



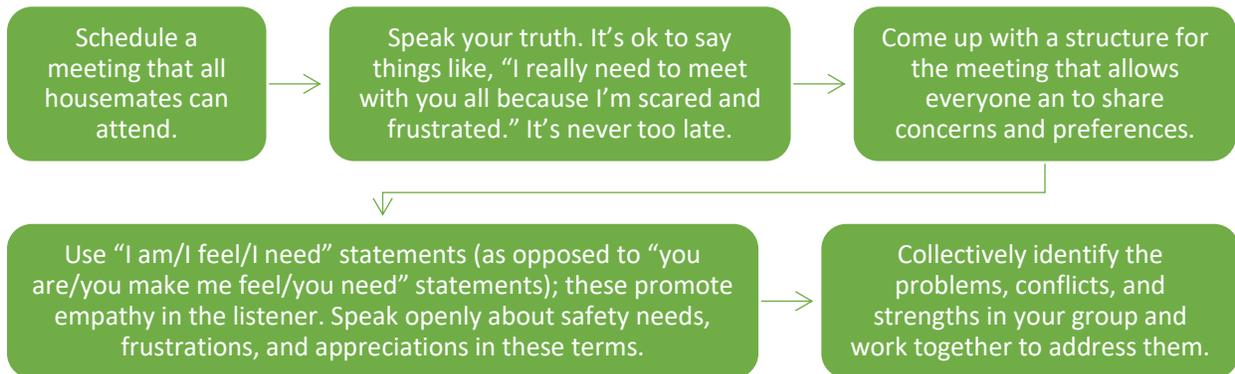
## Sharing Space - Tips for Group Living Under COVID-19

In the Washington DC area, many adults live in group houses. These living arrangements can bring unique challenges as housemates navigate their individual responses to the pandemic alongside the collective response of the household. Information about COVID-19 and what we “should” do can be confusing as we sort through information provided by our government, medical experts, and our families. We may be challenged to give up some of our individual preferences in exchange for harmony and a sense of safety for the entire household.

Group houses come in many forms—from tight-knit groups of friends who choose to live together, to individuals who are strangers before cohabitating, and all of the variations in between. While each group house has its own unique configuration, the following suggestions can help housemates navigate this challenging time together.

### Approach conflict as an opportunity.

Given the physical and emotional challenges of the coronavirus, the safety and health needs of each group house member need to be considered. For some housemate arrangements, this may require a degree of urgent, awkward, and even confrontational chats. It is normal that small conflicts may emerge that need to be resolved or managed. Strategies for engaging any housemate group include:



### Lead together.

Stress in housemate relationships can provoke patterns of avoidance or conflict just like any household. The difference in collective living between peers is that social hierarchies are often more horizontal, and can lack a “parent” that provides safety and top-down decision making. It is not always intuitive in our society to share power and collectively discern. Formally or informally, housemates often lean on one individual to complete a set of leadership roles. This can exhaust both the individual—who assumes the stress of playing parent to their peers—and the group, which can resent being parented.

In a highly disruptive situation like a pandemic, leadership diversity can be used to flesh out safety considerations or relationship dynamics that allow each member to contribute in ways that work for them. To be clear, individuals in a group house might “prefer” things to look one way, but prioritizing accommodations and considerations of the whole group over the individual might be what is needed. This can be challenging in an individualistic society, so consider how you can contribute to your group house. Here are some ideas:

Interact with the landlord regarding rent and house repairs on behalf of the household.

Provide some daily “group house services” like cleaning door knobs, if cleaning helps you feel calm.

Spread joy through beautification, acknowledgment, and celebration.

Make grocery store runs for the whole household instead of going separately.

Provide spreadsheet and budget support to split expenses.

The beauty of a group house over individual living is that you can share responsibilities and align your duties to the household with things that also support you individually.

### **Identify and respond to change in group norms.**

One of the hallmarks of this pandemic experience is the week-to-week and day-to-day influx of new information as well as new stressors to an individual’s well-being. Media cycles cast 7-day shadows, and personal and group norms for Week 3 can seem less useful or sustainable once Week 4 arrives. Under these circumstances, consider the following rules for your home:

- Establish regular, ongoing house meetings.
- Recognize and celebrate what is working. Acknowledge and name each other’s strengths.
- Identify what habits work sporadically or not at all. Rearrange and innovate as needed.
- Practice patience, compassion, and grace for the process and for each other.

### **Be humble to difference.**

In housemate arrangements, where social identity differences can vary widely, it is important to remain humble to diverse life experiences as they filter—among other things—coronavirus-related information along the lines of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, and intersections thereof. Further suggestions include:

- Flex your curiosity about your own reactions to the coronavirus, and check it out with your housemates.
- Consider that everyone comes from unique family systems with practices that may feel familiar and safe to one but uncomfortable to another.
- Be curious and open to your housemates’ reactions to the coronavirus. Keep in mind they may be triggered by feelings of insecurity that are not personal.
- Talk privately with housemates whose behavior or language causes harm to other housemates and remain open to being similarly approached.
- Give each other grace to make mistakes and maintain a position of “everyone is doing the best they can.”