

Walk-through double room blues ^[1]

Dear Alice,

At Columbia, there are three kinds of rooms: singles (one person in one room), doubles (two people in one room), and walk-throughs (two people in two rooms with a door separating them). My partner is living in a walk-through double with a friend of his. He lives on the inside room, which means I have to walk through his roommate's room to get to his room. I hate it! I feel so guilty leaving my partner's room late at night and if my partner's roommate isn't home, I feel like I'm somehow invading his privacy by walking through his room. When we hang out, I get uncomfortable being intimate (or even just hanging out pantsless!) with my partner knowing that his roommate is on the other side of the door. There's supposed to be more privacy, but in some ways, it feels like we have less! My partner and his roommate haven't had any trouble with the walk-through arrangement... but I do. I feel weird talking to his roommate about guidelines and solutions because it isn't my room. How can I find ways to set guidelines and boundaries for this peculiar situation without making myself a huge nuisance?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Roommate living can be tricky — especially when it comes to privacy. A lot of students living with roommates or suite mates find negotiating communal living tough at one time or another. Living with roommates even after college can have the same challenges. Talking to your partner and his roommate about your concerns may be an important part of how you navigate a solution to your walk-through double blues. Thinking about how to prepare for and approach that conversation may also play a role in finding a suitable compromise for all involved.

It sounds like you have already started to evaluate why and when you are feeling uncomfortable. Here are some questions you might want to ask yourself to help continue to understand and articulate your feelings:

- **How do you feel?** Try writing down the emotions that are surfacing for you. You've already described a few — fear, discomfort, disappointment. Can you identify specific instances that triggered these feelings?
- **How can you be mindful of everyone involved?** Navigating relationships and communal spaces involves you, your partner, and your partner's roommate. It's likely you all have

different opinions on shared spaces and privacy. How can you maintain an appreciation for the perspective of others, while you convey your feelings?

- **What's your ideal outcome?** Do you want to have a conversation to voice your feelings and to be heard? Or do you want something specific to change? Try picturing what would make you feel more comfortable. What are the key components? What is a realistic ideal outcome, given the factors in this scenario?
- **What is or isn't your space?** Try to keep in mind that you are a guest at your partner's place. While you may be able to suggest ideas for changing the current living situation, the ultimate decision will likely be up to your partner and his roommate. They may include you in that decision process, but remind yourself that it is their dorm to keep as is or adapt, if they choose.

When you feel ready to talk and bring up your concerns, you may want to begin with your partner. If you are feeling uneasy, you could use these tactics to help the conversation go smoothly:

- **Pick a time and place.** Let your partner know you want to talk to him about something that feels difficult. Ask if there is a good time to talk it out. Also, try and find a neutral place to have the conversation (ideally not in his room!).
- **Assume the best of intentions.** Approach him (and perhaps eventually his roommate) with openness. Try not to make assumptions about how he feels — allow him to speak for himself. You can also ask clarifying questions if you don't fully understand his perspective.
- **Clarify your intent.** Let your partner know if you want to problem solve or if you just want to share your concerns. The former may require more creativity and compromise, while the latter may involve more listening and emotional support.
- **Suggest solutions.** If your partner is open to problem solving with you, think creatively with him about how to improve the situation. Consider playing music or some other kind of background noise when you two are in his room. Try spending time at your room or find places outside of his room where you two can spend time together. You can also ask about his roommate's schedule so you can be mindful when you visit.

Try not to wait too long to bring the subject up with your partner — the longer you delay, the more daunting it may feel. Navigating seemingly tough conversations becomes a lot easier when you keep an open mind and speak thoughtfully from your experience.

Alice!

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