

4. Geeks are problem-solvers, which makes them competent in at least a few areas of their lives.

Because geeks gravitate toward math and have been trained in problem solving, with its very structured approach (e.g., assumptions, constraints, rules, problem statements, etc.), they have the superpowers of patience and persistence when tackling certain challenges. Which problems they love will vary from geek to geek. Some will cook amazing things by setting

up specific constraints (e.g., must maximize protein content of each dish). Some will jump at the chance to fix household problems (e.g., "Toilet leaking? I'm on it! Where's my double-action titanium wrench"). Some will plan the most amazing travel adventure (e.g., this itinerary has been optimized for maximum cultural exposure, and secondarily for gas mileage!).

Almost all of this accomplishment happens within the structure of the problem solution framework. And, if you didn't know already, you can use this structure to get what you want. If your man is maximizing activity on every vacation, and you are run ragged trying to keep up with his plans, you can change the constraints on the problem he's solving. Challenge him to maximize activities while allowing breakfast-in-bed and two hours at the pool. Chances are, he'll be engaged by such a specific task, and gladly factor in those variables. Just make sure you specify two contiguous hours at the pool or you might get eight fifteen minutes intervals scattered throughout the day. If you had tried to discuss the pros and cons of taking breaks while on vacation he would have argued you to death. But tantalize him with some gnarly new variables and he might be so enamored with solving the problem that he forgets to argue the point!

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5. Geeks feel things very deeply (though they don't often show it), which makes them vulnerable and, therefore, kind.

Geeks are easy to hurt. They are very vulnerable creatures, which, in my opinion is why they have created such formidable intellects. It helps them deal with things like baffling social situations, and tender-hearted attachments. A geek is much more likely to try to understand his emotional response rather than feel it, because feeling it, for most

geeks, is very, very intense. The result of this is that they often develop a deep and abiding kindness, born out of an empathy they might never admit they have.

The fly in this ointment is that their kindness is often trumped by their commitment to truth (see reason #3). Geeks are known to be blunt and often say hurtful things. But this is absolutely not because they intend to cause pain. It is because the principle of truth-telling is at stake. And truth, along with its handmaiden, reason, is more important than feelings.

My friend's husband is a financial geek, a bank vice president and a devoted stoic. He likes an orderly house filled with wonderfully preserved things in pristine condition. Once when he was visiting me, he spilled Diet Coke on my white chair. The look of raw horror and pain that crossed his face took my breath away. He was ripped apart inside because he thought he had harmed something that was very important to me (it wasn't a big deal, those chair covers were washable). His expression of deeply felt pain, his concern for having harmed me, will be forever etched in my memory.

6. Geeks have independent tastes, which makes them free to think you are the most beautiful woman in the world.

Geeks have the endearing tendency to pursue their interests with single-minded devotion. This is a very nice thing when what they are devoted to is you. This advantage was succinctly put by one woman I interviewed. She said of her geek, "He's non-judgmental about my figure flaws."

If he experiences you as his very own paragon of womanly beauty, he will not be swayed by media images that would have him believe otherwise.

I asked my geek why he thought that was. He suggested that geeks are fiercely independent thinkers, reflexively suspicious of unquestioningly accepted social norms. And since beauty is subjective, not objectively determined, they define their own standards. He also thought that since it is subjective, they likely discount its importance and focus on things more important to them, like intelligence.

If you let your geek's unwavering appreciation for you really sink in, eventually, you won't even experience yourself as having flaws.

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7. Geeks are curious, which makes them interesting.

People who love geeks almost always say that what they appreciate most about their mate is their unique, often peculiar interests. One woman I interviewed said that “He devotes all his spare time to learning web design and can talk endlessly about the singularity, the

merging of humans and machine. On our first outing we went to the Reuben H. Fleet Space Theater and Science Center and I was totally turned on hearing him describe everything he knew about human cell development.”

And their perpetual curiosity means that as long as you don’t tire of talking about their driving passions, you’ll always have something new to learn about or debate. With a geek you are likely to enjoy a constant stream of thoughts and ideas around an eclectic array of interests: human cell development, sous vide cooking, nuanced analysis of new video game releases, evaluative comparisons between musical artists. These are not the kind of men who passively consume information. They engage in, grapple with, and challenge the information in their lives.

If they love sports, they are most likely informed about all aspects of players, salaries, and performance statistics. If they love sports, the real thing probably isn’t enough. During the off season, they’ll focus on fantasy sports leagues. Luckily, they are not likely to be the beer-guzzling belly-painting, jump-out-of-their-seats -with-fist-raised fans that you’re embarrassed to be associated with.

But here’s a word to the wise: you might want to figure out what topics are interesting to both of you, and not try to engage on things that don’t float your boat. You may also have to be strategic in how you engage with their interests, so as not to be overwhelmed with details that make your mind go numb.

My experience with my geek’s fervent interest in airplanes, airports and pilots is that we’re both better off if I tune out most of the time. A lot of his interest is in the encyclopedic facts about airplanes, and, frankly, I just don’t care. But every now and then, I’ll ask about the meaning of something. “What’s so special about the

Sonex Waix?” I’ll be informed and entertained to learn that it’s the least expensive home-built motorglider kit, and there are probably fewer than 10 completed and flying in the world. Sometimes just the tip of the iceberg of what he knows is enough for us to connect over his interest du jour.



Photo credit: Sonex Aircraft

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8. Geeks are attentive to what matters, which makes them incredibly supportive.

