Roommate has FAS — Differences in communication?  

Dear Alice,

I live with a girl who has FAS and I don’t understand her because she functions differently than the rest of us. What can I do?

Confused Canadian #15

Answer

Dear Confused Canadian #15,

Despite good intentions, it's not uncommon for people to have a tough time getting along with their roommates. Individuals have their own unique way of functioning and communicating that stems from a combination of factors, including, but not limited to their upbringing, culture, and genetics. It isn't always easy to bridge the gap when you interpret the world differently from another person. As you may be discovering, co-living is one of the spaces where people’s differences can clash up against each other and cause some difficulties. In your case, your roomie’s fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), as well as your lack of familiarity with it, might be contributing factors to some of these communication barriers. As you hinted at, learning more about your differences, and also what you have in common, may make it easier for you both to live together and even improve your relationship.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause a variety of problems in the fetus, collectively known as FAS. Like other syndromes, FAS includes a set of symptoms, both physical and cognitive, and specific characteristics may or may not appear in each individual. Some of the most common physical symptoms of fetal alcohol syndrome may include distinct facial features, heart problems, and vision and hearing impediments, among others. People with FAS may also have cognitive impairments, including:

- Slow intellectual development
- Short attention span and hyperactivity
- General anxiety and nervousness
- Difficulty regulating emotions
When a pregnant person drinks alcohol, it reaches the developing fetus directly through the umbilical cord. Because the fetus has a slower metabolism, the fetus will have a blood alcohol level much higher than that of the pregnant parent. The alcohol present in the fetus' blood can impair the development of tissues and organs as well as permanently damage brain cells. Drinking early in the pregnancy is most likely to cause changes in facial features, but brain damage and other developmental issues can result from alcohol exposure at any time during the pregnancy. There has not yet been a determination around what level of alcohol consumption is harmful to a fetus as impacts have been found at different levels of consumption. Because of this, most providers recommend not drinking alcohol during pregnancy. FAS has no cure, so your housemate with FAS will likely experience symptoms throughout her life.

You may have noticed some of the following in your roommate:

- Difficulty focusing or remembering
- Impulsiveness
- Difficulty following social cues
- Fearlessness and trusting attitude towards strangers
- Difficulty regulating emotions

For example, maybe it seems like the girl you live with makes comments that seem inappropriate for the context or acts younger than her age. This is typical for children and young people with FAS, as they develop more slowly and may demonstrate impaired reasoning and difficulty recognizing social cues. If you feel frustrated or hurt by this person's actions, it may be helpful to remember that she may be processing the world differently than you would. She may not think through some of her actions the way you do, so she may not realize if what she does is out of place or what she said makes you annoyed or angry. Being aware of your roommate's limitations may help you interact with her and keep your cool if her behavior bothers you. For example, if she has trouble paying attention, you can help her by giving clear and simple explanations. Maintaining eye contact and refraining from asking her to multitask are ways to improve your communication with each other. If her actions or words annoy you, talking with her about what happened and calmly explaining why it upset you may be helpful.

Taking time to get to know your roommate may also help you to appreciate positive aspects of her personality. Learning about her interests, abilities, difficulties, hopes, and dreams could help you find some common ground beyond the differences between you. By focusing on these good qualities, as well as her individual personality, it may be easier to understand the challenges posed by FAS when they come up.

Everyone with FAS is different, so taking time to get to know your housemate may be the best way to understand her better. Who knows, you might be surprised by what you have in common!

Alice!

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