

## My Two Sense

Commentary  
By Lori Hicks



## A Sign of the Times

When households double up, some ground rules can help keep the peace

**F**UELED BY THE dismal economy, more people in America are doubling-up with friends and family to share space to make ends meet. Grown children are returning home, brothers and sisters are moving in together, families are taking care of grandparents and grandparents are taking care of grandchildren.

It's a sign of the times that in some households there is more than one queen.

Since I recently opened my home to my niece, her husband and their two children, who are relocating from New Mexico, I can appreciate the struggle and effort that goes into sharing your home, well as living under someone else's roof.

Whether it's done to save money or is the result of an unfortunate situation — a broken marriage, a sudden illness or the loss of a house — living with someone else is never easy. It doesn't matter if it starts out as a generous gesture of love, some of us are just set in our ways. We have a certain system to running things and, of course, our way is the best way. Or is it?

Living habits created by individuals, and the fact that theirs differs from yours, can make it difficult to cohabitate. Judgment and opinion can begin to rule the household, and suddenly what was once a tranquil environment suddenly becomes a mash-pit of emotion with defensive tones, disapproving stares, passive-aggressive comments and resentful behaviors.

But it doesn't have to be like that. Communication is key. You still will have to make an effort to overlook the small stuff. But the fact that someone doesn't put the toilet seat down, put their dish in the sink or replace the laundry detergent shouldn't cause belligerency — but being insensitive and selfish does. It's best to talk about the small things before they become big things.

The economic downturn has forced many people to re-evaluate their lives and living arrangements. Moving in with friends or relatives is something most people will

resist at first, but often it's the best solution available.

Be considerate of the people you live with. If you are helping someone, remember it may be as difficult on them living with you as it is on you having them there. Consider finding a way to make the new living arrangements easy for everyone.

If you want to avoid the pitfalls, there needs to be rules. From my experience, here are a few tips.

- Make sure everyone's lifestyles are accepted. It's hard to find out after the fact that you have to whisper the words "queer" or "lesbian" around the children. Or worse, if you are made to feel uncomfortable for showing affection with a same-sex partner in front of the new housemates.
- Respect, independence and privacy matter. All members of the house should have a spot they can call their own.
- Be nice. Everyone needs positive as well as negative feedback. If you can't offer both, hold your complaints until you can.
- Rules should be mutual. Some households conduct regular meetings. Face-to-face contact is best, but if time doesn't allow, get it out, and get it over with. Don't dwell, and don't take everything personally.
- Treat your family with as much consideration as you do your friends. It seems we often have more patience for our friends. We listen to what friends

have to say without feeling controlled or manipulated, we can give and receive advice from them and often we give our friends the benefit of the doubt.

I have never had children, and now, at 50 years old, I regularly walk my 9-year-old great-niece to the bus stop. We hunt spiders at night with a flashlight. We frequently share a snack of crackers and butter while discussing our day, family and, yes, even though I'm a lesbian, we sometimes chat about fashion.

It has been years since I have been a babysitter, much less lived with a toddler, but nowadays I even change my grandnephew's diapers. I find joy in coaching him to say the words "Auntie Lori." Nothing makes me smile wider than listening to him giggle as I snuggle his belly with my face. My heart softens when he hums over new tastes, and I am delighted to see him scream with amazement over a simple helium balloon.

Helping my family, giving them tender guidance and honoring them with love and compassion when they really needed the help has enriched my life immeasurably. I will admit, it took me a little time to get used to the concept. However, after a few ground rules were laid, all that was left was building a stronger relationship.

Now I see how I will miss them when they move into their own home. I can only hope they feel the same. **-E**

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