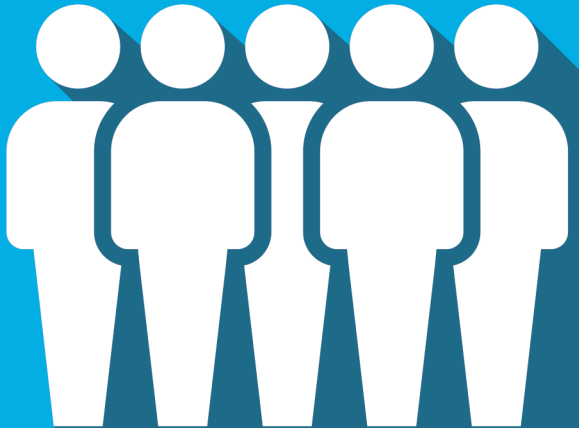




# ROOMMATE CONNECTIONS

*Developing a Positive Relationship*



# PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION

Living with someone requires a balance of mutual respect, cooperation and consideration. The best way to create this atmosphere? Proactive communication, which is the essential foundation for successful roommate relationships—really, for *all* relationships!

## Topics to Talk About

**Get to know each other** to cut down on the feeling of living with a “stranger.” Where are each of you from? What do you each like to do for fun?

- If you already know each other, then get reacquainted. Catch up on what classes you’ll be taking, activities you’ll be involved with and jobs you might be starting.



**Discuss right away what each of you wants and needs** in order to live together peacefully—don’t wait until a problem comes up. Some examples: How do each of you like to study; with background music/TV on or in total silence? What about your sleeping styles; do you need the room as dark as possible or is some light OK? What sets you off?

- By the way, this step is crucial with any roommate, whether you’ve just met or are friends who’ve known each other for years. In fact, many students find living with a friend can be tough at times—they can get nervous speaking up about issues for fear of losing a close friend. Ironing out these details at the start can help you avoid or minimize many problems.

**Tip:** It’s a good idea to write down what each of you needs and agrees to. This is known as a Roommate Agreement. You can refer to it later if you ever need to remind yourselves of what was said.

## *You Can Be Friendly without Being Friends*

While it can be great when roommates are also friends, don’t *expect* that to happen. The main goals are for you to live together peacefully and respect one another. Ultimately, that’s what makes a true roommate relationship work

# ROOM ARRANGEMENTS

Room organization and cleanliness issues can cause roommate problems. So, after moving in, discuss how to meet the needs of everyone living in the space. Topics to consider include...

- How will we handle keeping shared items like fridges and microwaves clean?
- Do we want to rotate throwing out trash, or will we each handle our own?
- How often will we each shower? What about doing our laundry?
  - It might sound odd, but hygiene is actually a very common cause of roommate conflicts. If someone rarely showers, washes their clothes or changes their bedding, a roommate is...let's say, *aware* of unpleasant odors! It can feel awkward to say anything when it happens, so talk about a system now and agree that each of you will be receptive if it needs to be brought up (kindly) again.

## *Beware of Hazards*

You have a right to a clean room, and a responsibility to maintain its cleanliness. Letting things slide can lead to problems affecting everyone in—and around—your room, such as...

- Insects like ants, flies or roaches, which are drawn to exposed food and garbage
- Fire hazards from excess trash like papers and pizza boxes near heat sources
- Clutter that makes it hard to evacuate quickly in emergencies or blocks emergency personnel

## *Anonymous Complaints*

*"My roommate leaves hair dye stains all over our bathroom. Can you tell her to clean them? But don't say I told you."*

Residence life staffers hear requests like this one often, but roommate conflicts can rarely be handled this way. Think about it: how would the staff know about this unless you came to them? Exactly—and your roommate will figure that out, too. So, keep it straightforward and go to your roommate first. If things don't go well, you can let your roommate know that you'd like to go to housing staff for help.

# CONSIDERATION

Realizing how each of you affects the other is another key to successful roommate relationships, as long as the information is used for good.

