

UMR Guide to Being a Roommate

It's safe to say that nobody wants to have an antagonistic or off-putting roommate experience. Many of our residents will dread moving into the residence halls because they are anticipating the worst outcomes; based upon what little information that they have gathered on their newly assigned roommate group.

While many people think that a perfect survey and automated matching process will be the best path for success, this could not be further from the truth. To make a roommate experience go well, you have start with understanding yourself (your wants and needs) and be open to learn about what your roommates think as well.

Most issues that occur between two people are a result of an inability to communicate needs and concerns to their roommates in an appropriate and well-timed manner. Take a look at this list and think carefully about where *you* are as a new roommate before arriving on campus and getting to know your roommate group.

1. Self-reflect on YOU and be prepared to talk about it with your roommates.

Have you ever shared a bedroom before? Living room, bathroom or kitchen? If not, how do you predict that this will be for you? What is going to change, what is going to stay the same? Do you want your roommates to be your best friends? Do they *need* to be your best friends? What expectations do you already have about your roommates? Are these realistic opinions to have before you've met? Are you a person who naturally shares your thoughts and opinions with others? Are you protective of your belongings? Are you a person who values privacy, or are you more open? How are you feeling about moving away from home?

2. Talk to your roommates before you arrive to campus.

When you talk with your roommates, make sure to not waste time! The opportunity to connect and come to an agreement is limited before the semester begins. Where are you from? What is your family/home experience like? What are your hobbies? What do you like to do? What is your major? What belongings are you willing to share? If you are sharing items, what does proper care of your belongings look like? What do you not want to share and why? Should you really share something, or would it be a better idea to bring separate items? This is a good time to communicate with your roommates, particularly if you are more protective of your belongings or have specific values to address before you live together.

3. Take your Roommate Agreement process seriously and as an opportunity for connection.

When you arrive, your Resident Assistant will hold a Roommate Agreement meeting. It is a process where you get to learn about your roommates, they get to learn about you, and then you get to build a set of expectations for your room together. Roommates who spend MORE time on this process and who are honest and open have fewer problems later in the year. Some people struggle with this conversation because they want to be liked, make friends, and do not want to rock the boat. It is more important for you to be honest about who you are, what your needs are, and explaining why you have these needs than to create a false reality. Think about this.

4. Expect conflict, but accept that it is a part of the normal and healthy process.

You are going to share a space with multiple individuals. All of these individuals, including yourself, have different lives, different motivations, and different experiences that inform their actions, habits, and behaviors. We hate to break it to you, but *conflict is going to happen*. It needs to, and it is a very healthy, normal, and necessary experience. Most often, the result of conflict that is handled gracefully and in a genuine manner serves to cement relationships; think about your relationships with your parents, siblings, or close friends. While conflict is not easy, it is also not scary. Tell yourself this. Repeat it. Own it. Your Roommate Agreement will be a tool that you can use to help you through conflict, but hopefully it will not need to be used.

5. Be honest with yourself.

Sometimes we get into the habit of letting things slide and pretending that a person's behavior did not bother us; particularly with people we are trying to impress, or for those we care about. This may avoid conflict in the short term, but when the little things add up, they release themselves in a big way. Be honest with yourself, and practice being honest with others.

6. Remember that timing and setting is important when confronting.

As with #5, some people wait too long to confront, and some confront too quickly. The reason why it is important to learn about your roommates is because you can learn ways to successfully confront them so that the message sinks in, and the defensive walls do not go up. Learn how your roommates like to be confronted, ask them, and tell them what methods work BEST for you. One tip: do not let notes, text message, or emails be your way to confront. Understand that relationships are about give and take, and that we often bring unrealistic expectations of others. Try not to punish or take out frustrations on your roommates, be patient with the slip ups, but do not let the small things slide.

7. Involve your Resident Assistant.

Pro Tip: Not so good at confronting people? Lack confidence or the ability to gracefully and articulately make your argument? There are people in the building who are hired and trained to help. Use them, involve them, and ask for guidance. It will go a long way.

8. Confront behaviors and choose your words, your mood, and actions carefully.

What is your goal when confronting roommates? Is it to change their behavior or create a more positive relationship between you and that person, or is it to slam them with insults, guilt, and burn a bridge with your roommates? Remember WHY you are confronting. Choose your words carefully and do not rely on personal attacks. "You are a slob" is not likely to change their behavior or create a positive relationship. "I feel frustrated when you do not wash your dishes" and "I feel uneasy about health risks using our kitchen when it is dirty" is more authentic to your actual issue, and serves to create understanding. If all you are feeling is anger and you KNOW that you are likely to attack...WAIT until YOU are ready to confront. You want to be effective, right? If your roommate is confronting you, remember how much courage it takes to confront others, and know that this is an attempt to improve your relationship. Listen and reflect on what your roommate is telling you.

9. Learn about each other and show respect.

Having a genuine respect between roommates is something that is developed and cultivated, not something that happens randomly and with no investment. Developing respect and trust will go a long way in cementing a positive room experience for you. Assume that your roommate, like everyone else that you meet, has something to teach you. Take time to learn from them, and teach them reciprocally. Give your roommates the benefit of the doubt before assuming that their behaviors are targeted AT YOU; the truth is that often you are the last thing on people's minds. If you need to confront, pick a good time. "Who needs to be present?", "where should this happen?", and "what do I need to avoid?" should be questions that you ask yourself. If you are angry, do not leave a nasty note, or post to the internet. Do not avoid your issues, or face-to-face conversation, because it does NOT make things easier.

10. Remember: "Best Friends" is not equal to "Best Roommates".

Sometimes we think that because people are our good friends, that they will be our best roommates. On the contrary, close friendships often get in the way of being honest with others for fear of hurting them or the relationship. What makes them a great friend, does not always mean that they will care about cleaning up, being accountable to you, or that you might discover something that distances you. Shared friendship circles and social events in your spaces can spiral out of control and create in-group drama. Remember, creating a best roommate is not as simple as living with your best friend.