Most every geek has a bit of the absent-minded-professor in him. They focus on some things and can be rather oblivious to others. Typically people who love geeks describe them as very good listeners, which make sense, since they usually want to accurately understand the information you are communicating.

You can expect a geek to consider what you say seriously and ask clarifying questions. One woman I interviewed said, "He shows me that he loves me by actually listening to me when I talk about things I am passionate about, he takes an interest in those things, and emails me articles and news in those area."

But don't expect a geek to instinctively understand all the subtle implications of what you are saying by picking up non-verbal or contextual cues. They are usually not often good at reading between the lines. One woman I interviewed found her relationship improved dramatically when she finally understood this.

[I] figured out that I need to tell him exactly what I need in order to feel better, and he'll do it/say it. Although it isn't ideal, I would much rather say, "I feel sad, will you please hold me?" and then have him reach out and hold me, pet me, and be sweet to me.

You also shouldn't expect them to comment on what they don't think is important. Another woman I interviewed transformed her understanding of her husband with a small exchange.

I was getting all dolled up to go out to dressy event. I had done my hair and makeup just so. I was wearing something new and very flattering. I liked what I saw in the mirror, and wondered what my husband thought, and if he even noticed. I asked him, "Do you even notice when I get all dressed up?" And he thought a moment, and then thought a moment more, and finally he said, "I notice when you are happy." My heart melted. I felt so loved and cared for. I never again expected him to comment on my looks.

9. Geeks' egos are not tied up in being ladies men, which makes them loyal.

Geeks can be known for having really big egos, but this is more often than not based on their intellect, knowledge, achievements, and toys. His is much more likely to puff up his chest showing off his latest and greatest mobile technology than his latest romantic conquest.

You are more likely to lose him to a new interest than another mate. For me, I've had to learn to rein in my jealousy of his airplane, which he truly loves and wants to spend as much time with as he can. Of course, if he ever got his hands on a Sonex Waix, I just might be toast.

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10. Geeks embrace experimentation and optimization, which makes them great in bed.

It's rather counterintuitive, but many of the stereotypical things that we think of as nerdy and unappealing actually make geeks great lovers. Here are some of the characteristics highlighted by women who answered my survey.

Attention to detail

"He's by far the best lover of the dozen I've had. What makes him so much better is that he picks up on very subtle cues that other guys have rarely or never picked up on. I am sure his ability to notice those cues is related to geeks' general ability to focus on details."

Research-oriented

"His geekiness contributes to him exploring the vast amount of knowledge about sex available in scientific literature and on the net, and putting it into practice with me, eager about trying out new things and approaches. He has an explanation for almost everything... like a living encyclopedia :) He is a wonderful lover, very passionate and caring."

Experimental

"I think perhaps his intellectual side makes him approach pleasing me from almost a scientific way, willing to try different techniques to see what works best."

Curiosity

"He has no inhibitions, only frank and fun curiosity. He never says no to me, but he comes up with some really interesting ideas!"

Factual

"His approach lets us talk afterwards without embarrassment or recriminations about what worked, what didn't, and what we could try next, which has not been true with other partners."

Belief in progress

"He thinks than anything can be made better than it is, even our sex life. So even though it's pretty great, there's always something a little bit new to try."

Trustworthiness

"Because I truly believe that he would never harm me, I can really let go with him. I feel so safe with him, and I'm experiencing orgasms like I never have before, and after a couple years, they just keep getting better."

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For even better relationships with our geeks ...

All this wonderful stuff doesn't mean that it's always easy being in a relationship with a geek, and I explore the challenges and how to overcome them in my forthcoming book "Loving Geeks."

One of the most important things we can do to have fulfilling relationships with geeks is to adjust to how they handle emotions. Geeks have rich emotional lives, but often don't feel comfortable exploring or expressing what they experience on the inside. If you crave a shared subjective experience, as most of us non-geeks do, you will have to look for outward indications of their inner lives. To love a geek is to accept that they let their actions speak for them, and you need to become adept at looking for signs of love in non-verbal gestures.

Sometimes, when I am feeling saucy, I'll make my geek sweetheart confirm my assumptions. When he stays up all night re-imaging my hard drive (or something mysterious like that) I'll say, "You did that because you love me, right?" He'll shyly concur. And, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I'll know to the depth and breadth of my soul that I'm deeply loved by a wonderful man.

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About Leading Geeks

The Leading Geeks Company helps organizations unlock the value of technical people by overcoming the disconnect between technical and non-technical groups. That includes:

- Launching project teams on a path to success
- Redirecting troubled projects, with attention to repairing critical relationships
- Improving technical leadership, recognizing that leading geeks is different
- Transforming the tricky relationships between technology and business groups

Since 1999, we have empowered leaders to leverage technology and the people who provide it. Today, Paul Glen and Maria McManus, the founding partners, bring a unique perspective to improving collaboration across disparate organizational cultures. They leverage their decades of experience from opposite sides of the chasm to uncover overlooked ways of getting along, thereby enhancing organizational productivity.



Maria McManus, formerly VP of Product at iVillage and Director of User Experience at Disney, is dedicated to maximizing invest-

ments in technology through good geek/non-geek relationships. In addition to helping businesses collaborate productively with tech people, she is writing a book called "Loving Geeks: A Nongeek's Guide to Finding True Love with the Best People on Earth."



Paul Glen is the award-winning author of *Leading Geeks* and long-time columnist for *Computerworld*. He has worked with geeks and

the people who lead them for more than 20 years.