



# *Playing*House

How to stay sane  
in a house share

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Alice Wilkinson

*“When people show you who they are, believe them.”*

- Maya Angelou

I’m perching on the edge of a third-hand bed that’s been stripped down to the mattress, gathering strength to clean the filthy carpet under my feet – and to accept that this dingy, musty-smelling room that looks out onto the Old Kent Road is now home. I never met the room’s previous occupier, but I’m in possession of his grubby bedsheets. I stash them in the wardrobe.

It’s SpareRoom.com – the equivalent of the lonely-heart pages for the unsettled – that brought me here, and this is my very first success story.

At this stage in my house-sharing journey, I’m 23 and in that frantic post-university haze, clawing back the independence I’d had a taste of but unable to find a job to fund it. I’ve spent too many weeks waking up in my childhood bedroom to commute two and a half hours into London where I have an internship at a glossy magazine. Using the £50 a day they’re paying me to rent a room in the city instead is one step closer to adulthood. I just needed to find one I could afford within walking distance of my office.

I’d scrolled through the pages of Spare Room’s online catalogue and agonised over the messages I was sending to unknown faces helpfully labelled by the platform as CURRENT HOUSEMATE.

You’ll know if you’ve played the Spare Room game yourself that it’s surprisingly hard to sound like a normal human being while also casually referencing that you’re hygienic and law-abiding (but not neurotically so), laid back, but not *too* laid back. Someone they’d love hanging out with but who has their own life. Signing off with times and dates I could view the room was the easy part.

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I get a reply from 'Patrick'. This is good news because the room he was flogging in a house share of six (five others and potentially me) was cheap and a 20-minute walk from my office. In response to my rambling, subtly needy message, he writes:

*6 tonight works. At gym 6.30 tho*

A 30-minute meeting in a work setting usually means a light discussion. It's a time frame I associate with low-stakes life choices like an easy weeknight dinner, a brief phone catch-up with my mum or a few laps round the park. In the 30-minute slot Patrick had reluctantly given up for me, I have to gauge if this could be my home and if the other five housemates are people I can see as my modern-day family-of-sorts.

There's a chaos to the Old Kent Road, which on dark winter evenings is reduced to fast flashes of light – from buses, police cars and blinking kebab shop signs. The disorder of the roundabout at its centre has a ripple effect on the streets around it. Walking them makes me hold my things tightly. I plug in Marcia Road to Google Maps and let the arrow run inside my pocket, lifting it out every now and again to check I'm on track. I knock on the door and I'm met by a face that matches the one on Spare Room. Patrick wordlessly ushers me inside. It's warm and I appreciate the vanilla Airwick that's masking the smell of unwashed sportswear – a valiant attempt at domesticity that didn't require doing any actual washing.

I ask him if I can put the light on to see the room in its full glory and he pulls out his phone to switch his torch light on. Another workaround he'd thought of, since all the light bulbs need replacing. Patrick tells me there are two others coming to view the room the next day. I weigh up my options: act now, take the room and live as a fully functioning adult or risk losing it, continue the five-hour daily commute and wake up staring at wallpaper I'd chosen when I was seven. In the low light of Patrick's phone torch, the room felt quite cosy. I'd make it work.

Maybe this would make a good meet-cute in a film. Two unassuming souls cross paths in an unlikely spot and endure a few painfully tense minutes that leave us wondering 'Will they? Won't they?' Usually in films, they do and the rocky road to romance begins. That, at least, is a road well-travelled. Turned over by generations of dating experts, relationship psychotherapists and anthropologists, there are over 10,000 dating titles in Amazon's "Books on dating" section currently, ranging from *How to Get a Date Worth Keeping* to *The Grown Woman's Guide to Online Dating*. Each one pores over the detail of that dance between two strangers deciding whether they're the right fit for each other. To the best of my knowledge, few of these meet-cutes end with the two lovers, moments after meeting, moving in together, immediately sharing bills, meals and routine.

Yet on multiple occasions I have moved into a house share and, within hours, entrusted perfect strangers with my finances, happily conformed to their routines and, signing a contract, have legally bound myself to do so for the foreseeable future. If you're in your house sharing years, you'll have likely done the same. Building that level of intimacy at such speed is something only housemates do – with a hefty deposit riding on the success of the relationship.

