

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT

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Multi-party Roommate Conflict

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I use this roleplay for a graduate course in interpersonal and small group conflict resolution. While it could be used for a mediation roleplay, it's written to be a 4-5 person small group conflict with no formal, outside intervenor. The expectation is that students can represent the characters and still demonstrate conflict resolution skills. (If students think CR knowledge, skills, and abilities are only applicable and helpful as an outside intervenor than something's gone awry.)

The assumed setting is that the roommates have come together for one of their regular monthly house meetings. You are welcome to use this for your own conflict resolution work/training. I only ask that you cite me. If you'd also be kind enough to drop me an email (john@conflictresolver.com), I'd appreciate it. It's nice to hear about the "life" of a roleplay.

Roommate 1: Will

You are one of four graduate students sharing a five bedroom, three-story house near Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. You've been living in the house for 3 years now, and in general you have been happy with the living arrangement. The rent is reasonable, which is hard to come by in this area of the city, the house is gorgeous, and while there's been a steady rotation of different housemates, in general roommate relations have been good. Because you have seniority in the house, this past year you also got to move into the choice upstairs bedroom of the house, which has a fantastic view of the city and more space than any of the other rooms in the house.

The house has monthly house meetings. They're usually dull and longer than you think they need be, but you figure it's a necessary evil in any group living situation. Unfortunately, you've got a bad feeling that this month's meeting is going to be anything but dull.

Two months ago the house got a new resident, Grace. Grace is a grad student in religious studies and a strong believer in her faith. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be much room in Grace's religious convictions for your identity as a gay man.

It didn't take long for you to realize that Grace was uncomfortable with your homosexuality. Her bedroom, like yours, is on the upper floor, and she did a rotten job of hiding her open shock when she ran into your boyfriend leaving your bedroom on the morning after she moved in.

Homophobia isn't new to you, but thankfully up until now it's not something you've had to deal with from one of your own housemates. Now whenever your boyfriend of two years, or any male friend for that matter, comes and visits you have to worry about Grace's reaction. While she avoids confrontation directly, she doesn't try to cover her negative judgment. She mutters to herself, snorts in disgust, and sometimes she acts like you and your friends are invisible, ignoring you entirely even when you try to be social with her. You've heard her talk on the phone with her friends and loudly complain about her "sinful roommate."

This kind of disrespect and hostility has to stop. This is your house too, and you and your guests deserve to feel welcome and respected here. You have a hunch you might be able to get her kicked out of the house. She hasn't been formally put on or signed the lease yet, and because you help out with minor repairs and improvements to the house, you have a good personal relationship with the landlord.

But trying to get Grace kicked out of the house is only a last resort. Despite your good relationship with the landlord, he did give Grace a verbal assurance that signing the lease was only a formality, and you doubt this is an issue in which he'd want to get involved. Besides, Grace does seem like a bright and reasonable person in many regards, and hatred and homophobia is something you would rather try and confront and change head on, instead of just trying to get it to "move around the corner."

Roommate 2: Grace

Two months ago you moved into a five bedroom, three-story house near Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. At first, the living arrangement seemed perfect. Like you, your three roommates are all graduate students. The house is close to campus, rent is reasonable, and although your room on the upper floor is tiny, you immediately fell in love with its fantastic view of the city.

What you didn't realize when you chose to move in was that one of your roommates, Will, was openly gay. You didn't find that out until, after living in the house for a month, you were woken up in the middle of the night by Will having loud sexual relations with another man.

You have strong religious convictions and values, and you're proud of the significant place your faith has in your life. That includes beliefs and values that may not happen to be widely held or popular. That's ok. Your belief comes from your understanding of God's teaching, not any attempt to win a popularity contest.

Your faith teaches you that homosexuality is wrong. It's an immoral and unnatural act, and not something to be endorsed or accepted. Up until now you've just tried to just stay quiet about the issue. In the name of tolerance, you've refrained from confronting Will about his sinful behavior. But you're growing more and more uncomfortable with this stance.

