ROOMMATE CONNECTIONS
Developing a Positive Relationship
Connections. We’re all looking for them: a place to belong, people to hang out with, a purpose to serve... So, when you move on to college and move in with a roommate, connecting is probably one of the first things on your mind.

This guide offers simple, effective ways to interact with your roommate. From developing a healthy, respectful relationship to tackling the tough times, it’s all about making a connection.

Fiction & Fact

Fiction: “As long as he keeps his hands off my stuff, we’ll be fine.”

Fact: Living with someone is about much more than just material belongings. Respect, communication and flexibility will be key elements in your roommate relationship.

Fiction: “My roommate and I need to have a lot in common.”

Fact: Two different people can live together and learn from one another. Former VP Al Gore and actor Tommy Lee Jones roomed together in college, as did actors Robin Williams and Christopher Reeve (Superman). Just imagine those combinations!

Tact, respect, care and an open mind will increase your chances of developing a solid roommate connection.

The Best Friends Myth: One Student’s Story...

Sam came to college anticipating that her roommate would become her best friend. She thought they’d do everything together, talk late into the night, share meals and ward off loneliness. And, after graduation, they’d meet at reunions, serve as one another’s bridesmaids and keep in constant contact. It all sounded great!

The reality that Sam found, however, is that roommates don’t always end up as close friends. Friendship isn’t the end all, be all for a roommate relationship — instead, respect and a willingness to communicate are the most important factors.

So, be realistic with your own roommate expectations. If you and your roommate don’t wind up as best friends, don’t despair. Seek people out by getting involved on campus and you will be sure to find a person with whom you can really connect.
You’ll need to get used to the concept of compromise. It’s essential in developing a positive roommate relationship.

Up for Discussion

Here are a few things to discuss with your roommate as you learn to compromise…

**The Room.** Arrange the room together so that it feels like home to both of you. And when the mood strikes to change things around, consult with your roommate first. Think about:

- Do you both feel a sense of ownership over this space?
- Is the room comfortable for all?
- How important is neatness to each of you?

**Technology.** From laptops to smartphones to tablets, talk about:

- Should you answer one another’s phones if they’re sitting out?
- How will you both keep technology in the room safe?
- Who can use what and when?

**Stuff.** Sharing *everything* may not be the healthiest approach, so discuss:

- Will you both have equal access to the microwave, TV, video games, food, dishes, etc.?
- Is it okay to borrow one another’s clothes, sports equipment, etc.? If so, under what conditions?
- What is okay to share and what isn’t?

**Guests.** Discuss the following so guests don’t come between you:

- If people drop in while one roommate is studying, how will you handle it?
- How will each of you get enough alone time in the room?
- Are overnight guests acceptable? Under what conditions?
- If one of you is gone for the weekend, is it okay for a guest to use your bed?

**Compromise**

Be Flexible but Don’t Break

Compromise doesn’t mean always giving in to someone else’s wishes. It’s okay to assert your rights and not bend so much that you fail to have ownership over anything. Remember, if you don’t speak up, you’re *bound* to be disappointed.
When communication breaks down, roommate conflicts occur. It can get ugly when roommates stop speaking to one another, start complaining to others or expect their roommate to know when something is wrong.

Instead, be proactive in making your communication style healthy and effective. If you and your roommate know how to communicate, you're much more likely to get along!

**Go to the Source**

Talking behind your roommate’s back:

- Offers you a short-term “get it off your chest” feeling that’s followed by continuous, long-term problems

- Makes those you’re complaining to wonder if you talk about THEM behind their backs

- Still leaves your roommate in the dark

**Say What You Mean**

When you dance around an issue, you:

- Confuse your roommate

- Fail to represent the breadth of your concern

- Rarely get to the core of an issue

**Don’t Assume**

Lapsing into assumptions is the lazy way of doing things…

- He went home the past two weekends so he must be anti-social.

- She didn’t eat any meals with me last week so she must be upset with me.

When you let assumptions become your reality, you hold people at a distance. As you get to know your roommate, try to go beyond assumptions. There are always more layers to a person than initially meet the eye!

**Avoid Gossip**

Refuse to participate in the rumor mill that runs rampant in residence halls by:

- Encouraging yourself and others to go directly to the source when there’s a problem

- Steering clear of individuals who gossip

- Not using gossip as your “small talk” with other acquaintances

Just be direct and to the point when communicating with your roommate and neighbors. Once an issue is laid on the table, it’ll be easier for you and your roommate to figure what comes next.
You and your roommate are bound to hit some tough patches — all relationships do. That’s why it’s important to establish clear, healthy patterns of communication.

**Use “I” Statements**

This lets you take ownership of your feelings. It removes the blaming tone and will probably decrease your roommate’s defensiveness. As a result, he’s bound to listen better.

**Not using “I”** = An accusing tone: “When you have your crazy friends here all the time, I can’t get any studying done!”

**Using “I”** = A straightforward message: “I am struggling to find enough time to study in the room without other people around.”

