

Highlights

Residential Life & Roommate Study

October, 2016 Peer Relations Study Group
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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“My roommate is awesome! We never fight or get on each other’s nerves. Love doing things together. I can tell my roommate will be my best friend for life!” It happens like that—sometimes. But more often there are some challenges and hassles in roommate relationships, and becoming BFF’s sometimes just doesn’t work out. Gathering information on over 500 students in University residence halls, we’ve learned what makes roommate relationships go well, and what creates problems for roommates to manage. Here are some key findings.

“She is much more introverted than I am, so she spends most of her free time in the room. Sometimes it’s hard to work around if I want to have guests over.”

The best and worst

Students aren’t all looking for the same thing in a roommate. Some desire a close companion who can share activities and offer emotional support. Others just want to keep out of each other’s way. We asked students to rate both their satisfaction and closeness with their roommate. They also listed best and worst things about living with their roommate. Responses differed among students with various levels of closeness and satisfaction.

For example, students who were high in closeness to their roommate and highly satisfied with the relationship pointed to having similar values, interests, and sleep schedules as the best things about living with their roommate. Sharing activities, receiving support, becoming friends, and having a mutual understanding also were high on their list of best features. By comparison, students who were highly satisfied with a roommate relationship that was low in closeness emphasized respecting each other and each other’s personal space, along with getting along, caring about each other, and sharing activities as the best things. Those who were low in closeness and satisfaction with their roommate often listed the roommate’s being quiet, or never around as what was best about the relationship.

Things regarded as the worst part of living with a roommate also differed among groups. Those high in closeness and satisfaction worried about spending too much time talking with their roommate, leaving little time for studying, or being so close that there wasn’t much “alone time.” Students highly satisfied but low in closeness with their roommate regarded differences in values,

Roommate Hassles

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attitudes toward drinking/partying, sleeping habits or cleanliness preferences as among the worst things—along with lack of communication or miscommunication. In the low satisfaction / low closeness group, the lack of interaction with the roommate or the roommate’s being selfish, inconsiderate, or disrespectful—or having terrible living habits—were identified as the worst part of the relationship.

In trying to build positive roommate relationships, both students and housing staff members should bear in mind these differences in what students are seeking and what they encounter in closeness and satisfaction with their roommate. It might be wise to start by having a candid (and possibly difficult) conversation between roommates about their expectations.

Top 8 sources of conflict with a roommate

Students talked about the major sources of conflict they encountered with their roommate. Here are the Top 8 sources they identified:

8. Lack of communication or miscommunication
7. Different values or lifestyles (for example, different attitudes toward drinking/partying)
6. Using one’s belongings without asking, or having different attitudes about sharing
5. Having a boy/girlfriend over without asking, or for too long a time
4. Differences in preference for level of cleanliness and neatness in the room
3. Making noise while one is trying to sleep or study.
2. Different sleep schedules
1. Lack of respect for personal space or privacy

Challenges for Cross-National or Cross-Ethnic Roommates

Residence halls provide students with excellent opportunities to meet people whose backgrounds are very different from their own. But living with such a person has its challenges. In our sample, students living with a roommate sharing the same national and ethnic background reported the highest level of satisfaction and closeness. Satisfaction was lowest among students living with someone from another country. Those living with someone from the same county but different ethnic groups reported the lowest closeness with their roommate.

What might account for these patterns? One possibility is the dissimilarity often seen in cross-national or cross-ethnic pairs in living habits, attitudes toward drinking/partying, and academics. Controlling for these differences, students rooming with someone from another nation actually had closer relationships with their roommate than those rooming with someone from their own nation.

A good way for students to avert the challenges of cross-national or cross-ethnic roommates is

"The most challenging for me is not being able to relate with my roommate 100%. Culture barrier."

to deal directly with dissimilarities in values and living habits. The University could help by offering guidelines to help students make more effective roommate agreements, reducing the impact of dissimilarities. Providing an online platform for roommates to communicate prior to arriving on campus could help avoid big surprises of the first few weeks living together. Diversity workshops in residence halls could address negative stereotypes and help roommates manage attitude or lifestyle differences.

About our study . . .

In the Spring of 2016 we invited students in 7 U.W.-Madison residence halls to fill out a confidential on-line survey. Specific halls were selected to represent the diversity of living environments and student populations living on campus. A total of 503 students successfully completed the survey; response rates varied between 15% and 20% in the selected residence halls.

Females (65%) outnumbered males (34%) or other-gender individuals in our sample. About one-eighth (13%) of participants were from outside the U.S., representing 14 nations. Among the domestic students, approximately 80% identified as European American, 3% as African American, 4% as Hispanic, and 11% as Asian American. Close to one-fourth of the sample was comprised of roommate pairs.

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AMY NIU, Study Director
B. BRADFORD BROWN, Principal Investigator

Keep it clean! Rules for room cleanliness

Students had great ideas for guidelines to keep the residence hall room "acceptably clean." Here's our "Top 10" list:

1. Sign an agreement about how clean the room normally ought to be.
2. Sign an agreement about a regular cleaning schedule.
3. Wash dishes soon after eating.
4. Clean out expired food from the fridge.
5. Don't store foods with strong smells.
6. Maintain personal hygiene.
7. Put towels and dirty clothes in a laundry basket.
8. Do the laundry before the basket spills over!
9. [for girls] Clean hair off the carpet regularly.
10. Vacuum and clean the trash can regularly.



When a Roommate Has Emotional Issues

"She has severe depression," one participant said about her roommate. "She doesn't go to classes, just sleeps all day. I have to skip study times of bed and it's such an awful losing battle. . . I hate that my living situation adds stress to my day and just want her to get the help she needs." Having a roommate with significant emotional problems is unusual but highly stressful. Campus resources can help you manage this issue. For those in this situation here are some tips.

1. **Alert the housing staff.** Your house fellow should help you find appropriate professional resources.
2. **Help your roommate** realize the need for professional help. You may need to accompany your roommate to a UHS appointment, for moral support.
3. **Take care of yourself!** Worries and frustrations that come with efforts to assist your roommate can take a toll on your own health. It may help to seek guidance from the housing staff or UHS or the Dean of Students staff for what *you* are experiencing.