While you recognize the value of tolerance in a pluralistic society—you are a grad student in religious studies after all—your silence is beginning to feel like a form of endorsement of Will's behavior. His homosexual behavior is sinful, and not confronting that sin is beginning to feel like a disservice to yourself and your faith.

Things have to change. There is a regular monthly house meeting, and you think it's time to bring this up. Tolerance is one thing, but this is beginning to feel more like sheltering sin. You're not willing to move out of the house. Reasonably priced housing near campus like this is difficult to find, and you just paid moving expenses and can't afford to do that again right now. What's more, why should you have to take on the inconvenience and cost of moving when Will's deviant behavior wasn't disclosed when you expressed an interest in moving in? Unfortunately, your negotiating power is a little weak here. Will has lived in the house for three years, longer than any of the other roommates, and although the landlord long ago gave his verbal agreement to you moving in, he's

been out of the country for the past two months and so you still haven't been able to sit down with him and formally sign the lease.

You're not quite sure what can be done. Will has male friends over all the time, and you're not sure how many of them he's sexually involved with (all of them?!). Since your room is upstairs next to his, every so often you actually even hear their "activities." You're not about to give up your view of the city, but maybe he could trade rooms with one of the downstairs roommates.

While having Will's behavior being less "in your face" would help, you'd prefer if that kind of behavior just wasn't going on in the place you call home. Will could move in the house or out of the house, but ideally you know the right thing would be for you to get him to stop acting out on his homosexual urges. You get along with the other housemates, who thankfully don't seem to engage in any deviant acts, drug use, or the like. Other than his behavior, Will seems like a reasonable, intelligent, and interesting person. His sinful behavior is something you would rather try and confront and change head on, instead of just trying to get it to "move around the corner."

Roommate 3: Alex

You are one of four graduate students sharing a five bedroom, three-story house near Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. You've been living in the house for 2 years now, and in general you have been happy with the living arrangement. The rent is reasonable, which is hard to come by in this area of the city, the house is gorgeous, and while there's been a steady rotation of different housemates, in general roommate relations have been good.

Every month the house has a house meeting, and you suspect that this month's meeting is going to be pretty exciting.

Two months ago the house got a new roommate, Grace. At first it seemed like Grace would fit right in. She's bright and has a great sense of humor, and you've had some fantastic philosophical discussion with her. Unfortunately, you've noticed that her strong religious convictions, and in particular her view of homosexuality as a sin, are beginning to chafe with Will, the housemate who's lived in the house the longest, who is openly gay, and who, like Grace, has a room on the top floor of the house.

You're not sure how long tension has been building between Will and Grace, but from side remarks you've heard from both of them over the past week you know that things are reaching a breaking point. As a culture studies grad student, you're sensitive to the profound need for tolerance and empathy in a pluralistic society. But you also know that ideas like "tolerance" and "acceptance" are social constructs, and you don't want to see Grace's beliefs—no matter how much you happen to disagree with them—be mocked, marginalized, or punished simply because they aren't popular or your own. Maybe it would help if one of them moved downstairs. You'd love to give up your downstairs room and get one of the upstairs rooms with the swank view of the city.

On a side note, at this month's house meeting you expect that your other roommate, Mallory, will probably bring up the issue of the downstairs study being messy. You're in the midst of writing your dissertation proposal, and for the past month you've been camped out in the study writing, researching, and taking breaks to unwind and think (play computer games and smoke some weed to take the edge off of some of your anxiety about the work). You know that ultimately this arrangement can't work forever, but you only have about one or two more months worth of work to go before you're done. And besides, as fellow grad students you'd hope your roommates would understand the stress of the process and have some flexibility.

