



THE HEALTHY RIPPLE EFFECT, EXPLAINED

“Getting a dog helped me overcome my social anxiety—and find the love of my life.”

By Sophia Solomon, as told to Jane Bianchi

- ✦ I used to get nervous in front of new people. Even when it was my turn to order food at restaurants,

I'd clam up and completely forget how to articulate the words. When I started my residency in the summer of 2015—I'm now a podiatrist and foot surgeon at Manhattan Specialty Care in New York City—I'd get anxious talking to a higher-up at the hospital or giving a presentation. I felt lonely and down all the time due to my reaction to social sitches.

That changed in the fall of 2016 when I found Berger, my 75-pound

Bernedoodle. I had planned for a while on getting a dog, in the hope that a companion might force me out of seclusion and encourage me to meet new people. I'll never forget seeing Berger through the pet store window: a huge ball of fluff. He was so cute, and I couldn't resist him. I took him home that day.

Life with Berger forced me out of my comfort zone. On walks, we couldn't make it one block without someone wanting to pet him or ask a question about him. Those neighborhood interactions helped me get over my fear of chatting with strang-

ers, and I started socializing with other pet owners at the dog park too.

Another bonus, one I never expected? Berger connected me to my soul mate. A little background: In 2017, when I was 29, I met a guy at a bar. His name was Tyler and he was a phys ed teacher. We ended up going on a date to the beach a few days after meeting. On the drive there, with Berger in tow, Tyler bonded effortlessly with my beloved pup. Berger did something I'd never seen him do before: He crawled into the guy's lap in the passenger seat and parked his furry body there for the entire ride, which signaled to me that Tyler had earned Berger's stamp of approval.

Though we shared a fun date, I declined Tyler's offer for a second one (I was job hunting and hung up on someone else at the time). A couple of weeks later, Tyler texted me a picture of him with Berger at the beach, but it wasn't from our beach day. By complete coincidence, Tyler ran into my mom and sister with Berger on the beach—and Berger ran to greet him with jumps and barks. Tyler spent a few hours with my family that day. And when I saw my mom later, she said, "You're an idiot if you don't marry this guy."

I ended up giving Tyler another shot. Within a few weeks, we were a couple and in love. Looking back, I see Berger recognized all of Tyler's best qualities—he's kind, gentle, and giving—long before I realized them.

Before these two goofballs entered my life, I spent chunks of time alone in my house in an effort to avoid interacting with anyone. Now, I'm constantly talking with Tyler or playing with Berger, letting my guard down. Having them as my support squad allowed me to emerge from my shadow of social anxiety. And they're not going anywhere: Tyler proposed in March in Costa Rica, and we're getting married next year. Berger, clad in a doggie dress shirt, will be the ring bearer.