

# How to get a college roommate you can live with

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Anxious college freshmen can relax. No matter who will be sharing their dorm room, they have the power to make the relationship better, University of Michigan research suggests.

The research, published in the September 2008 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, was conducted by psychologists Jennifer Crocker and Amy Canevello at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

"Roommate relationships can be really good or they can be really bad. And the fear is that they'll go from bad to worse," said Crocker, a social psychologist who studies how our own behavior and attitudes affect the kinds of relationships we experience. "But our study shows that you can create a supportive relationship and turn the stranger who's your roommate into a friend."

For the research, funded by the National Institutes of Health, Crocker and Canevello studied more than 300 college freshmen who were assigned to share rooms with other students they didn't know at the start of the first semester. In one study, participants were surveyed once a week for 10 weeks about their attitudes toward friendships in general, and about their feelings of loneliness and experiences of conflict. In a second study, 65 roommate pairs completed daily reports about their relationships during a three-week period in the middle of the semester.

The goal was to see how students' own approaches to relationships

affected the quality of their relationships with roommates and their own emotional health. Among the questions students were asked: How often do you try to be supportive of others? How often do you avoid being selfish or self-centered? And how often do you avoid showing weakness? They were also asked about feelings of loneliness and closeness to other people.

During the first week of the study, 32 percent reported always or almost always feeling lonely, compared to only about 17 percent in the 10th week of the study.

In the first week, about 34 percent said they always or almost always avoided showing weakness in their friendships, compared to only about 13 percent in the 10th week of the study.

Crocker and Canevello found that students who were invested in enhancing and protecting their own self-images were less likely to report that their relationships with their roommates were getting better.

An essential element in reducing loneliness and building a good roommate relationship involves moving away from what Crocker calls an 'ego-system' approach, in which people focus on their own needs and try to shore up their self-image, toward an 'eco-system' approach, in which people are motivated by genuine caring and compassion for another person.

"Basically, people who give support in response to another person's needs and out of concern for another person's welfare are most successful at building close relationships that they find supportive," Canevello said. "We get support, in other words, by being supportive."

"The transition from high school to college is challenging for a variety of reasons," Crocker said. "The academic environment is usually more

difficult and more competitive, and moving away from the nuclear family for the first time disrupts established social support networks. Along with meeting academic challenges, creating and maintaining friendships ranks among the most important tasks of the first semester of college.

"So these findings provide some good news---students can be the architects of their roommate relationships, enhancing or undermining the quality of these important relationships."

Source: University of Michigan

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