## Don't Assume

**Using Supplies.** Before assuming your roommate's cool with you using her shampoo every day, talk upfront. Some roommates prefer to provide their own supplies and food. Others share after deciding who buys what.

- Have a plan for special items. Let's say you both pitch in for a TV for the room—what happens at the end of the year? Will you sell it and split the money?

**Borrowing Belongings.** If you'd like to use or borrow something belonging to your roommate, *always* ask first. If your roommate readily agrees, return or replace it right away, or pay for it—whatever makes sense. So, for example, after she lets you borrow her hair dryer, put it back where it belongs. Or if you finish his cereal with his OK, buy more after class.

- Don't take it personally if your roommate is uncomfortable sharing. An item may be sentimental, or there might be financial constraints.

## Staying Safe

Safety is a crucial issue and roommates' actions can greatly affect one another. For instance:

- ▶ Is it wise to have someone stay over who you just met?
- ▶ Is not locking the room door ever OK?

In a word, no. These aren't areas on which you and your roommate(s) can agree to go against institutional policies and common sense. Keeping yourselves safe and your room secure is non-negotiable and should *never* be compromised. Don't ever put yourselves at risk of vandalism, theft or assault.

**Handling Loss or Breakage.** If you accidentally lose or break something of your roommate's, apologize and replace or pay for it right away.

**Establishing Comfort Levels.** If a roommate wants something in the room that makes you uncomfortable, say so. And if your roommate wants a prohibited item, that's unfair to you since both of you can be held responsible for the policy violation. This is another situation where you need to speak up before something dangerous or damaging can happen.. If you need help, speak to housing staff.



# INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Connecting successfully with your roommate(s) involves a degree of sensitivity.

## Diversity

You might be living with someone very different from you. This can be a great opportunity to learn more about another religion or to educate a roommate about your culture. Respect each other's needs. For example: perhaps your international roommate has to call home late at night because of the time difference between countries, or maybe you want 15 minutes of quiet prayer time in your room daily. Discuss how to meet these needs in a way that works for everyone.

## Look Out For Each Other

Stress from classes, personal circumstances and more can trigger depression or anxiety. Signs include...

- Sudden changes in appearance or behavior (like uncombed hair or angry outbursts)
- Significant weight increase/decrease
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Missing class or work often
- Preoccupation with death or suicide
- Withdrawing from people and activities previously enjoyed



If you experience these symptoms, see housing or counseling staff immediately to get caring help and support. If your roommate seems to be struggling with these problems, you can talk about it initially, but don't handle the situation on your own. Instead, encourage getting help from staff who are professionally trained to address serious issues like these.

*If your roommate refuses help and you're concerned about self-harm or harm to others, tell staff right away. It's never about "getting someone in trouble" – it's about wisely and compassionately getting someone the help needed.*

## Guests

A guest is *anyone* not assigned to your room—including classmates. Follow housing policies and check with your roommate(s) before having guests. Visitors are a privilege, not a right—the only people with rights to your room are you and your roommate(s)! Also...

- ▶ Don't leave your guest in your room when you're not there.
- ▶ Give as much advance notice about an overnight guest as possible. Don't put your roommate on the spot at 2 a.m., asking if your friend can stay.
- ▶ If you want alone time, discuss what can be arranged to have the room to yourself occasionally.

# SCHEDULES

Even the most compatible roommates often struggle with schedule challenges.

**Perhaps your schedules are drastically different.** Let's say you're on an athletic team with 6 a.m. practices, but your roommate works nights and gets up much later than you. How can you get ready in the morning with minimal disruption to your roommate? How can your roommate come home late without disturbing you? Talk about what you each need before a problem can arise. For instance, maybe your roommate can use headphones at night while watching Netflix, and perhaps you can eat breakfast in the dining hall instead of in your room to minimize noise on practice mornings.

**Surprisingly, you can actually have similar schedules and still have conflicts!** For example, if two of you need to use your room's shower at the same time, you don't want to deal with figuring out who goes first each morning. Have a plan beforehand—and if you need to make a change occasionally, explain why. Don't just jump in!

