From sharing closet space to coming out of the closet [1]

Dear Alice,

When I came to Columbia, my roommate and I got along really well. We still do. However, three weeks into the year, I learned that he is gay. I have no problems with this, I'd like to think that I'm open-minded? but can you give me some advice on how to handle this relationship?

?The Heterosexual Roommate

Answer

Dear The Heterosexual Roommate,

It sounds as though you're wondering whether your roommate's coming out to you is going to affect the friendly relationship you've developed already. You seem to want to know what, if anything, you need to do differently now that you have this additional information about your roommate. These are good questions, and asking about this already shows that you put a lot of thought into preserving a good relationship with your roommate.

It's important to start off with reminding yourself that your roommate is the same person now that he was when you first met him. That your roommate is gay needn't affect your relationship, as either roommates or friends. Gay and lesbian people live with straight and gay people and have friends who are straight and gay. Your roommate's being gay is probably just one of the ways in which he is different from you, and it sounds as though you're an open-minded person who appreciates the differences among his friends.

As for how to handle the relationship, you might find you can handle it the same as you would if your roommate were straight. There are always some awkward moments among roommates, but they might not necessarily be due to sexuality. It may be helpful to think about what you want and need from a roommate. Some useful questions to help you figure out how to manage your living situation may include: How often should we clean our shared space? What is our policy on overnight guests (of any gender)? Do we like to throw parties or keep the place quiet? For more tips on being good roommates, you may want to read I don't want to sexile my new roommate [2], which addresses roommates' rights and responsibilities.

It isn't clear from your question whether your roommate told you himself that he is gay, or whether you heard about it from others. If he told you himself, then he may be open to having a conversation about any questions you might have. You might have questions about your roommate's sexual orientation, and he may or may not answer them. You may also have
questions about the details of living together: try to keep that conversation general. Your roommate probably shares many of the questions or concerns you have. For example, you might want to ask about how you both feel if he were to bring a guy home at night, just as he might want to talk about what to do if you were to bring someone home! This issue, similar to many others, is an issue having to do with living and sharing a residential space with someone—gay, straight, bisexual, black, white, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, whatever.

Dealing with roommate concerns for what they are—the mundane concerns and issues of two people living with each other—and not making sexuality an issue is a great way to show your roommate that you appreciate him for who he is. If you're at Columbia and you want to learn more or ask questions, one resource that you might want to check out is Everyone Allied Against Homophobia [3], a Columbia version of a gay-straight alliance.

Some people might be less comfortable than you seem with your roomie. Readers can try their school's Ombuds office or gay-straight alliance, if there is one. Finally, for more information about sexuality, and about being an ally, you might want to take a look at the Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) [4].

Alice!
Category:
Relationships [5]
Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, or Questioning [6]
Relating [7]
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Related questions
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How do I know if I'm gay? [10]
Help! My roommate's a lesbian! [11]
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Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [13]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [14]
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