Now safely in my thirties, I think back on the places I've lived where I've felt most at home and I know it's the people who create that sense of belonging for me, more than the space. Being surrounded by people who are invested in me and considerate of my needs – as I am of theirs – is what makes it feel like home. Perhaps the search for a good housemate and a harmonious house share is actually more of a search for surrogate family: people who, for the time we live together, I care about and will care about me. People who will accept and respect my quirks – like taking up space in communal

areas with my creative projects or my strong aversion to wet bathmats left on the floor – because I do the same for them. Eighty-nine per cent of the 2000 British men and women surveyed by YouGov say they see their homes as a sanctuary where they can be themselves<sup>1</sup>. And young professionals working in today's always-on culture need somewhere to restore as much as anyone. Surely, it's the people you live with who have the power to create that.

The modern-day house share turns psychology, and what we know about human bonding, on its head. Living together is something that romantic couples and families can take years to truly master. When housemates do it after a first meet, it creates an unnatural connection. Perhaps you've felt it after moving in with strangers in a house share. You very quickly know the intricacies of their shower routine and will be able to identify their clean socks on an airer by the scent of their washing powder, but not know their surname or where they went to university. Some of us can spend more waking hours with our housemates than we do our best friend, but never feel as close.

In 1993, anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist at the University of Oxford Professor Robin Dunbar published research which has become widely known as 'Dunbar's Number'. It is the number of people you can maintain stable and social relationships with, based on our cognitive limit. His research suggests that we can only maintain 150 meaningful human connections at once and that they are highly structured. At the centre of your individual circle are five intimate relationships and the rest sit outside of that in concentric

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bheta.co.uk/news/retailer-news/how-lockdown-changed-british-attitudes-to-our-homes-for-good/>  
<https://www.kingfisher.com/en/media/news/kingfisher-news/2020/how-lockdown-changed-british-attitudes-towards-our-homes-for-goo.html>

circles. 15 close friends sit outside your five intimate relationships and 50 friends outside that, on the periphery.

I asked Robin for his insights on how the bonding psychology behind his research plays out in a house share set up. "Spending a lot of time with a housemate who you don't feel that close to does create confusion in our minds. If you think about being stuck in a lift with a stranger, we tend to go silent and stare at our feet. The physical closeness is not indicative of the closeness of the relationship. It's at odds. There are ways to engineer closeness through social activities, but you have to establish a baseline relationship before you can do that."

Creating a relationship with someone we don't know relies on a number of psychological processes which kick in almost immediately after meeting them. It's these that influence our decisions about where in our social structure we want that person to sit and more crucially when you're houseshare hunting – whether you want to live with them.

Whether you're conscious of it or not, your character and outlook on life weighs in on how you read the situation. In 2015, research on interpersonal chemistry published by California State University<sup>2</sup> identified participants who were agreeable, conscientious, female and young those as those most likely to report experiencing friendship chemistry. I'd say there's a high chance that these participants' agreeable and conscientious nature gets the better of them: they experience the friendship chemistry because they want to see it.

The same piece of research touches on interdependence theory based on the idea that if you meet someone and perceive the relationship might be rewarding in some way (indeed, offer you a place to live) and you can't see a better alternative (back on SpareRoom.com), then you're more likely

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4470381/>

to make effort to nurture that connection. It's another significant factor at play when we meet a new person. Even more so when you're meeting a stranger to decide if you want to live with them.

The conclusions we draw about peoples' personalities are based on previous experiences and reference points of the people in our life. They have a big part to play when we meet people for the first time. In research published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*<sup>3</sup> 2000 participants took part in a platonic speed-dating exercise where they had three minutes to get acquainted with a stranger and then assess their personality. Based on their findings, the researchers concluded that when we meet new people, we rely on 'notions of normalcy', a positive bias that leads us to assume that they're just like the average person.

### **Chemistry or Compatibility**

If you've had your own experiences with moving in with someone who, quite quickly, you realised wasn't going to be a good housemate match, maybe you're already hyper aware that your first impressions can be unreliable and it helps to interrogate what's going on when we first meet someone. The truth is the psychological processes at play when we meet a prospective housemate aren't all that trustworthy. In fact, they may even trip us up as our conscientious personalities trick us into thinking there's friendship chemistry when maybe there isn't, or we assume someone has an average character only to find out months later that they're actually very extreme in their views. And here lies the issue when it comes to making a decision on a housemate after thirty minutes.

