Hi Alice,

I'm a junior in college and I live in a suite with five other girls. We are all best friends, except for one girl. None of us like her because she says anything that pops into her head (she told one of my suitemates, who is battling an eating disorder, that she looked pregnant), and she is constantly trying to find out gossip about us. After a night of fun, she will come into all of our rooms, and pump us for info (she hasn't gone out with us yet this year). She thrives on knowing gossip about anyone and everyone. My question is: how can we tell her to mind her own business and shut her mouth? Also: how can we tell her that we don't want her to live with us next year? Thanks for your help!

? A student who has had enough!

Answer

Dear A student who has had enough!,

What you and your suitemates are struggling with is likely to sound familiar to many. Living in close quarters, perhaps with someone you don't know very well, can be a source of stress and the root cause of communication breakdowns. In thinking about how to remedy your situation, it's critical to consider the possible reasons why your suitemate is acting this way and any role you and your friends play in this behavior. Once that's clear, you'll be able to present the facts to her in a way that gets your point across effectively.

The cohabiter in question may simply be annoying without much chance for change, but is there anything about the way you and your best friends are acting that might be exacerbating your suitemate's nosiness? Perhaps one reason for this behavior is her disappointment in not being included among your group of best friends. Imagine how lonely and frustrating it might feel to always be excluded. Sometimes, it's difficult to hide these feelings and may lead to her over-eagerness to hear everything she missed.

There's also a chance that you and your best friends unknowingly act clique-y — creating a situation where your suitemate feels that she has to go fishing for information. Showing some interest in her life and voluntarily sharing some of yours might go a long way in changing the dynamic. If you and your friends make a concerted, honest effort to be more inclusive of your suitemate, perhaps she'll lay off a bit.

What bothers you the most about your suitemate's behavior? Her desire to be included in your
activities? Her tendency to gossip? Comments she's made that seem disrespectful? Of course, the responsibility doesn't lie completely with you. Your suitemate also needs to adjust her behavior. How do you tell her this? Coming right out and reading her a laundry list of behaviors that bother you probably won't be very effective. Instead, sharing simple, consistent messages typically work best. For example, one of you can take her aside and quietly explain, in private, that it hurts you to hear her say things about your friend and that you'd really appreciate it if she'd try to be more understanding. It's also helpful to focus on things you have directly observed, so you can state facts instead of simply sharing your opinion of her. The key here is being clear, yet sensitive.

If subtle approaches are ineffective, you may need to sit down with her and simply explain how her comments and behavior make you feel. While it's tempting, try to avoid the urge to confront your suitemate as a group; ranting about all the things she's said that upset the rest of you may make her defensive and ultimately lead to an unproductive conversation. Try to first understand where she is coming from to ensure there aren't any underlying issues. It's also critical that you give her a chance to respond and keep an open mind. It could also be that she has no idea that she's getting on your nerves. In preparation for and following the conversation, it's a good idea to model the behavior you're hoping to see: don't disappear into one of your rooms, without her, and whisper about all of your gripes.

Lastly, what would you like to see happen for the remaining time left this year... and the rest of your time in college? Hopefully talking with this suitemate will help pave the way for a more comfortable living situation for the rest of the year. If things are still prickly and you live in a residence hall, your resident advisor (RA) or other residential life staff can help you strategize and develop some plans of action. You may choose to have a mediated discussion, explore schedule adjustments that would minimize contact, or try to ignore what you find intrusive and learn to let it slide. If, when it comes time to pick housing for next year, you still feel that living with her won't work, it's best to be honest about it. It's possible that she'll be thinking the same thing... but maybe not. Using the same direct, honest, sensitive approach really may be an effective way to have a discussion. While her feelings may be hurt, you can feel good knowing that you've been respectful and true to your own needs.

Good luck!

Alice!
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