

By: Maya Harris

Roommate Conflict Is A Top Stressor Among Students

Leaving dishes in the sink, entertaining guests too late, and leaving the lights on past bedtime--are all common problems University of Minnesota Twin Cities students are facing with their roommates.

Roommate conflicts have long been at the core of college life. But the number of students reporting roommate conflicts as one of their top stressors has increased over the past six years on campus, a trend that many say reflects heightened difficulties of living together in the age of social media.

About one in five students report having roommate conflicts according to the 2018 Boynton College Student Health Survey, with 27.4% of those students saying it has affected their academics.

Resident directors and roommates themselves say social media may have a role to play in how students are setting expectations for roommates, communicating, and resolving conflict.

"I think students have a greater fear of being direct," Rebecca Lehman, resident director at 17th Avenue Residence Hall, said. "Clear communication without analogy is important, sometimes you just have to be direct."

University Residence Life believes that conflict is a normal part of life and teaching students how to deal with that conflict is their goal.

"We believe that student learning and development occur when community members connect across difference, engage in individual self-discovery and work together to navigate barriers and conflict," the residence life vision states.

The problem may start before school even begins. More students are beginning to meet and choose their roommates through social media and quickly finding out that they may not be the same person their accounts claim to be.

"A lot of people want to avoid face to face communication so they may text or put things on social media. I think student's kind of fall back on it as a way to communicate," Lori Swenson, a counselor at the University Student Conflict Resolution Center, said.

"I met my freshman year roommate on Facebook and after talking with her for a while we decided to become roommates," Taylor Hall, a junior at the university, said. "On her social media it seemed like she was a very outgoing, positive person, while in reality she was extremely negative which made living with her hard."

"I met one of my housemates randomly because the girl that normally lives with us is studying abroad," Kiley Nelson, a junior at the university, said. "All of my other roommates and I talked to her on Facebook and she claimed that she was really clean and friendly, but that was not the truth."

Once the relationship is established, social media can intensify conflicts if they arise. Many students complain about roommates who insult them on private accounts. That happened in Hall's case.

"My roommate also had a private account that she used kind of as a diary. There were multiple times where she would use the account to complain about things I was doing," Hall said.

Such conflicts can add significantly to the stress of school in ways that students don't always realize, Dave Golden, the director of public health and communications at Boynton Health, said. "Roommate conflicts are in that category of chronic stress," he said. "Unmanaged stress can be detrimental."

"It was difficult to establish a good sleep schedule due to our conflicting class schedules. It was often difficult to wake up and attend my morning classes due to noise at night," Austing Zhang, a senior at the university, said. "It was a pretty big stressor as I had never had to share a living space with anyone else. I'm already pretty self-conscious and tend to overthink things, and this exasperated these tendencies."

More and more students are having difficulty communicating face to face and a lot of students are not skilled in that way of communicating, Swenson said. "I think because of social media and because of their family upbringing students are more sheltered from difficulty and have a harder time when challenges come up. We have parents that come and want to resolve conflicts for their son or daughter and I never used to deal with that."

Students are needing more and more help with communicating face-to-face as the use of devices is increasing. A lot of it is a lack of skill in communication, Swenson said.

"A lot of what we do is consult with them on what are the best ways to communicate with the other person. We want to know what they've tried already. What has worked and what hasn't," Swenson said. "It isn't about I'm right and you're wrong, it's about the grey area of communication."