Roommate 4: Mallory

You are one of four graduate students sharing a five bedroom, three-story house near Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. You've been living in the house for 2 years now, and in general you have been happy with the living arrangement. The rent is reasonable, which is hard to come by in this area of the city, the house is gorgeous, and while there's been a steady rotation of different housemates, in general roommate relations have been good.

Every month the house has a house meeting, and you suspect that this month's meeting is going to involve working through some tough conflicts.

Two months ago the house got a new roommate, Grace. At first it seemed like Grace would fit right in. She's bright and has a good sense of humor. But you had a hunch things might get difficult when you began to learn more about her close-minded religious beliefs. Grace's opinions are clearly beginning to chafe with Will, the housemate who's lived in the house the longest, who is openly gay, and who, like Grace, has a room on the top floor of the house. You're not sure how long tension has been building between Will and Grace, but from side remarks you've heard from both of them over the past week you know that things are reaching a breaking point.

You imagine that Will probably just wants to kick Grace out of the house, and he might even have half a chance of pulling it off since he's close with the landlord and Grace has yet to officially sign the house lease. But that option doesn't sit well with you. Grace was worried about not being able to sign the lease when she first moved in—the landlord was out of town, so it wasn't possible then—and you along with the rest of the roommates gave your word that it wouldn't be a problem.

But beyond that concession, you have a hard time sympathizing with Grace's plight. You're a fervent believer in tolerance and acceptance, and hate and homophobia aren't things you're prepared to put up with in a place you call home. You're not sure how much it would solve, but you would be willing to let Grace take your room on the second floor and you take her upstairs room next to Will—you've wanted one of the upstairs rooms with the great city view for a long time.

On another front, for the past month you've been growing increasingly frustrated at how Alex, your other roommate, has been treating the common study area on the first floor of the house. He's constantly

camped out in the room, and although he claims to be working on his dissertation proposal, every time you walk into the room you find him just playing computer games and smoking pot. You're a sociology PhD candidate yourself, and you remember the stresses of the proposal writing process. But this is a common space and you have work you need to get done there as well. You've tried gently bringing this up with him on several occasions, and although he keeps saying he'll clean up and be better about sharing the space, nothing changes.

You kind of think of Alex as a younger brother, and you want to push this issue not just so that you can use the space, but so that he can get on with the job of getting his proposal written and stop slacking off so much. Confronting him alone isn't getting the job done; you want to bring this up at the general house meeting so that the other roommates can get involved. They don't end up using the downstairs space as much as you, but it is a common area of the house and when issues like this come up it should be a shared responsibility for getting them resolved.

Role 5 (optional): Jack

You're a next-door neighbor and friend of Alex's from grad school, who spends a lot of time over at the house goofing off. Alex is a good drinking buddy, and you've always like the vibe of the house. You've attended some house meetings in the past—mostly by accident, because you just happened to be around—and you've again found yourself unexpectedly in the midst of a house meeting.

Aside from being friends with Alex, over the past two months you've been getting close to Grace. Nothing serious or romantic. The two of you just hit it off, and you've been kind of fascinated by someone with such conservative Christian views (you were raised in a very conservative Christian home, but have since strayed from the faith for a variety of reasons). Grace really seems to mean well, and you'd really like to see that she doesn't get too attacked or persecuted by the group just because her beliefs are different.

You're also hoping the meeting can get done with in a reasonably quick time period. You kind of were hoping to do some drinking and play video games with Alex, which is why you came over in the first place.

If the group suggests you moving in and swapping places with Grace or anyone else, you have to decline. You just purchased the one bedroom condo you live in next door, and moving isn't an option for you. You want to help them get along and resolve this, but you can't contribute any material resources to help.

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John Windmueller is a doctoral candidate (all but dissertation) at George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution. His academic background is in inter-disciplinary International Affairs, with a MA and BA from Florida State. He's done training and been certified in mediation (Florida Supreme Court Certified Mediator) and inter-cultural communication and conflict resolution. He is a co-teacher of ICAR's graduate course in Interpersonal & Small Group Conflict.