

# Communal Wellness

*Stay healthy and sane in residence*

By Guy Robertson

“Hell,” said philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, “is other people.” You know what he meant. Sometimes communal living is difficult because you’re surrounded by people who act like... people. They have annoying habits. They can be noisy and untidy. They smell. Occasionally they make you sick.

You’re not alone in sometimes feeling negative about the people around you. But be warned. They might feel the same about you. That is, unless you’re perfect. If you’re not, you can improve life in your residence, workplace and neighbourhood by following a few simple pointers.

**1** First and foremost, live life in moderation. Eating and drinking are natural and wonderful until you do them to excess. Exercise is good for you until you overdo it and injure yourself. Study is essential for academic success, but a sleep-deprived, never-ending review of textbooks and course notes can weaken your academic performance. Constant partying sounds fun, but too many late nights can lead to exhaustion and poor grades.

Eat, drink, exercise, study, and celebrate your existence as a social being, but do so in moderation. Remember that the people around you can find immoderate behavior annoying. Sloppy eaters can leave trails of dirty dishes, cutlery and fast-food wrappers, while heavy drinkers can be obnoxious and, behind the wheel of a car, life-threatening. Unlike responsible exercisers and sportspeople, exercise addicts can leave equipment scattered throughout living areas and forget to clean up after themselves. Those who over-apply themselves to course work are usually harmless, but their need for silence at all times can become irritating. (Contrast their behaviour with that of true academic achievers, who make a point of taking regular breaks from study, even during exams.)

Party animals can be great company, but you can drink only so much beer and listen to only so much loud music. At some point everybody needs sleep, and, since you’re at university, it’s safe to assume that the people around you need to study. So do you, if you want to pass your courses. There’s nothing wrong with having a good time as long as it doesn’t interfere with your essential activities, or those of your neighbours.

**2** Secondly, keep clean. One of the best ways to avoid colds and flu is to wash your hands regularly with soap and warm

water. When? Before eating and after any visit to the washroom. If you’ve been working in a lab, kitchen or high-traffic area such as a large lecture theatre or study hall, you’d be wise to wash your hands. Do it properly. Don’t just run a microlitre of cold water over a convenient pinky and wipe it on your jeans. Try to soap and rinse both hands all over, and work up a lather. Dry your hands on a clean towel.

Avoid sharing towels and washcloths with others. Don’t let anyone else use your toothbrush and razor. Don’t reuse Kleenex, dental floss and bandages. And after you’ve used these items, don’t leave them lying around for other people to pick up. Dispose of them properly. That’s healthy good sense.

Spitting in public places is not only a disgusting practice, but also a potential public health risk. It was once common when many people chewed tobacco. In the absence of a spittoon, they’d release torrents of muck anywhere convenient. Fortunately almost nobody on campus chews tobacco any more, and pavements are much cleaner. But some careless smokers toss matches, ashes and butts in all directions. This behavior is dirty, inconsiderate and dangerous. It’s too easy to start a fire, and cigarette debris has caused some of history’s largest fires. If you smoke, use an ashtray or butt can in a designated smokers’ area.

Spitting seems to be an accepted practice among joggers. Sometimes it’s necessary to clear one’s throat in order to breathe more easily, but decorating the trails with saliva is rarely necessary. Players of field sports and hockey are also known for spitting, although they usually confine this habit to the soccer pitch or rink. You won’t see Wayne Gretzky and Gordy Howe spitting off ice, even during interviews with Don Cherry.

Say what you will about Cherry, you can be sure he doesn’t leave patches of chewing gum on his neighbourhood sidewalks. With lots of garbage cans around campus, you can follow his good example—in one way, at least.)

Unfortunately there are other ways to make your neighbours’ lives unpleasant. Nobody wants a share of the flu or cold that you woke up with this morning. You know the feeling. Flu makes you feel weak. You might have aches and a fever. Respiratory flu can involve a runny nose and sore throat, and is often confused with a cold. Stomach flu can lead to cramps, vomiting, and diarrhoea. The common cold is so common that you’ve probably experienced it several times, and will make an effort to avoid it.

You should also try to avoid passing these bugs to other people—in residence, on the bus, on your team or in the classroom. If you’re sick, you have an excellent reason to stay in bed. Sleep, drink lots of (non-alcoholic) liquid, and take aspirin and other medications recommended by your doctor. It’s unfortunate that colds and flu disrupt your schedule, but most of your profs, teammates and friends will forgive your absence. If you can, it’s appropriate to let them know that you need time off to recover. A simple e-mail message is often all that’s necessary. You can be sure that while they cherish your company and brilliant conversation, the last thing they want is your bug.

**3** Finally, stay in touch with friends, family and your spiritual practices. Don’t become a stranger to people back home. You don’t have to phone them every day, but a weekly or bi-weekly call to parents or caregivers is always appreciated. Some families rely on e-mail, but don’t neglect those who don’t use computers. Your grandparents will enjoy any card, letter or photo you send. Even the briefest message is better than a term-long silence.

Old friends from your hometown would also like to hear from you, if they haven’t already joined you on campus. You needn’t write 20-page letters to them; a postcard is enough to send greetings and the usual friendly insults. Especially popular back home are birthday cards. Remember your parents’ birthdays, and they will forgive you for anything—almost. Be sure to let them know about any travel plans that you make, for extended field trips, holidays and spontaneous get-aways with friends. Don’t just disappear.

If you attended a church, temple or synagogue regularly before, don’t stop when you arrive on campus. There are numerous faiths and denominations for you to investigate and join if you wish. Pastoral counseling is available. Keep in mind that religious observance can not only enrich your experience as a student, it can also raise your morale and help you through difficult times. While there are many ways to be alone, there are just as many ways to benefit from being with other people. Your membership in a congregation is one more way to get the most from your life on campus and elsewhere.

Everything in moderation. Keep it clean. Stay in touch with home and spiritual practices.

These things aren’t hard to do.

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