Hi Alice,

I'm a new student at my school and have a kind of odd problem. You see, I went to a really conservative boarding school and was never very comfortable with my body (especially when it entailed someone else seeing it naked!), so this whole co-ed bathroom thing is freakin’ me out! I know this is pretty silly, but every time I shower I become paranoid that a guy is on the verge of accidentally pulling back the curtain (or worse yet — can see my nude silhouette through those revealing plastic sheets). I just unpacked and classes start tomorrow so I don't want to move out of my dorm... please help or else my speedy showers are going to lead to a stinky start!

Thanks,
a prude

Answer

Dear a prude,

You're certainly not alone in your concerns about co-ed bathrooms (more commonly called gender-neutral or gender-inclusive bathrooms). Plenty of students don't like feeling vulnerable when showering close to a person of a different sex or gender. At the same time, many students appreciate the added level of closeness that sharing spaces brings to a residence hall floor. Your capacity to think about how your past experiences contribute to your current feelings is insightful and may be helpful in sorting out the root cause of these feelings. Exploring these feelings and understanding the purpose of gender-neutral bathrooms may reveal methods to address your situation.

First things first: why do gender-neutral bathrooms exist in the first place? Among other reasons, gender-neutral bathrooms can help to address access to facilities for the LGBTQ+ community (in particular, trans and gender non-conforming people). For transgender individuals, their sex assigned at birth is inconsistent with their gender. Approximately 70 percent of transgender people are denied access to public single-sex facilities at some point in their lives, and those who do use them can be at increased risk of physical, verbal, and sexual assault — that includes intimidation, fear tactics, as well as verbal aggression. Given that these people often don’t feel safe in single-sex bathroom settings, studies show they often avoid bathrooms altogether,
leading to decreased academic and work performance, heightened risk for bladder and urinary infections, as well as an inability to participate in gendered extracurricular activities with peers. Gender-neutral bathrooms help to address these barriers and offer space for individuals who prefer to use inclusive facilities that don’t differentiate based off binary sex and gender categories (such as male or female and boy or girl). To your point about opening curtains, research indicates that there’s no evidence that having gender-neutral bathrooms contributes to a heightened risk of such incidences.

Knowing the rationale behind having gender-neutral bathrooms may not ease your concern about a man seeing you through — or even opening — your shower curtain. Escaping these worrying thoughts can be challenging but may be made easier with knowledge. It’s worth noting that there’s been no evidence of an increase in sexual assaults or other criminal behavior in restrooms in states that have enacted gender-identity-inclusive public accommodation nondiscrimination laws. If knowledge such as this doesn’t ease your worries, you may consider planning your shower times when you anticipate others won’t be there, such as early in the morning or late at night. Or, perhaps you can coordinate your shower time with a friend so that someone you know and trust will be in the bathroom with you while you shower. If trying these strategies doesn’t help your concerns subside and you’re still experiencing shared bathroom woes, it may be worth reaching out for other options and support.

Starting college is an exciting and challenging transition, but it sure can be tough to juggle new stressors. If you ultimately decide this isn’t something you can move past, you may consider asking a school administrator for help moving to a building that offers single-sex bathrooms. If you choose to stay in your residence hall, there’s no shame in seeking out help from a mental health professional — even if you’re not entirely sure from where your concerns stem. Feeling comfortable in your new living space is critical for making the most of your college experience, and hopefully this has provided you with more information and options for you to do so.

Good luck with your school year,

Alice!

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