

# Frequently Asked Questions About Roommate Relationships

## I've never shared a room with anyone before. What can I expect from my new roommate?

Living with a roommate is obviously different from living with your family. You're making a transition from surroundings and people familiar to you to sharing a very small space with a total stranger. Your new roommate may come from a totally different background, and have personal habits that are very different from your own. It can be a little intimidating, but keep in mind that the experience will help you build interpersonal skills you will use long after you've turned your key in to ResLife.

You and your roommate can be very different and still have a successful roommate relationship. It is important that maintain realistic expectations so you are not disappointed. Don't expect your roommate to be just like you or your friends from home. It's normal to encounter some problems. After all, it's unrealistic to expect two strangers who share a small space to get along all the time. Remember "the three C's" of getting along with a roommate: courtesy, communication, and compromise.

## What can I do to prepare for living with a roommate?

In order to avoid a roommate nightmare, you have to be a good roommate yourself. Think about what you need in your personal space and what you hope to get out of the roommate relationship so you can express yourself clearly. Ask yourself what you're like to live with. How do you feel about things like sharing your belongings, playing music, privacy, or neatness? Take some time to really think about these questions. You might not consider yourself a neat freak until somebody else's clothes are on the floor. Or you might think you don't mind loud music, until you hear Celine Dion blasting from your roommate's speakers.

Now that you know what you expect from the relationship, find out about your roommate's expectations. When you first meet, get to know each other a little bit and talk honestly about your needs. Agree upon some basic ground rules for what goes on in the room. For example, you may decide to use headphones for music when you're both in the room.

When you are bothered by something your roommate does, talk about it instead of letting little annoyances fester into larger hostilities. Don't expect your roommate to read your mind. Maybe your roommate grew up with three sisters and never thought twice about asking to borrow clothes, but for you it's a big deal. Assumptions like these are the root of many roommate misunderstandings. Remember that most people do not intentionally wish to be inconsiderate of others. What irritates you may be totally acceptable to someone else (and vice versa).

## How do I prevent conflict with my new roommate?

It's that word again: Communication. Talking about things up front can save you a lot of frustration and disappointment later on. Pick a time to sit down and discuss your views on cleaning, sharing, and your individual sleeping, socializing, and study habits.

### **Cleaning**

One of the most common sources of roommate conflict is cleaning. You may be the kind of person who doesn't notice a mess until flies gather and you can't find your desk beneath the junk. But your roommate may have just the opposite reaction. It's helpful to sit down together when you first move in and work out a schedule for what chores need to be done and how –often. Make a list of shared chores like vacuuming and taking out the trash. Find a definition of "clean" you can both agree on.

### **Sharing**

Another big area of roommate conflict is sharing. Set out boundaries at the beginning about what things you're going to share. While you might be fine if your roommate rummages through your closet for the Dustbuster, your roommate might see that as a huge invasion of personal space. And even if your roommate says it's fine to use her printer when you ask, she might not be okay with your using it when

she's out of the room. Talk about all the potential issues, like who pays for paper and toner. And when it doubt, always ask permission. Don't just borrow the CD or eat the cookies if you haven't talked about it ahead of time.

### **Sleeping, socializing, and study habits**

Even if you're a night owl and your roommate is an early riser, conflict doesn't have to result if you learn to compromise. Take some time to figure out your individual sleeping, socializing and study habits, and work out basic rules you can both agree on. Some key questions to discuss include:

- What time do you usually go to sleep at night and get up in the morning?
- Can you sleep with music playing? With the lights on? With the windows open?
- Can you study with the TV on? With music playing? When people are talking?
- How late is too late to have guests in the room? What about telephone calls?
- How do you feel about overnight guests?

### **How do I resolve conflict with my roommate?**

If your roommate isn't doing his/her part with chores or following the guidelines you have agreed to, don't fume silently while complaining to everyone else about him/her. Talk to him/her about it. Don't wait until things build up and then explode at your unsuspecting roommate. This sort of "dumping" is unfair and ineffective.

Talk about whatever it is that bothers you as soon after it occurs as possible. First, find an appropriate time to talk with your roommate -- don't wait until he/she is rushing out the door for a class, and never confront him/her in front of others.

Before you approach your roommate, ask yourself: "What is my objective in this situation? If our roles were reversed, how would I want someone to approach me?" Assume that your roommate doesn't mean to cause harm or that he/she is out to make your life miserable.

Be sure to assert yourself. Try not to sound meek and apologetic, because your roommate may dismiss your concerns. But try not to blame or become angry either, which could make him/her feel defensive. In both your choice of words and your tone of voice, strive to come across as one friendly, reasonable adult talking to another friendly, reasonable adult. You have something important you want to say, and you assume he/she will listen.

While stating your case, make sure also to listen to your roommate and respect his/her point of view. Maybe your roommate had a huge test this week and forgot about the trash. Or maybe you've been doing some pretty irritating things yourself that have been driving your roommate crazy. By listening non-defensively as well as talking assertively, you'll create a climate for resolving conflicts. Be sure to stick to things that your roommate can change. Focus on the actions, not the person.

Finally, come up with a solution you're both comfortable with. Work at seeing the other person's perspective. If you're both trying to do so openly and honestly, you'll reach a fair compromise.

### **Should I try to develop a close friendship with my roommate?**

Many people assume that their first roommate will become a friend for life. But living together involves something different than friendship; it involves being able to talk and share ideas, being tolerant and finding ways to handle situations that arise. None of these skills require friendship. The best roommates aren't always the best of friends. It's just a fact that you may not want to spend more time outside your room with the same person you spend some ten hours a day within ten feet of. After all, you weren't placed together based on your potential to become close friends. But even if you don't walk away from the experience with a new best friend, living with and building mutual respect for someone who is different from you is a valuable experience.

### **I've tried everything to get along with my roommate, but it's still not working out. Now what?**

Perhaps a third party can help. Have you asked your counselor or a friend to act as a mediator? With someone else present, you and your roommate may be able to speak honestly, hear each other out and reach appropriate and acceptable agreements. If this doesn't work or you're not sure who would be a good mediator, there are other options:

- For conflicts with your roommate, landlord or neighbors, contact University Housing. This is an excellent resource for assistance with housing conflicts for students who live on- and off-campus.
- For students who live in off-campus housing, contact Housing Information Services. They will provide a mediator who will help with conflicts with roommates, landlords, subletters, or neighbors.
- The Office of Student Conflict Resolution (OSCR) provides assistance/consultation for any U-M student who believes their rights as a student have been violated.