It takes time to build the foundations of a good relationship

and to put our first impressions to the test. There's a reason why most of us spend months dating before making it official and why close friendships can often take years to build. There's a long information-gathering phase that helps to form a solid foundation. In a world where there are more housemates searching than rooms available and there's financial pressure to fill a room so the rent gets paid, we're forced to move quickly.

The house-sharing scene doesn't allow for an information-gathering phase. When fellow house sharers describe the confusion, they feel when they're faced with complicated housemate relations, I have a strong suspicion there's a bad housemate-matching process at the core. Perhaps you have a long list of your own house sharing nightmares and can map them back to a rash decision or an inaccurate first impression. The stories I hear from fellow house sharers about housemates who don't come out of their rooms, walk around with their earphones in not wanting to engage in conversation, send passive-aggressive text messages, stop talking to them without a word as to why, have wild parties on weeknights – they all began with a decision made quickly and out of necessity. There is often simply no time to put our compatibility to the test before committing to living with each other. So it's no wonder so many of us find ourselves perplexed by the people we live with.

Lisa Monks, 36, has had her fair share of housemate disasters. She's a nanny and has lived in the UK for eight and a half years after moving over from New Zealand. She too, says could have been avoided by an improved housemate interview. She was living in a house in Brixton when her and her friends desperately needed to find someone to fill a room. "We scheduled 15-minute interviews for each person to kind of come in and have a drink with us. We went and bought a bunch of cans of cider from Lidl and offered everyone a can of cider. So we were all getting progressively drunk and obviously,

3 <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fa0039587>

by the end of the night, the last guy that we saw is the guy we gave the room to. It was a big, big, big mistake, because obviously this guy thought he had walked into the world's biggest party flat. There were so many red flags we missed: he was young and it was his first time living out of his parental home. He lost his keys a bunch of times. He would call my boyfriend at the time at like two in the morning being like, 'I'm on my way home. Can you roll me a cigarette?' Just a nightmare. It was a horrible, horrible year."

Years later, she was looking at finding another housemate to fill another room in that house share, this time in the middle of the Covid pandemic. "It was so hard to fill the room because everyone was moving out of the city. There was only guy interested in the room. So we had to take him because we needed to pay the rent. He was so socially awkward. My friends and I ended up calling him an energy vampire. Basically, someone who will talk your ear off about the most mundane thing and just drain your will to live. And I'm not exaggerating, that was this guy. If I ever got cornered in a conversation with him, I would lose an hour of my day. I'd find myself staying in my room until I heard him go back upstairs."

Both of Lisa's experiences highlight how the psychological processes we're relying on when we first meet someone aren't fit for purpose on their own when it comes to choosing a good housemate in a short space of time. Her positive bias led to her making an assumption (albeit an alcohol fueled one) that the person they chose to fill the room in their Brixton house share would be fine. He was a nightmare. She chose housemates because she had a problem to solve and they provided an answer. Maybe you've had to do the same. I know I have.

I let my need for a room cloud my decision when I first met Patrick. It's no wonder that, after his 10-minute tour in that

Elephant and Castle house share, I only stayed in that room for six months. The ground-floor room right next to the front door was not an ideal place for me, a young woman trying to make it as a writer. Patrick was a boozier and often woke me up on weeknights, bringing friends back and smoking weed outside my window. When I first met him, I thought his predilection for Airwick was a good sign but I realised he was heavily reliant on it to mask disgusting habits. He frequently washed his clothes without using detergent and would let his friends sleep in my bed when I was away without telling me. I could always tell because my bedsheets smelt strongly of Davidoff Cool Water, and they'd leave telltale signs like unfamiliar chargers in my plug sockets and used condoms tossed into my lidless wicker waste-paper bin.