## *Antisocial Media*

*"That moment when your roommate sets his phone for 6 a.m. but keeps hitting snooze..."*

Sure, memes can be funny, but think twice before you vent with something like this online. To maintain a good rapport, talk directly to your roommate instead.

## *Scenario*

**You're rushing for your 8 a.m. class and realize your phone battery is dying. You can't find your charger, but your roommate has the same kind on her desk. She's still sleeping and you feel bad waking her. Is it OK to borrow her charger to use in class?**

Being in a rush doesn't justify borrowing something without asking. When your roommate is asleep or isn't around, or if your roommate hesitates and acts uncomfortable with what you're asking, handle the situation as you would if you lived alone. In this scenario, what are other options you can think of?



# RESOLVING CONFLICTS

Don't be discouraged if a roommate is doing something that bothers you, or vice versa. This is inevitable at some point in *any* shared living arrangement. Make note of these Do's and Don'ts to address situations most effectively...

- DO:**
- \* Bring concerns up right away
  - \* Use “I” statements to describe how you feel
  - \* Avoid generalizing behaviors unfairly with words like “always” or “never”
  - \* Be specific so your roommate understands *exactly* what you need

- DON'T:**
- \* Drop hints; many people won't pick up on them and you'll get frustrated
  - \* Resort to social media or text message; be discreet yet direct
  - \* Delay bringing up an important issue; you'll only get more upset
  - \* Bring up a long list of issues all at once and overwhelm your roommate

## Sample Statements

### DO say:

- “I have a hard time sleeping with bright lights on. Could you please use your desk lamp after midnight instead of the ceiling light?” Very clear and fair.

### DON'T say:

- “Ugh, I'm so tired, I haven't been able to get a good night's sleep all week.” Too vague.
- “You're *always* so rude! You don't even care that I haven't slept well for a week!” Too heated. Plus, it sounds like other issues besides sleep have been bothering you. Bottling things up until you explode won't help anyone.

## Can't I Just Switch Rooms?

Seems like the obvious solution, doesn't it? Not so fast. Not only can space on campus be limited, but roommate conflicts will follow you if you're not willing to anticipate them beforehand and resolve them once they happen. Many students are surprised when room changes don't solve their problems—sometimes, things are worse! Try working it out with your current roommate(s). If there's no improvement, speak with residence life staff for assistance.

# SPECIAL BONDS

If you're lucky, some of your roommates could end up becoming important in your life, sharing key moments with you...

- "I...lived on campus to get the college experience. I had five roommates and I still keep in touch with them while I'm on the road."  
—*Actress Tatyana Ali*
- "When I started Facebook from my dorm room in 2004, the idea that my roommates and I talked about all the time was a world that was more open."  
—*Technology Entrepreneur Mark Zuckerberg*
- "I remember when I was in college, I used to watch Julia Child's cooking show during dinner and joke with my roommates about becoming a TV chef."  
—*TV Chef Martin Yan*
- "My wife and I met when each of us was dragged to a party we didn't want to go to by friends...my roommate insisted I get out of the house and be around people. God love our friends; we've been together 20 years now!"  
—*Actor Michael Chiklis*

## *The Golden Rule or the Law of Reciprocity*

Basically, this is the idea that you should treat others the way you'd want to be treated. It's a good principle to guide you in connecting with your roommate—and with pretty much anyone!

## *Famous Former College Roommates*

- Actors Robin Williams and Christopher Reeve (Juilliard)
- Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore and actors Tommy Lee Jones and John Lithgow (Harvard)
- Actors Stanley Tucci and Ving Rhames (SUNY Purchase)
- Filmmaker Wes Anderson and actor Owen Wilson (University of Texas at Austin)
- Actresses Parker Posey and Sherry Stringfield (SUNY Purchase)
- Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and actress Connie Britton (Dartmouth)

**Sources:** *Mental Floss*, 1/13/09; *Mother Nature Network*, 11/15/13

