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Coed renters advised to set some ground rules

If you 'double up,' be prepared to negotiate

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Something as simple as a raised toilet seat could be the deal breaker, according to experts, when uninvolved roommates of opposite sexes share an apartment. As more and more roommates "double up" to split expenses in today's economy, rental experts predict a rising number of coed rentals as well.

"With more doubling up across the board," said Peggy Abkemeier, president of Rent.com, "it's safe to assume that this trend applies to both situations: same-sex as well as opposite-sex roommates."

Making a success out of the living arrangement will depend, in

part, on being prepared to negotiate and setting ground rules upfront, she said.

Ashley Mazzeo, 19, of Fair Lawn shares an apartment with longtime friends, male and female.

"What works about the fact that we're not in a [romantic] relationship is that it's easier to get along. The bad things are the guys' sense of humor is very different than the girls'. A perk for the guys is that we do the cleaning," she said.

Roommate Brittany Apgar, 18, agreed the males fall short when it comes to cleaning, but added, "I feel protected" because they're around. She said a coed living arrangement works only if you get along with, and trust, the male

roommates.

Mazzeo said she'd never room with someone she just met on the Internet. "You definitely should know each other," she said.

Besides cleaning more, the girls have had to adjust, Apgar said, by not leaving lingerie and girl stuff around. "They fling it around like it's a toy."

Rodney Calhoun, 31, of Brooklyn, a finalist in a national roommate contest by apartments.com, describes himself and his roommate as "the odd couple." And it's not because one is messy and the other neat. His roommate is female, and they're not dating, but their arrangement of the last 2½ years has been successful.

"I just needed a roommate," he said. Liz was a friend of a friend with the same housing needs.

Describing himself as "bad with ground rules," Calhoun said he never set any before Liz moved in, yet their situation "just sort of works. I guess we've become friends and we have the same friends, so it's cool. It could potentially become weird if you find yourself attracted to the person. It could jeopardize the roommate relationship or turn it into something else."

He said an advantage of rooming with a female is that they tend to be neat and better at decorating, so their apartment is "not like some awful filthy man cave," he said, and "there's always ice cream around." Not only that, but Calhoun, who doesn't cook much, is thrilled that

"she bakes me pies."

Unlike the younger men, Calhoun said he picks up after himself. "I think I'm fairly well-trained at this point," he said.

According to Abkemeier of Rent.com, those considering an opposite-sex roommate should set some ground rules.

■ Know the other's "must haves" for the living arrangement. "Perhaps he is an avid runner who needs to live close to a park or jogging trail, whereas her top concern is a walk-in closet to house her shoe collection," she said. Limit stress by discussing these at the outset.

■ Ask questions about living habits. "If your motto is 'early to bed, early to rise,' you might not be a good match for a night owl," she observed.

■ Consider how you will split

domestic duties. "Your living environment will be much more pleasant if you outline responsibilities early on."

■ Communicate. It's especially important to set straight what living areas may be off-limits at certain times of the day. "If one individual's showering in the morning, agree that it is unacceptable for the other person to come in to brush his/her teeth," she said.

■ Respect each other's privacy. Bedrooms should generally be off-limits, and personal property should not be borrowed without consent.

Opposite-sex roommates can be successful, Abkemeier said, but "like any relationship, communication is key."

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