So after six months, with a bout of the kind of desperate hope that spurs people to sign up to Tinder the same day that their relationship breaks down, I logged back into SpareRoom.com. There were 18,202 London flat shares available, 1,939 in Southeast London. Accustomed to the high-resolution, full-width imagery of the likes of Airbnb, I found the tiny photographs of dark corners of spare rooms suspicious. I'd get closer and closer to my laptop, looking for hidden clues as to what it might be like to live there. Is there a fruit bowl? Do they have loads of mismatched furniture? One flat I'd viewed had two dining tables crammed into the communal space and only two out of six chairs were safe to sit on. Good photography and interior design shines here. So when I saw Emma's listing, I was already imagining myself curled up on her sofa, sipping wine and washing up at her Belfast sink. The flat overlooked a green, and there were high ceilings, natural light and wooden floors lined with thriving plants. It was beautifully styled, with no mismatched furniture. She seemed like someone who would change the lightbulbs.

The flat was in East Dulwich, a tree-lined side of Southeast London where there were more quirkily named independent bakeries than post boxes. Where the corner shops sell loose lentils and rice that you have to weigh out in paper bags. There's a park where you can take a pedalo out on the lake. Walking the streets of East Dulwich, the need to hold on to my things tightly felt less urgent.

I messaged CURRENT HOUSEMATE Emma, editing the draft I'd sent to Patrick to tell her a bit about myself and that I really liked the look of the flat. She, like me, worked in the creative industries, she'd lived in East Dulwich for two years and grew up in rural Essex (I'm from rural Cambridgeshire). We seemed well-matched.

I wanted to be more mindful this time about who I lived with, to make sure we connected in person. So, when I went round to view the flat, I stayed for a glass of wine. The conversation was polite but free-flowing, mostly about the flat and how Emma enjoyed living there – she'd been there two years and spoke fondly of her time there and of the amenities surrounding the flat. She had been living with her boyfriend previously, but he was moving out to look after his mum who was ill, so she needed a roommate to split the rent with. After I left, I got a text from her suggesting we meet for dinner next week. A second date before we seal the deal.

"Bonding is a long, slow process normally," says Professor Dunbar. "But it can be fast-tracked by doing a number of social activities together that release endorphins: laughter, singing, dancing, feasting – so you could share a meal together. And storytelling – so sharing anecdotes and information about your life. These activities trigger the mechanism in our brain that underpins social bonding and creates a sense of closeness. We don't really know how long it takes. There's one study that looked at how long it takes to form a friendship and the figure

was something like 200 hours over a period of months, which is only achievable if you don't have to work."

It wasn't 200 hours' worth but the level of bonding time Emma was committing to was more than I was used to. The Spare Room chat I'd engaged in so far had involved a bit of preamble over the chat function before committing to a viewing time. On first viewing, all being well, my understanding was that you take the room there and then because there's no time to waste. Renting even a spare room is a fast game. I liked that she was taking this slow. She wanted to make sure it felt right; we weren't rushing into this partnership-of-sorts.

We met at the East Dulwich Tavern, a cosy pub at the end of Lordship Lane, a high street full of arty independent shops and just across the green from Emma's flat. It was a warm evening after work in March and I felt all the anticipation of a first date. She was there waiting with a glass of white wine, remembering from our first meet that it was my drink of choice.

It wasn't long before we were chatting away. I'm the youngest of three sisters and she's the youngest of two. Her elder sister, like my eldest sister, has a toddler – we bonded over our love of being aunties and shared photographs of our nieces. We talked about food – her chef boyfriend hosts supper clubs that she told me I should come along to. We compared our career journeys in our respective creative industries. They were similar: It had been tough, we agreed, but both felt as though we were over the mad hustle of poorly paid internships and working through the night.

We were two glasses of wine in when we decided we'd order some food. On first dates that's a good sign. It was here too: the conversation was natural and neither of us wanted to leave. As the sun shone through the pub window, I felt relaxed. I left elated at the prospect of a future in this beautiful East Dulwich flat with my soon-to-be housemate who would

welcome me into her ready-made supper-clubbing friendship group. It all sounded gloriously grown up.

### **Great Expectations**

There's an important distinction to be made between finding housemates to live alongside who you get along with just fine and actively seeking a housemate you want as a friend. You might hope to be friends with someone you move in with, and make the necessary effort to harbour a friendship. In my eyes, Emma and I had both shown willingness to put the effort in to engineer the foundations of a friendship and were doing all the right things in Professor Dunbar would recommend to work on our connection. But, as with any relationship, you can't know how it will unfold.

