

Roommate Conflicts: Confrontation, Communication, Mediation

Living with roommates isn't always easy. Sharing a living space may be stressful, and conflicts may arise. Sometimes situations that work at the beginning of the year become more difficult as the year goes on; remember that college is a time when students grow and change which can certainly impact even the healthiest of roommate relationships. It is perfectly normal to have roommate conflicts.

Many conflicts can be resolved easily with mature and respectful conversation between roommates. Other conflicts may be more difficult to resolve and may require assistance through a formal mediation process. In extreme cases, conflicts may not be able to be resolved resulting in a room change for one or both roommates. It is never our desire to force students to live in a room where the climate is wrought with tension and frustration or where conflict cannot be resolved. We do, however, expect students to make a sincere and collaborative effort to work through the conflict, communicate clearly the concerns, and develop strong conflict management or coping skills in the process.

Residence Life offers a number of resources to students facing roommate conflicts. The Community Assistant initially handles roommate conflicts at the building level. Area Coordinators and the Assistant Director for Reinhard Villages often guide the CAs through each roommate conflict. Students seeking assistance should begin by talking with their CA.

What is a Roommate Conflict?

This can seem as simple as "I want to go to bed at the same time as my roommate so that I am not awakened when she comes into the room after I've fallen asleep." Sometimes, the collision involves value systems. For example, one roommate may feel quite comfortable having frequent visitors to the room – intimate visitors or groups of friends; while, the second roommate wants the room to be a safe haven from social interaction with others.

It is important to note that this definition makes clear that roommate conflicts are not a reflection of the character of either student involved. Rather, the conflict occurs because two different students hold two different views on what is happening in the room. More often, the conflict arises when one or both roommates do not have the confidence or communication skills to confront the problem.

Navigating Roommate Conflict for Students

Communicating with or Confronting your Roommate(s)

If you start to notice that your roommate does not want to talk with you, may get annoyed with you over little things, may leave the room when you are there, you should recognize these as signs of potential roommate issues. If a problem is addressed early, there is a better chance of it being worked out amicably. Most roommate conflicts are the result of miscommunication or, in some cases, a total lack of communication. If you can communicate effectively, it will be much easier to develop a comfortable living environment for yourself and your roommates.

How to address the issue:

- Approach your roommate in private.
- Confirm that this is a good time for both of you to talk. If either of you feels rushed or blindsided the conversation will be less effective.
- Be direct. Discuss the issue with regard to behaviors rather than personality traits. This tactic is less likely to put your roommate on the defensive.
- Be patient. Listen to your roommate and remember that there are two sides to every story. As you are listening, try to put yourself in your roommate's shoes.
- Each person should be given an opportunity to share their perspective on the roommate relationship and potential areas of tension.
- Revisit your roommate agreement. If you do not have one, **GET ONE**. You should have it available in the room or the CAs will have a copy on file in the Office. Which of your guidelines are working and which of them need to be reconsidered?

Remember that a solution will probably involve each person giving something and getting something. The solution may not be your ideal scenario, but it should be an improvement on the current state of things.

Healthy communication tips:

- Talk to your roommate directly when something is bothering you. Don't discuss it behind their back because this can cause a breakdown in trust between you.
- Be direct. Be clear about what is bothering you. If you don't tell your roommate that there is a problem they won't be able to do anything about it.
- Remember that communication works two ways: talking and listening. Neither one is effective without the other.
- If you create a win-win situation, then the conflict is more likely to be resolved. Evaluate the needs of both sides before a solution is proposed, and make sure the solution is acceptable to both parties.
- Respect each other's differences. Difference is a part of life. Get to know each other and establish common ground.
- Avoid responding from your emotions. Criticism is bound to happen and your natural reaction is going to be to criticize back, but that is only going to compound the problem. Learning to accept criticism is going to help you communicate and live with your roommate. If you both find that you are approaching the limit and things are not being resolved, agree to take some time away from the discussion to cool down.

Roommate Mediation

In difficult discussions, such as roommate conflicts, it is very helpful to have an unbiased third party to help mediate the discussion. Our Community Assistants are trained mediators, with good experience helping roommates come up with solutions to their conflicts. If you find that you and your roommate are having difficulty resolving your conflict, you should definitely approach your CA to arrange mediation.

We believe that Roommate Mediation is paramount to the learning process and the development of conflict management skills. As such, we require all students involved in a roommate conflict to participate in mediation before changing rooms.

How Mediation Works:

Contact your CA, either by email or in person, to explain the situation and to request mediation.

Your CA will contact all roommates to find a time that works best for everyone. Most mediation meetings can be completed in less than one hour. At times, a second meeting may need to be scheduled to work through issues thoroughly.

The CA and a co-mediator (another CA from your building or the AD/AC) will begin the conversation. The CA will explain the ground rules; discuss confidentiality and the mediation process.

In the Issues Phase of mediation, the roommates will each be given an opportunity to present the issues as they see them in the roommate relationship.

In the Understanding Phase of mediation, the roommates will talk with each other about the issues presented in the previous phase. Each will have the opportunity to respond to the other's perception, share how they feel about what the other said, and share their own understanding of the situation as presented by the roommate.

In the Agreement Phase of mediation, the roommates will offer possible solutions that will address the issues presented earlier. Solutions will involve compromise and negotiation. The mediators will guide this process, but will not suggest agreement items to the roommates. It is critical that the students involved in conflict own and fully agree with solution(s) presented.

Remember, although the CA is a trained mediator, they are not magicians. Some roommate conflicts require a number of mediations before a workable solution can be found. In other cases, the roommate relationship may not be mended even after an honest attempt at mediation has been made. In those cases, and only in those cases, a room change may be the best answer.