

Failure to Communicate

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By ABIGAIL SULLIVAN MOORE, The New York Times

SINCE the very first bunk bed, roommates have annoyed each other. They leave their clothes all over the floor; they host overnight guests unannounced. Big deal. You tell them to pick up their stuff; you work out a "sexile" schedule.

But housing officials say that lately they are noticing something different: students seem to lack the will, and skill, to address these ordinary conflicts. "We have students who are mad at each other and they text each other in the same room," says Tom Kane, director of housing at Appalachian State University, in Boone, N.C. "So many of our roommate conflicts are because kids don't know how to negotiate a problem."

And as any pop psychologist will tell you, bottled emotions lead to silent seething that can boil over into frustration and anger. At the University of Florida, emotional outbursts occur about once a week, says Norbert Dunkel, the university's director of housing and residence education.

"It used to be: 'Let's sit down and talk about it,' " he says. "Over the past five years, roommate conflicts have intensified. The students don't have the person-to-person discussions and they don't know how to handle them."

The problem is most dramatic among freshmen; housing professionals say they see improvement as students move toward graduation, but some never seem to catch on, and they worry about how such students will deal with conflicts after college.

Administrators speculate that reliance on cellphones and the Internet may have made it easier for young people to avoid uncomfortable encounters. Why express anger in person when you can vent in a text? Facebook creates even more friction as complaints go public. "Things are posted on someone's wall on Facebook: 'Oh, my roommate kept me up all night studying,' " says Dana Pysz, an assistant director in the office of residential life at the University of California, Los Angeles. "It's a different way to express their conflict to each other."

Dissatisfied students rarely take up an offer from a resident adviser to mediate, Mr. Pysz says. "With mediation you have to have buy-in from both," he says. "We don't have a lot of mediation. We have a lot of avoidance."

In recent focus groups at North Carolina State University, dorm residents said they would not even confront noisy neighbors on their floor.

"It was clear from the focus groups that the students expect the R.A.'s to keep the floors quiet," says Susan Grant, the university's director of housing.

Administrators point to parents who have fixed their children's problems their entire lives. Now in college, the children lack the skills to attend to even modest conflicts. Some parents continue to intervene on campus.

"I can't tell you the number of times I am talking to a student and thinking I am making headway and the student gets out their phone and says, 'Can you talk to my mom about this?' " Mr. Kane says. Or housing officials field calls from parents pleading or demanding that the college get involved in a dispute, only for the officials to discover that the dispute was little more than a minor irritation, if anything.

Constant cellphone connection means parents jump in too quickly, says Sarah English, director of housing and residential life at Marist College, in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Some go directly to the source, Ms. English says: "It surprises me when students say, 'My roommate's mother called and yelled at me,' and I think, 'Are you kidding me?' I can't believe parents call students. Ten years ago, I never heard of that."

With avoidance often comes escalation.

With the trend toward smaller families, many new undergraduates may never have shared a bedroom with a sibling. Without that experience, students don't know how to negotiate potential areas of friction like keeping the room in (relative) order, watching a roommate's television or borrowing an iPod.

Ryan Melson and Matt Blumenreich had their own bedrooms at home before rooming together as freshmen at Grinnell College in Iowa. They really hit it off. They both played on the baseball team and encouraged each other through long nights

of studying during a grueling first semester. But Mr. Melson is a neat freak, and Mr. Blumenreich, by his own admission, is "the opposite." Quite the opposite.

Mr. Melson says: "I just wanted him to clear a path so I could walk over to my stuff. I always had my own room and had it clean. I didn't know how to handle it."

Finally in October, he had had enough. "Hey, man, can you just move your stuff!" he said, clearly upset.

"It didn't sound very nice," he remembers. "I really wish I could have taken that back."

Mr. Blumenreich retreated into silence for several weeks. "I wasn't used to having someone harp on me to change who I am, to clean up after myself," he says. Adding to the tension, Mr. Blumenreich was hearing from other students that Mr. Melson was unhappy with him.

The epiphanies came after winter break.

"Ryan came back and walked into the room with a big smile on his face," Mr. Blumenreich says, "and he seemed so happy to see me that we just talked and we realized it was an insignificant difference. I realized I can't always do things the way I want to."