"I think in the end, the real issue with using a short cut to build a bond as you might when you're first meeting a prospective house mate, is that endorphin-based fuel for friendship might provide a platform for building a connection but it won't make it last," says Professor Dunbar. "The activities – the chemical tricks – they do seem to work for a while but then it will come down to how much you have in common."

At the very least, I felt sure that we had enough in common to be good housemates. I was sure we could be good friends. So when she offered me the room, I was thrilled that she clearly felt the same, that we'd have a nice life living side by side in that beautiful East Dulwich flat. I signed on the dotted line, we set a date and exchanged a few texts in the run up to my moving in.

Hey Alice, hope you're getting excited for the move! Wondered if you want any of the furniture left in the room? Will get Chris to store if not. Ex

That's really kind but I'm all good – have just ordered a bed to get delivered the day I arrive x

Great! Do you need a hand on move in day? Ex

Hi! Think I'll be OK. Not too much stuff. Do you have a food processor there? I'll bring mine if not – is quite small so dw it won't take up a whole cupboard x

All good signs of two mature young women ready to share a home.

Move-in day was a bright Saturday in April. I popped up to the second-floor flat luggage-free to announce my arrival before I started bringing in boxes. I thought maybe we'd have coffee and a catch up before I started unloading. But I met Emma coming down the narrow stairwell. Hair up, sunglasses on, tote bag on shoulder, she was heading out. She was looking at the floor and hadn't taken her sunglasses off so I asked if she was all right. Her boyfriend had ended things, she said, and she was going to get coffee with a friend to give me some space to move in. I responded as empathetically as I could, this being the third time we'd met.

There was an atmosphere in the flat from the moment she returned from the coffee with her friend. I couldn't shake the feeling I was in her space. The spring passed and in between being in the office and weekend plans, we'd touch base in the lounge every now and then, shuffling around each other in the flat. She'd have mates over who'd sit in the lounge with her and watch films, but she'd never introduce me. Then, when they'd gone, she'd shut herself in her room and I could hear her chatting on the phone for hours. I said a couple of times that I was here to listen if she needed to chat, cry or drink wine. I wondered if the breakup was the reason I was getting a frosty side of her.

To draw her out of her room and take her mind off the breakup, which may or may not have been bothering her, I suggested we hosted some drinks at the flat for both our friends as a housewarming. All week, we'd been exchanging messages



about the punch we were going to make and what day we were both free to go to the shop together to get supplies. Then the night before, she told me her and her friends were going out to a rave instead.

They assembled at our flat ahead of the rave to share a bag of housewarming coke that her friend, who called himself Sparrow, gifted her. I watched them sniff it off the ELLE magazine I hadn't finished reading yet. It was 4am when she rolled in that night. I know because, although I'd been asleep for an hour by then, I woke up to her having sex in the hallway in the landing, against the wall to my room. I lay there, paralysed. Nothing in my life had prepared me with tools for how to escape this awkward trap I was now stuck in. Patrick would wake me up and I'd open the door to my room and I'd open the door and tell him to be quiet. If I opened my door to protest now, I'd see Emma, and her late-night friend, naked, having sex. Ear plugs only went so far to block out the sex sounds that were all the more uninhibited because they were very high.

I fell asleep at some point after a panicked text exchange with my sister, Emily, who'd also been awake at 4am nursing her toddler. She'd agreed Emma's behaviour was out of order but we settled on the fact it was probably a rebound thing and a one off. Her last text read:

Try to get some sleep. You'll sort it out in the morning. Love you xxx

The next morning arrived and I made my way into the kitchen to start clearing up the bottles and glasses from the night before. I spritzed by ELLE magazine, front and back, with Cif. Emma walked in to make her and her visitor a coffee. I was expecting an acknowledgement at the very least, if not an apology. She didn't lift her gaze from the work surface to chat to me.

"Hey," I said when she walked in.

"Ugh I feel like death," she said.

"Yeah," I replied, thankful to be busy washing up so I had something to take my mind off how awkward this was. "It was a late one...good night?"

"Yeah, it was in like a forest. Pretty cool."

