

Help! I hate my roommate

You're an early riser and she sleeps till noon. She's a slob and you're a Virgo. As college life resumes, some dorm-dwellers are seeking therapy to fix their relationships
REBECCA ECKLER

What do fun-loving, freedom-seeking, Kraft-dinner-eating, keg-drinking first-year university students have in common with unfulfilled married couples looking to revive their relationship?

Therapy.

A growing trend, at least in the United States, is the roommate counsellor.

"I was teaching an undergraduate course at UCLA, and all of the students kept coming up to me and most of their problems had to do with their roommates," says therapist **Alyson Mischel**, a 30-year-old Sarah Jessica Parker lookalike who now works in UCLA admissions.

"I realized there was a market for this. Roommates were stealing parking spaces, bringing boys over, borrowing clothes, or always late with their rent. And their roommates would be so angry."

Usually, one roommate will come to Mischel first, and then she'll see the pair together for a couple of sessions, with follow-up emails.

"I do the same thing as I do in couple counselling," she says. "I make sure they are communicating the correct way and make sure roommates are getting their point across. Usually they are willing to come in together. It can totally ruin their year if they don't get along. There's nowhere to hide in a dorm room."

She teaches counselling strategies ranging from communications exercises (i.e., "I feel hurt when the dishes stay dirty") to schedules for cleaning and having boyfriends sleep over.

Roommates and spouses, in fact, face many of the same problems. "Cleanliness is a huge factor, or one person stays up late, or wants to go out with friends and doesn't bring you along," she says.

According to relationship coach Susan Fee, author of the book *My Roommate is Driving Me Crazy*, the two-week mark is when things often start to go south.

Fee was a counsellor at a private college in Ohio, and had worked in the corporate sector teaching conflict resolution, before turning to academe.

"Two weeks into the semester, all I kept hearing from students was, 'My roommate is driving me crazy.' I started talking to students across the country and everyone had a roommate story, so it just clicked with me." Fee's book struck a chord: One college ordered 500 of her books to put into dormitories.

"At the two-week mark, students start to realize that they have to choose to be a student or not," Fee says. "It's the time that many of their relationships from high school break up and that adds stress. Also, homesickness starts to kick in. One roommate can handle the stress or gets really quiet, while the other could go off the rail and start partying and drinking."

Fee says that many first-year students have never had to share their space with anyone before. In marriage counselling they call it "conflict resolution." Roommates have "issues."

But just as in marriages, some of the worst conflicts are over the pettiest things. Mischel cites the roommate who refuses to share in the cost of a newspaper subscription. "The roommate who pays will put the newspaper in the garbage after reading it. Then the non-paying roommate will fish it out to read. When the paying roommate finds out, she'll put the newspaper in the garbage and pour washing fluid all over it to prevent the roommate from reading it," says Mischel.

Her roommate clientele is exclusively female. "Men let things roll off their backs. You bring a girl over and it's like, 'Whoo-hoo!' Men can also tolerate mess," she says. Paige Dzenis, 22, whose breezy blog has become a must-read for the university crowd, once lived with five other females while she was studying at the University of Western Ontario. "It was pretty awful by the end," she says.

Despite university efforts to pair students with similar interests, dysfunctional roommates are all too common in dorms. "The two girls next to me at Western had major problems," Dzenis says. "One went to bed at 10 p.m. and would put on her sleeping mask and would wake up first thing in the morning. So the other roommate, who liked to stay out until 4 a.m., once came home and the sun was just starting to stream in so she put up a blanket to cover the window. Her early-to-bed and early-to-rise roommate slept in and totally had a meltdown when she woke up at noon."

Like Mischel, Fee says that all of her roommate clients are female.

"Females can be really passive aggressive," she says, citing the example of one fighting pair who were furiously sending messages to each other from a few feet away. "There they were, in the same room, fighting by text messaging!"

Many parents, in fact, now send their children to see Fee during school breaks.

"It's a worthwhile investment because there have been students who have dropped out because of their roommates," she says.

Karen Hirscheimer, a marriage and relationship counsellor in Toronto, says that while sharing a room is not as long-term as sharing a marriage, "for some people it's very significant. If it doesn't work out with a roommate, it may not be as devastating as a divorce, but at that point in their lives it can be very significant."

But, like marriage partners, Hirscheimer says, roommates need to learn to balance acceptance with firm boundaries. Students must figure out when it's worth it to pick battles, and the difference between what's "desirable" in a roommate and what's "essential."

"If they don't learn to solve their roommate problems, I tell them now, they will end up working with a person exactly like them after college," says Fee. "If you don't learn to speak up with your roommate, will you be able to speak up when you want a raise, or want to transfer, or not want to transfer in your job? So deal with the challenges now and learn from it."

If you don't, of course, it will only lead to more therapy as an adult.

Tips for cohabiting co-eds

Talk: If something is bugging you, bring it up in a non-defensive way. Don't assume your roommate can read your mind.

Focus on behaviour, not personality: You can't criticize someone for being "perky" but you can ask them not to talk so much while you're studying.

Stay flexible: Consider what you could do differently to help the situation instead of only blaming your roommate.

Start with one pet peeve: What can you absolutely not deal with? Nothing kills a relationship faster than listing dozens of reasons why you don't like a person.

Think positive: If you're shy, maybe being around a more outgoing person will force you out of your shell.