Dear Alice,

I am a graduate student. My roommate, also a grad student, has B.O., big-time! She bathes so infrequently, that it takes her almost two months to go through a bar of soap (I'm not kidding)! Given my current relationship with her, I am unable to let her know that she stinks.

This smell is evident in her towels, clothes, and room. At times it also permeates the air of other areas of the apartment that are adjacent and not adjacent to her room. It is so offensive, that I am forced to keep my door closed because the stench from her room finds its way into my room and nauseates me.

My question is: why is it that she does not realize that she has B.O.? Has she grown immune to her own scent? What would possess a 35 year old woman not to maintain a schedule of regular hygiene? I'm sorry if this letter sounds petty, but you are the only source I can go to and ask otherwise "embarrassing" and "silly" questions.

Signed,
Living with Pepe Le Pew!

P.S.: I enjoy your "column." Keep it up!

Answer

Dear Living with Pepe Le Pew!,

Frustration with a roommate's standard of cleanliness (or seeming lack of standards) is a common issue for many people living in shared spaces. However, it sounds like your situation has reached a point where your roommate's habits are infringing on your ability to live comfortably at home: in other words, it may be time for some kind of action.
First, let's talk about body odor. Perspiration is normal and usually has a distinctive odor, but on average is not terribly offensive. Offensive odor such as you describe is caused by bacteria on the skin and clothing. Often times, people can reduce odor by improving their hygiene habits (bathing more often with soap, using deodorant). Some people also benefit by taking zinc supplements (30 mg a day) to help reduce the odor. Your roommate may find that an antibacterial soap helps reduce odor-causing bacteria more than regular soap. Anti-bacterial soaps are easy to find at any drug store or supermarket; or if your roommate is inclined towards 'natural' products, soap with tea tree oil (which has antimicrobial properties) may do the trick.

It sounds like the odor in your abode may run deeper than a general lack of personal hygiene. If there are smells emanating from her bedroom, your roommate may have old food or waste that is contributing, or piles of laundry waiting to be washed; it is unlikely that body odor alone could waft so far and cause such a stench.

Hygiene basics are easy; bringing the issue up to your roommate may be more difficult. You mention that you don't have the type of relationship where you could talk to your roommate about this issue; if this is the case, you could try to approach her indirectly. For instance, you could try a gift basket with scented soaps, bath bubbles, lotions, herbal deodorant, exotic detergent, etc.; maybe she will get the hint. However, keep in mind that as frustrated as you may be, it would be unreasonable to expect your roommate to read your mind. An indirect approach, while less confrontational, certainly has its limitations.

To directly address the issue, you may want to consider some of the following:

- Is your roommate truly aware of the smell? If she is not, and you bring the issue to light, she may feel embarrassed, but agree to try change her ways.

- Did you discuss any "house rules" when you began living together? If so, it may be time to revisit the discussion and ask your roommate to live up to the agreement. If not, it's never too late to set up a house meeting and discuss what standards of cleanliness each of you can agree to. You could choose to discuss any house issues as well, although her odor would presumably be at the top of your list.

- Do you have an especially sensitive sniffer, or unusually high sanitary standards? You may want to ask a friend to assess the odor situation, as back up. If your roommate doesn't believe the odor is as offensive as you say, confirmation from an outside party may help her see your side.

To confront her, you may ask your roommate to sit and have a talk at a mutually convenient time. You could present the problem with an "I" statement, to minimize any defensiveness on her part: "I can't get used to your smell, but I have some ideas that may help me adjust, if you would consider them?." Have some suggestions prepared, such as: Setting up a bathroom schedule, so each of you has time to bathe regularly; setting up a cleaning schedule so that trash is removed regularly, vacuuming and sweeping are done, the refrigerator is emptied of old food, etc.; or splitting the cost of a weekly or bi-weekly house cleaner. You can also ask your roommate for her perspective on the issue — is she aware? Does she have time to
clean? Does she agree there is a problem? Try to listen to her, and have a calm conversation to reach some agreements about how to keep your apartment clean. Hopefully the two of you will be able to reach an agreement, as well as begin to build the foundation for a civil living situation.

Your roommate may or may not agree there is a problem. If she fails to try to work with you to make your home comfortable for the both of you, and you cannot tolerate living with her, you may decide to take a different, more drastic approach: finding a new roommate. Either you or she could consider moving out, which takes a lot of work, but is always an option.... Good luck!

Alice!
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Published date:
Jan 01, 1994
Last reviewed on:
May 23, 2014

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