**Expect Success**

Entering into a difficult discussion with an optimistic attitude can help set you up for success. If you expect to fail, it’s more likely to happen.

**Expecting failure** = An almost absolute guarantee that the problem will get worse

**Expecting success** = An increased desire to see the problem resolved

**Don’t Play the Victim**

Coming across weak and put-upon does no one any good.

**Playing the victim** = The perception that you are weak, annoying or unable to stand up for yourself.

**Not playing the victim** = The perception that you can cut through difficult situations to advocate for your needs.

**Agree to Disagree**

This means that you can stand up for yourself without putting your roommate down, as both of your values are valid.

There will be times when your values connect, leading you to agree on something. Yet, of course, there will be other times when your values are at odds, leading to a disagreement. So, agreeing to disagree means that, as roommates, you know you won’t always agree. You may not like what she believes and she may not like what you believe but, in the end, you’ll respect one another’s right to expression.
When you live with others, you’re bound to see many of their ups and downs. While you aren’t expected to “fix” anything, it’s natural to show concern when a roommate is struggling.

The key here is recognizing your limitations — for everyone’s sake. Bigger issues need the involvement of trained professionals. So, get residence life and counseling staffers involved when it comes to situations like these…

**Anxiety & Depression**

Does your roommate sleep a lot during the day? Does she cry frequently? Has she mentioned harming herself? Has she dropped some of her friends and involvements? Does she get really worked up about certain things? She may be depressed or have an anxiety disorder, meaning she’ll benefit most from professional help.

**Family Issues**

Do you overhear family fights on the phone? Does your roommate dread going home during breaks? Has she confided in you about family abuse? It can be very easy to get caught up in your roommate’s family difficulties. Yet, you can’t handle heavy-duty counseling situations on your own — so seek help.

**Warning!**

Don’t ever call your roommate’s family in an attempt to “fix” things! This may make things worse.

**Academic Difficulty**

Is your roommate obsessed with grades? Does he get upset if he does poorly? Or is he sleeping through classes and putting homework aside whenever a social opportunity arises? Encourage him to seek assistance through advisors, the learning center, the counseling office, instructors and others.

**Alcohol & Other Drugs**

Have you seen alcohol or other drug paraphernalia in the room lately? Does your roommate appear to be in an altered state at times? Is she using substances? Do you think she may be addicted? Express your concerns and encourage her to seek help. If you’re not sure how to handle this, go to the residence life staff in your community for assistance.
True respect is a key component of healthy roommate relationships, whether it’s respecting people’s values, belongings, responsibilities or time.

**Difference**

The ability to learn about another culture, religion or way of life from your roommate can be a good experience! Stay open to the possibility that you both have a great deal to teach one another.

Go ahead and discover what you have in common, as well as the differences. In order to learn from these differences, explore issues such as…

- Lifestyle choices (i.e. vegetarianism, no alcohol use, etc.)
- Cultural background
- Spiritual life
- Holidays celebrated
- Family and hometown traditions

As you peel away the layers, you’ll have a better appreciation for and understanding of your roommate.

**Peace of Mind**

Sharing a space also means sharing the responsibility for making it safe. Discuss the following items and come to an agreement about how you’ll keep the room, your belongings and yourselves safe.

- Locking the Room. Will it be locked when you’re out of the building? Down the hall?
- **Carrying Room Keys/Cards.** What if someone loses his or hers?
- **Following Policies.** If one roommate is doing something illegal in the room, how will this affect the other?
- **Cigarettes, Incense & Candles.** How might you feel if using these items resulted in a fire?
- **Overnight Guests.** What parameters will you establish?

*Note: Safety experts strongly recommend that doors remain locked, policies are followed and room keys/cards are always with their owners in order to maintain optimum safety.*
It’s much easier to live positively with another person if you discover who they are and what they’re all about. So get some good conversation going in the early stages of your roommate relationship. Just put the following types of questions into your own language and get better connected.

**Interests**
- What are some of your interests?
- What kinds of things do you feel like you’re pretty good at?
- What do you get really excited about?

**Background**
- Have you ever shared a room with someone before? What was it like?
- Where are you from? What was it like growing up there?
- What do you feel comfortable telling me about your family and friends?

**College Perspective**
- What are you looking forward to this year? What are you nervous about?
- Do you know what your major will be? What do you hope to do with it?
- What types of things are you hoping to get involved in this year?

**Personal Characteristics**
- What makes you happy?
- What really annoys you?
- How can people tell when you’re angry? Stressed?
- Are there any touchy subjects you’d prefer not to discuss?

**Roommate Issues**
- What do you think are the most important things for us to work on as roommates?
- What type of environment helps you concentrate on your studies most effectively?
- Are you more of a morning or a night person? When do you typically go to bed? Wake up?
- How do you feel about having overnight guests?

Take time to talk with your roommate right away and keep at it. Not only will you discover more about one another, you’ll be building the foundation for a promising year ahead.