

8 CLASSIC ROOMMATE DILEMMAS — AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM

by Leigh Kamping-Carder | 7/31/14 - 9:59 AM

Whether it's your first time rooming with someone, or your fifth, conflict will likely ensue. There's so much fodder for friction: What's the best way to look for an apartment, who gets which bedroom, how do you make sure the damn place gets cleaned?

We compiled some of the trickiest roommate-related conundrums and canvassed average New Yorkers, real estate brokers and roommate experts for their best advice:

1. How do you figure out if you're compatible?

The single biggest piece of advice is “trust your gut.” If you're not sure about someone but can't necessarily say why, it doesn't matter. ... Often people think friends or friends of friends make the best roommates but, when we asked our users, most people said strangers made better roommates. Living with your friends can put extra pressure on the relationship, especially when it comes to money matters. Sometimes it's best to live with people you like but socialize with your friends. —*Matt Hutchinson of SpareRoom, a search site for rooms and roommates*



Following an initial phone call or email exchange, the prospective roommates can meet in person for an interview. ... The first month can be considered a trial period where you iron out the wrinkles and meet with each other on a weekly basis to just talk about how the situation is evolving. It will take some time to figure it out but roommates should get a good idea within the first few days and weeks. —*Douglass Leavy, founder of Rainbow Roommates, an LGBTQ roommate-search site*

There are a few things you can do to help you feel out if you're making the right decision: do you all have the same feelings on cleanliness? Do you have similar work/life schedules? These are things that can make or break a roommate experience. —*John Le Vine, managing partner EXR Group*

It also helps for both roommates to be in similar financial situations. It can cause tension if one roommate feels they cannot “keep up” with the other—or on the other side of the token, if one roommate feels the other is “pulling them down” by being late with bills, rent etc. ... Also remember that there is no better way to kill a friendship than by living together. People who are friends often take liberties with each other they wouldn't dream of taking with strangers or acquaintances. As the saying goes, “you only hurt the ones you love.” —*Andrew Sacks, an agent at brokerage Citi Habitats*

Editor's note: Try using BrickUnderground's roommate questionnaire—20 questions that will help you determine if sharing a roof with that person is a good idea.

2. What's the best way to find an apartment that you're all happy with? Does everyone have to check out each place, or do you divide up responsibilities? If so, how?

Try and get everyone looking for apartments—maybe divide up your target area into sections and take one each. Whoever finds the one you end up taking gets first choice of room. That can work as a great motivator. ... Ideally you all want to see an apartment before you move in, but sometimes, especially if you all have different work schedules, that can be difficult. You really want to see the apartment before moving day. If one of you ends up unhappy it can create tension and cause problems further down the line. You don't want one of your roommates to be able to say, “I never wanted to live here in the first place.” —*Matt Hutchinson*

Talk it out first to determine if you have shared opinions or divergencies about what's important in an apartment: is it proximity to a subway? Outdoor space? Are you all willing to compromise space for a more desirable location? If you get these details out of the way first, it can make your apartment search considerably easier and avoid potential issues down the road. ... If someone is out of town, it needs to be clearly stated that the person or persons moving forward with the apartment process have the trust and authority from the other roommates who are not present. —*John Le Vine*

You wouldn't want to take on the responsibility of finding an apartment without the person you plan on living with. Everyone has specific likes and dislikes. —*Rachel, Midtown East resident*
If all roommates are present at the first showing with funds and paperwork in hand, your odds of getting the apartment increase greatly. If not possible, video chatting or your phone's camera can be useful tools. —*Andrew Sacks*

3. How do you split the rent: evenly, by income or room size?

In many apartment shares you can just split the rent evenly, but it's not always possible. Room size is always a good way to divide things up as it can take income into account without embarrassing anyone. It's less depressing to think "I pay less rent because I have the smaller room" than "I pay less rent because I don't earn as much as my roommates do." —*Matt Hutchinson*