Mr. Melson compromised, too: "I've gotten a little messier myself."

MANY campuses don't have sufficient housing to accommodate student requests for room changes.

At Loyola University in Chicago, students who want to switch rooms have to find someone to trade places with them. Four years ago, as requests began to increase (to 50 now from about 20), the university started a "swap night" three weeks into classes for students dissatisfied with their roommates. It's a chance to size up potential roommates. Pizza is served.

"It takes the burden off professional staff to match the people up and it engages students to own the process so the student has some say," says Warren Hale, former director of residence life at Loyola and now director of university residence halls and apartments at the University at Buffalo.

When relationships really go south, colleges react. Marist used to ban first-semester students from changing roommates but in the past few years has been making more exceptions, Ms. English says. "It just gets to the point where they can't live together anymore and we've exhausted all conflict negotiations and they are sleeping in other rooms and it's involving other people," she says.

Five years ago, 5 to 10 students at Marist might have asked to change roommates after the first six weeks; now 30 to 40 do. Marist has had to assign more staff members to freshmen dorms to referee conflicts, which number two to three a day during the first weeks, and peak again during times of stress like exam period. (Older students generate only two or three interventions a semester.)

Colleges are focusing on training members of the residence staff in conflict resolution. R.A.'s at the University of Florida attend a two-hour session with a psychologist on how to handle roommate confrontations. Some colleges have roommates draw up and sign a contract on bedtime schedules, study times, sex in the room, room cleanup and using each other's possessions. The goal is to anticipate issues and provide students with a starting point to discuss problems as they arise.

Colleges have also been moving away from the purely random assignment, adding lengthier questionnaires designed to pinpoint compatibility or software programs that allow students to have a greater say in who becomes their roommate. "That ownership is incredibly important," Mr. Dunkel says. The University of Florida uses RoomBug, a Facebook application in which students describe themselves and their vision of a perfect roommate, then browse profiles. Prospective matches communicate on Facebook, and submit their request to the school. But such matchmaking is hardly foolproof.

The lion's share of freshman-year roommates -- 72 percent according to one study, 83 percent in another -- don't live together sophomore year. Instead, they choose from compatible friends, supporting sociologists' theory of homophily: birds of a feather flock together.

Colleen Card, Kara Gifford and Bridget Christie, freshmen at Marist last year, will live together in the fall. Ms. Christie says they are free spirits who talk easily with one another (unlike her first roommate, who preferred Post-its to talking about sticky issues like restocking the water bottles in their fridge). They also stay up late to study and like to sleep in.

At Marist, campus housing after freshman year is assigned based on merit. Students get more points for high G.P.A.'s, campus involvement and good conduct (like not being written up for under-age drinking) and deductions for infractions (like damaging rooms). The best housing goes to high scoring groups of roommates.

At an all-day event in April, students gathered in the gym to learn the housing consequences of their actions and friendships. Based on their group's point average, students selected housing style and size. Snacks and boxes of tissue were on hand along with members of the housing and counseling staff to buffer bad news.

As the day progressed, choices diminished. No more townhouses for 10? Only suites for six? Friends must be dropped from the group -- thus the Kleenex. Most of the strategizing, though, occurred before the event.

A rocky first semester academically had given Ms. Gifford a low score. Ms. Card's was average. Friends with designs on the desirable Gartland Commons dorm ditched Ms. Gifford, but Ms. Card refused to abandon her in the service of better housing.

The two teamed with Ms. Christie, a top scorer who was then invited to join another student with high points. She, too, declined, even with the prospect of another year in a restrictive freshman dorm. "Our room will be the cool room, the cool, drama-free room," Ms. Card said.

Then, in a twist of fate, this month their names were plucked from a waiting list for Gartland Commons, a destination that eluded those first friends. "It's really funny the way it worked out," Ms. Card says now. "I chose to stay with Kara and get along with my roommates instead of living with a group of people whom I might not have gotten along with but had better housing. And I ended up getting my roommate and getting good housing."

Abigail Sullivan Moore is a co-author of "The iConnected Parent: Staying Close to Your Kids in College (and Beyond) While Letting Them Grow Up," to be published in August by Free Press.

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