



Roommates: Talks Will Help You Avoid Troubles

[By Mahsa Khalilifar]

It's back to school once again, except this time you're older and more independent...well, presumably. However, your budget for law school is probably not as fortunate, meaning it's time to snatch up one of the first cheap but decent spaces you come across. Usually this means having a roommate or maybe (gasp) even two.

Oh, the joys of roommate living. While a lot of people would rather live alone, due to financial reasons, many end up opting for this sort of living situation, especially earlier in life. Many times, though, people jump into living situations without realizing the consequences and repercussions.

When Ph.D. student Jennifer Eichenberg decided to take an assignment in one of her classes to the next level, she chose to look at her own peers on campus. She found herself coming across a general need on campus for roommate living advice and training for students.

"The dynamic of this generation is very different from the previous generation," she says of students learning the tools of living communication. "I talked to people, and they convinced me that [roommate troubles] are not an isolated problem."

Growing up, Eichenberg, like a lot of her peers, had to share a room with a sibling. As time has gone by, however, this has become a more unlikely occurrence for children, she says. Although she grew up to be independent as an adult, students are becoming more independent at a younger stage, thus making it difficult to share living quarters with a stranger at a later stage.

After talking to a community director from Wayne State University in Detroit, MI, and looking at some dorm statistics, Eichenberg realized that people living with roommates weren't feeling so harmonious in their living arrangements.

"The biggest problem that I hear consistently is having the 'You're really clean' or 'You're a slob' disagreement," Eichenberg says.

She explains that a way to solve this sort of problem is to talk about the cleanliness issue from the beginning.

"Start a dialogue and take responsibility for what you need to do," Eichenberg, who has a master's degree in communications, says. She adds that talking face to face will ultimately set the tone for how you need to address issues, stating that learning how clean a person is versus how messy he or she is needs to be resolved during a conversation early on.

"The discussion should be at the beginning," she says. Even if you wait longer to discuss the issue, you should make an effort to do it as soon as possible. Eichenberg explains that roommates tend to resent each other if such issues are not discussed.

"Make a commitment to start on a clean sheet," she says. "Forget about the past and say, 'From this point forward, I'm willing to forget everything that got us at this point so that we can move forward.'"

An open dialogue should also be relied on when it comes to significant others, says Eichenberg. You should establish a guest policy plan and stick to it; then go from there.

"You have to be honest to yourself, and you [need] to speak up" if something is a nuisance to you, says Eichenberg. "Often it's one or two questions that will get the dialogue started."

Establishing a way to approach the person if a problem arises is equally important.

"An important thing at the beginning or during the re-tweaking [process of] the relationship is asking, 'How will we handle the situation if things fall apart?'" says Eichenberg. Also, she recommends sticking to talking in person rather than only writing on a whiteboard, because the latter can only "perpetuate the problem."

Asking the right questions and establishing concrete guidelines can open the doors to communication with a roommate. If you start using your space as only dressing and sleeping quarters, then you will become frustrated by the situation. This will cause more stress, according to Eichenberg, who says that you will begin to resent your roommate as a result.

Ultimately, talking to your roommate(s) is your best bet, says Eichenberg, who plans to launch her training program for college students in the fall. For now, she advises students to speak out about their issues.

"Communication is dynamic, and you can renegotiate," Eichenberg says.

"Relationships change, and asking questions is important. It's a cliché, but communication is the key."

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