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Roommate can bring problems into your space

By EVE GLICKSMAN

As if leaving high school friends and family to start a new life in college isn't enough of a panic. Now you have to live with a randomly selected stranger who will be privy to your phone messages or how often you floss.

This could be your next best friend for life ... or you could find yourself begging to get reassigned after two weeks.

Ready for the worst first?

Peter Stine used to wake up and find his freshman roommate staring at him, or hear him replaying a song for three hours straight. But the kicker was his roomie's extensive knife collection and off-the-wall quip one day: "What would you do if I tried to kill you?"

Stine, now a 28-year-old lawyer in Wynnewood, Pa., moved out in haste at the end of the semester.

Anyone who has had roommates will laugh if you ask about the convivial bunch on TV's "Friends." The size of the apartment on the show is not realistic, says Steve Martin, 26, who shared a New York duplex. "If you don't have that large common area for personal space, there's a lot more tension!"

Ask Julie Norris, a 19-year-old sophomore at Ohio State University, who lived with three other women as a freshman. She woke up one morning to find two men she didn't know filing out of her bathroom.

Cheryl Kabel, 29, a public relations professional in Orlando, Fla., had an infuriatingly cheap roommate who used to tally the cost of every stamp she used to pay their bills. Patrick Panzarella, 31, a mortgage company financial officer in San Antonio, Texas, lived with a food bandit. "We found out he didn't like bologna, and we all started buying it because it was the only thing he wouldn't chow down."

Dale Lehrfeld estimates that one in three students she used to see as a staff psychologist at Temple University Counseling Services in Philadelphia raised a roommate issue during the course of treatment. Many students arrive never having had a roommate before, she says. "There can be many adjustment issues."

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Linda Bips, director of Counseling and Development at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pa., echoes that today's crop of students seem less willing to and less capable of coping with even the pettiest squabbles because most are accustomed to rooms of their own. Roommate problems tend to be most difficult in college, she adds, because "your room is the entire world. You spend more of your free time there."

Muhlenberg College doesn't allow roommate changes for at least six weeks, and encourages students to try to work things out, Bips says. "Roommates have to recognize that there will always be a level of discomfort that has to be tolerated in living with another person." The key, she says, is respect and learning to live with differences.

At Ohio State, Norris was allowed to change rooms after one month, when the tension got so bad that two of her roommates refused to speak to her. The last straw? A fourth roommate, a friend of Norris, ate one of their granola bars.

To avert explosive situations, Temple University asks students to sign a roommate agreement, a voluntary contract requiring that roommates discuss possible conflicts and misunderstandings. The topics in the agreement encompass everything from study time and phone use, to overnight guests and borrowing rules. Ohio State has a similar requirement.

Discussing these issues upfront might have saved Stine another bad roommate during law school. He knew the guy he moved in with, but didn't count on his girlfriend — a woman he didn't get along with — being there all the time. Then, there was the mess.

"You could not see the floor because there was so much junk. The cat's litter box overflowed and everything smelled," Stine said. Stine's girlfriend ultimately refused to visit because of the filth.

Bips points out that people can be friends but not be able to live together. Indeed, Stine moved out after five months and shares this advice: "Don't lock yourself into a lease for a whole year. It might cost more to get a short-term lease, but it's worth it."

So who makes the best roommate?

Whatever you do, don't move in with your best friend, declares Sylvia Bergthold, who wrote and published "Sorry, the Boa Has Gotta Go! A Roommate Survival Guide" last year. See:

<http://www.a roommate survivalguide.com>

Unless you have a very close, longstanding relationship with a brother or sister, she would issue the same warning to adult siblings considering cohabitation. "Best friends know each other too well. They say things to each other they would normally not say to someone else. They end up hurting each other and destroying the friendship."

Panzarella agrees, maintaining that rooming with a best buddy is "pushing the limit."

"It is tough if there is friction and you usually do everything together," Panzarella said.

Many who go into the workforce after high school and move out of parents' houses may also need a roommate to make ends meet. How do you find one?

Bergthold has used classified ads to find roommates for her California house and interviews each promising candidate twice. Watch for signs of instability, she says. Kabela recommends the company bulletin board to advertise for a roommate. "At work, you can ask around and check the person out," she says.

What about choosing a roommate of another gender? Last fall, Marlboro College in Vermont became one of a few colleges in the country to allow students to select opposite sex roommates in regular dorm rooms. Annette Huffman, 24, and Steve Martin, 26, said it worked for them. Both attended Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, and shared a duplex after college in New York City, until Huffman moved back to Ohio.

While they had the classic skirmishes over the toilet seat up or down, Huffman, now working at a Toledo public relations agency, said she loved having a guy around to provide a male perspective when discussing dates. Martin, who still works at Merrill Lynch in New York, downplays the gender angle, saying it was their similar lifestyles and "lots of respect and compromise" that made them so compatible.

While Huffman and Martin are not best friends, they did catch a movie or have drinks together sometimes.

But having a roommate in your mid-20s is different from college, says Huffman, who remembers wanting to do everything with her college roommates. Panzarella concurs that his roommate needs likewise changed when he started working. "After college, you want people who are on the same work schedule as you. I had a bartender roommate who came home at 3 or 4 a.m. when I was going to sleep at 10:30 p.m. That roommate was short-lived."

What if there were no financial concerns? How many would still elect to share space? "I come from a big noisy family and like having a roommate," says Huffman. She and her roommate looked after each other, making her feel safer, she says. While they live in different states now, they visit each other and remain close.

After her first disastrous roommate experience at Ohio State, Norris is very happy with her current roommate and assures nervous incoming freshmen that bad situations can be quickly remedied. She also admits that she could have done a better job of setting clear limits with her roommates in the beginning.

In the end, Lehrfeld says there are more stories of successful roommates than not. Between borrowing the forbidden sweater and tying up the phone line, the good news is that most roommates are able to work it out.

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