

NAVIGATING ROOMMATE RELATIONSHIPS DURING COVID-19

A RESOURCE CREATED
BY

OFF-CAMPUS LIVING,
UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

Fostering a Healthy Roommate Relationship

Living with roommates can be a challenge at the best of times, but what if one of your roommates is still not taking physical distancing the safety of others. Know that by physical distancing, you are taking a stance of care for others. Distancing is not about fear or compliance, it is about looking out for one another and being part of the greater good.

Some people still feel that physical distancing is a scary and unreasonable measure. If you are living with one of these people, here are some tips to keep yourself safe and help them to keep themselves safe, too!

Dr. Jessica Rourke, an expert in conflict, and professor at the University of Victoria says empathizing with someone is the first step to avoiding conflict. She recommends two steps to help others see where you're coming from: observing and listening.

When you observe, rather than criticizing your roommate, tell them about the behaviours you have noticed without judgement. You can make statements like "I have noticed you have invited friends into our house" or "I have noticed you have been going out to meet up with people more than has been advised by the government". These are factual statements without a loaded judgement or criticism. Be direct about your worries and the boundaries you want inside your home- remember, it shows care for your roommate and others to have these conversations.

Then, listen to what they have to say. Explore why your roommate is acting the way they are acting. Rather than approaching the situation with assumptions about their decisions, find out what is going on for them that is leading to them to make those choices.

Using these two steps you can reach a conversation that is rooted in empathy and understanding, rather than judgement and assumptions. This will help you to open up the lines of communication so you can express your concerns about safety and the well-being of everyone in your home.

These steps are effective for other conflicts, too. If you're finding the concentrated time with your roommates suddenly difficult, you're not alone. Try observing and listening and see if you can work out some of the conflicts that may be coming up for you.

Writing a Roommate Contract

Setting boundaries with your roommates is an important step in the move-in process. In the age of COVID-19, to ensure your safety and the safety of others, it is a good idea to create a roommate contract in which you will set guidelines for behaviour inside your home, as well as the activities your roommates might engage in outside the home.

A roommate contract is a legally binding document, that can help you navigate issues that may arise. Here are some tips for things to include in a roommate agreement

- If you are on a group lease, ensure your contract includes the amount of rent each tenant is responsible for, and what happens if one tenant wants to move out early
- Outline any other shared expenses such as utilities, internet, cable, toilet paper, cleaning supplies and shared food items. Explain who pays for what and how replacements will be paid for.
- Outline your plan for food sharing
- Outline which kitchen items are shared
 - ie. pots, pans, dishware, and what happens if items are damaged
- Discuss comfort levels with pets
- Outline others' schedules and habits, such as when quiet time should be respected
- Set expectations for cleaning and other chores
- Set bathroom and kitchen schedules
- Set indoor temperature expectations
- Outline security and privacy expectations (keeping doors locked/windows closed and when)
- Discuss how you will resolve conflicts
- Discuss each tenant's expectations for their roommates' physical distancing practices such as
 - Are guests allowed in our home?
 - If so, how many at a time and for what purposes?
 - How will we safely host guests if guests are agreed upon?
- Use the "swiss cheese model" to create layers of protection
- Outline any immunocompromised individuals in your circle (ie. parents, grandparents, siblings)
- Can we visit home/go on a weekend trip to see others?
 - If so, how often?
 - What extra precautions need to be taken before and after a visit?
- What events/activities can we each participate in outside of the home to keep our networks small
- When will we revisit this contract
- Agree to default to the highest level of precautions requested by a member in your home

What if a roommate I don't know well tests positive for COVID-19?

If you have a roommate that you are not giving care to, you are still considered a close contact while living with them. Some tips from Public Health are:

Wash your hands often

- Wash your hands with soap and water after each contact with the infected person.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.

Avoid sharing household items

- Do not share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, bedding or other items with the person under investigation.
- After use, these items should be washed with soap or detergent in warm water.
- No special soap is needed.
- Dishwashers and washing machines can be used.
- Do not share cigarettes.

Clean

- Clean your home with regular household cleaners.
- Clean regularly touched items such as toilets, sink tap handles, doorknobs and bedside tables on a daily basis. Wash laundry thoroughly
- There is no need to separate the laundry, but you should wear gloves when handling.
- Clean your hands with soap and water immediately after removing your gloves.

Be careful when touching waste

- All waste can go into regular garbage bins.
- When emptying wastebaskets, take care to not touch used tissues with your hands.
- Lining the wastebasket with a plastic bag makes waste disposal easier and safer.
- Clean your hands with soap and water after emptying the wastebasket

How to exit a lease early

If things aren't working out with your roommate, you may choose to move. If you want to move out before the end of your lease term, you have the following options:

- Approach your landlord to discuss the possibility of terminating your lease before the end of the original lease term (leases are usually 12 months long).
 - Ask to have any agreements you make put in writing (email is fine).
- Sublet to another tenant for a limited amount of time
- Assign your lease to a new tenant.

What is the difference between subletting and assigning?

If you sublet, you remain on the lease. If you assign your lease to someone else, you permanently sign over your position on a lease to another person. When assigning, you are not responsible for future rent payments or the behaviour of the new tenant.

Subletting is preferable if you intend to move back into the unit. Assignment is preferable if you want to exit the lease agreement altogether.

Assignment requires the consent of the landlord, but landlords cannot refuse an assignee without a reasonable explanation that is accepted by the Landlord and Tenant Board. If your landlord refuses to allow you to assign your lease without a reasonable explanation, then you have the option to end your tenancy early with 30 days' written notice. If you are in this situation, contact the Landlord and Tenant Board at 1-888-332-3234 for more information on how to proceed.