Dear Alice,

This is more of a coping question. I am a first-year who applied for a single room over the summer and was denied. I figured that everything would be okay nevertheless. I tried to look at the situation as a character-builder. Well, that is not the case. My roommate is very depressed. I talked to the RA on my floor, but she didn’t take any action, except to talk with her. Unfortunately, my roommate is so ashamed of what’s happening that she denied the facts, and the RA believed her. No one except me has realized yet that she is sleeping most of the day and all of the night, and that it is indeed a real problem. I have expressed my concern to her and encouraged her to go to counseling services. She went a couple of times and then started canceling appointments left and right. I have worried about her, but I have no backup whatsoever, so there is really nothing I can do to help at this point. We get along relatively well otherwise.

Right now, the concern I have is that her depression is pulling me down, too. I literally have not been alone anywhere for more than two to three minutes in weeks. I wanted a single because it’s a requirement that I spend some time by myself, and I’m going crazy these days. The lights are always out in the room, and I’ve noticed that I’m sleeping more than usual myself as the situation has progressed. Also, I am having to deal with some personal issues of my own this semester, and I simply don’t have the energy to take care of someone else who desperately wishes that I would do so. Any ideas would be greatly appreciated.

— Wish I Were a Loner

Answer

Dear Wish I Were a Loner,

Seems like you’re in a tight position! There appear to be two levels to your current predicament: first is getting help for your roommate, and second is getting relief and support for yourself. Your concerns are certainly legitimate, and the events you’ve described call for more action than brief conversations, or ones that don’t go anywhere. Bringing this information to others who may be able to assist and setting some boundaries may help with your situation. Additionally, it can be helpful to remember that your responsibilities as a caring roommate only extend so far. It’s great that you’d like to help and connecting your roommate with others falls within that role, but it’s key
that you take care of yourself before trying to take care of others.

You said that you spoke with the resident assistant (RA) — how about the residence hall director (RD), residence life coordinator (RLC), or other similar types of people at your school? Are there any other friends, hall mates, advisors, deans, or relatives of your roommate who could help out — people whom your roommate respects and trusts, and who might even accompany her to resources on- or off-campus? This may help your roommate feel supported while taking some of the onus off of you.

You may also want to try calling your school's counseling service just to get their advice on what to do in this tough situation — they may have suggestions for what you could say to your roommate, perhaps providing some words that might encourage her to get the help she needs. They also may be able to help you with some strategies for coping with your roommate and dealing with your own personal issues. There are several other options that you may want to consider for getting help for your roommate such as: your campus's peer support and referral service, a mental health hotline, or your school's health and counseling service. For more information about how to refer a friend to resources and having tricky conversations, you can check out Friend is depressed — How to help? [2] in the Go Ask Alice! Emotional Health [3] archives.

Whether or not your roommate decides to take action on her mental health, you may want to ask her to come to an agreement with you about having alone time in your room. One suggestion may be trading off evenings alone or scheduling a block of time when you know she'll be at class or the library. It's perfectly reasonable to need down time; both of you may benefit from an agreement that allows each of you to be alone sometimes and also encourages each of you to be out of the room at other times. When you approach this conversation, it may be most effective to use 'I' statements, such as 'I'm the kind of person who needs some alone time, and it would be helpful to me to have time alone in the room....'

Speaking of you, looking to some similar resources may help you to draw some more comfortable boundaries, allowing you to concentrate on your own needs. Try taking some time to focus on your priorities — and consider how to continue taking care of your roommate while also taking care of yourself.

Alice!
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