

# College roommates underestimate each other's distress, new psychology research shows

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College roommates are sensitive to their roommates' distress but tend to underestimate the level of distress being experienced by others, finds a newly published study from New York University psychology researchers.

The work, which appears in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, suggests that [roommates'](#) perception of each other's [distress](#) could be useful for monitoring the mental health of college students, but there are ways that students could be trained to be more accurate.

"Although [college](#) is an exciting time, many students feel academic and social pressure, and this can lead to serious distress," explains Qi Xu, an NYU doctoral [student](#) and the study's lead author.

"College students can detect certain levels of distress in their roommates and spot changes over the course of a semester, but they nonetheless underestimate the absolute level of distress," adds Patrick Shrout, a professor in NYU's Department of Psychology and the study's senior author.

The researchers note that the study's subjects had not been trained to spot distress, unlike other peers, such as dormitory residential assistants.

"More universal training on how to identify and respond to the distress of peers might have the benefit of encouraging conversations among roommates about what actions each might take if he or she notices another experiencing extreme distress," Xu and Shrout write.

In their study, the researchers studied 187 same-sex undergraduate roommate pairs who included Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, and biracial students.

At two times during the academic year—February and April—each roommate in the pair reported his or her own distress level as well as that perceived in the other roommate. Comparing these reports allowed the researchers to quantify accuracy and bias.

In addition to systematically underestimating the level of distress of their roommate, students tended to believe their partner's distress was similar to their own level of distress. Despite these biases, the judgements of their roommates reflected a component of truth. Those students who were judged to be most distressed were ones who tended to self-report extreme distress.

Because they did the survey at two different times, the researchers were able to determine which students were becoming more (or less) distressed over time and to compare the changes to roommates' rankings.

The biases found at the separate time points did not carry over to the inferences about distress change. When students' reports indicated that their roommates were experiencing more distress, the target roommates tended to self-report more distress as well.

With training regarding how to detect distress in others, the researchers say, roommates might be even more accurate in their judgments and could be a helpful in supporting a safety net for [college students](#) who are distressed.

Provided by New York University

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