It tends to get awkward either way. You do whatever you are each comfortable with. —*Rachel*

4. How do you figure out who gets which room?

When my roommate and I were looking, we rarely came across an apartment with equally sized rooms. In our case it was simple [to choose rooms], since we each had slightly different budgets. The one with the higher budget got the larger room. —*Andrew Sacks*

If you can't work it out amicably in a discussion, then the next logical place to go is by pricing the most desirable room higher than the other rooms and seeing if you can settle on a price-based solution. If you can't work it out in either of those two ways, you should maybe reconsider your living situation. —*John Le Vine*

Simple things like drawing lots or rock, paper, scissors can work. I was in exactly that situation a few years ago and we decided by having a game of air hockey—the winner got the room! We figured we had to do something neither of us had an unfair advantage at and air hockey came out top. I got the room. —*Matt Hutchinson*

That is dictated by circumstances. Who has a tighter budget? Who has the bigger furniture? —*Rachel*

Editor's note: You may also want to take Sperner's Lemma for a whirl. This mathematical theorem, featured recently on the New York Times, helps people split up things of different value by calculating how much the items are worth to each person. And yes, it totally works for unevenly sized rooms and rent.

5. How do you decide whose name(s) goes on the lease?

Everyone who lives in an apartment should be on the lease, but that's not always realistic. That said, leases only come into play in worst-case situations. So, evaluate your situation, determine your risk, and make a call. —*John Le Vine*

It's always a good idea for both roommates to sign the apartment lease. This way both parties have equal rights and financial responsibility for the space. In my situation, for my roommate and I to qualify for the apartment we chose, both of our names had to go on the lease to make the 40 times the monthly rent in annual income that the landlord required. —*Andrew Sacks*

The [leaseholder] is usually the roommate who is looking for someone to move in. It's rare that a new roommate moving into a shared apartment will be added to the lease. You could consider using a roommate agreement as a good exercise and general guide to how the share will be managed.—*Douglass Leavy*

6. If you need a guarantor, how do you decide who takes on that responsibility?

If possible, everyone should have a guarantor—if one is needed. If that's not possible, then it's about feeling comfortable with the people you are living with, and the responsibility that the guarantor is taking on. —*John Le Vine*

*Editor's note: Read up on how guarantors can protect themselves. And if you're having trouble figuring out who's going to volunteer to be the guarantor—or finding one in the first place—you may want to check out **Insurent**, a professional guarantor solution and a BrickUnderground sponsor.*

7. How do you split up decorating and furnishing common areas?

Teamwork! While some people share the cost of big-ticket items like a couch or television, to me it's too much of a hassle. Who gets it when you move out? You could always sell it online and split the proceeds, but who has time for that? Each person should do their best to contribute furniture to the common area and when the lease is up, what's yours stays yours and what's mine stays mine! —*Andrew Sacks*

You need to come to a decision together. Come up with a theme or a color together and from there you can split up all the specifics. —*Rachel*

Take an inventory of who owns what and take pictures or videos of the items to record the state the items are in. —*Douglass Leavy*

Just agree beforehand. If someone wants to splurge and get a 50-inch flat panel [television] instead of a 32-inch one, then that person should pay the difference. —*John Le Vine*

8. How do you make sure chores get done?

You need to communicate and come up with a system that works for you. Also, make sure the work is divided evenly. There can't be one roommate pulling all the weight. —*Rachel*

I would suggest a chore list put on the fridge in the kitchen or maybe an app. Be sure to meet each week at the beginning of the share to make sure each is doing their share of the chores and to discuss how things are going for each other. —*Douglass Leavy*

With my roommate, we handle them as they come up. That fits both of our personalities. The great part about it is that if one of us lets our guard down the other is good at nudging and motivating the other. People who make formal "chore schedules" and Excel spreadsheets about whose turn it is to load the dishwasher don't seem like a real blast to live with to me. —*Andrew Sacks*