There was a long, awkward pause. Only the sound of my washing up and the clink of the teaspoon as she poured and stirred milk into their coffee. She started walking out the kitchen, coffees in hand.

"We're gonna order food."

"Ok. See you in a bit."

She shut the door to her room, I heard her leave her room to collect the food and I didn't see her again until Tuesday evening.

During the weeks that followed, I came to the stark realisation that Emma and I were not compatible as house mates, after all. Maybe it was unfortunate that I was getting to know her in the middle of a break up. Maybe it's that she was more of a partier than me. Maybe she just didn't want to hang out with me. I'll never know. But there were sleepless nights for me as multiple Tinder dates for her led to boozy parties for two in the living space that sat between our bedrooms.

One Wednesday morning before work she called to me just as she was leaving the house that her ex, the chef who ran supper clubs and who I'd met when I'd viewed the flat, was coming over for dinner that night. I, of course, said that was cool and that I'd see them later. I had, by this point, had a man I'd been dating stay over a couple times so I reasoned that it was only fair she had her freedom too. But on the bus to work I thought how strange it was that they were keeping in touch. Still, they'd been together something like six years before the break up so I wondered if it was just a platonic thing.

I managed to eat my dinner before them and made some small talk before sloping off to my room to watch something

on my laptop. It was clear to me by now that when she had visitors, she didn't want me hanging around. After I'd gone to bed that night, they finished a second bottle of wine and I woke up to that familiar scraping sound against my wall. She was having sex in the landing again. On a Wednesday night. They'd once had this flat to themselves before they'd broken up and before I'd moved in so I rationalised that they must be used to their favourite sex spots.

They were up until 4am revisiting their favourite spots around the flat. I was, once again, trapped inside my room unable to sleep and had to call in sick to work the next day. I was freelancing then so it meant I'd lost my day rate. For some reason, the fact I'd lost money gave me the kick I needed to bring it up with her. I sent her a long text because I couldn't face talking about her sex habits in person. I apologised for having to bring it up but that I'd felt uncomfortable with the loud sex and that she needed to remember I was paying to live here too now. She apologised and did seem quite mortified. But it was too little too late. Even with an apology, I didn't want to live with someone who was so unaware of how their behaviour impacts who their living with. I decided it was time to move on. I had spent three months trying to navigate our differences by then. I couldn't understand how it had all gone so wrong. I'd done my due diligence – or, at least, I thought I had.

### **Finding good enough**

I think I fell into all the possible mind traps I could have when I met Emma. Maybe you too look back on your own house shares and can see the point at which your need to find home clouded your decision making. I was relying on the relationship working out because I desperately needed to move out of my flat with Patrick, and fast. I had a vision and I needed her to like me to bring it to life. I took the few commonalities we had and

assumed that she was just like me and had a similar lifestyle to me. In my excitement to find her East Dulwich flat and to meet Emma, I'd forgotten to ask her some fundamental questions when we first met and put my assumptions to the test.

As someone who is both generally conscientious and agreeable, I held back from sharing some of my own non-negotiables in case it rocked the boat. I hadn't thought that unlike other relationships – romantic and friendship – this isn't about you being likeable or even lovable, but is first and foremost about being compatible living together. It is, I think, similar to what happens when you're dating someone and the closeness you feel – in part fueled by the endorphin-releasing activities (including sex) that Professor Dunbar identifies – overrides your clear judgement where you're assessing if the person in front of you . The connection and the feeling I got about Emma and living there clouded the enquiring part of my brain. I never asked Emma about how often she went on nights out, when she cleaned the flat, what time she goes to bed, how often she sees her friends, what her work schedule's like, if she hoped to socialise with me, if she was into drugs, what her weekends looked like. I should have.

I think about Lisa's journey and my own and how, similar to dating in romantic relationships, we took what we learnt from our bad house shares and used it to inform our decisions moving forwards. By finding out what doesn't work for you, you're also getting a clearer idea about what does.

"It is a long, slow process to get it right," says Professor Dunbar. "My sense is that house shares can provide a stable base from which you might build a network of friends or community over time. My take on it would be that at the very least your house share provides you with an anchoring from which to develop your own interests and social life. If it all breaks up after a year or two, you've hopefully had enough

time to build a wider community. If it works and creates lifelong friends, then it's not to be sniffed at."

The housemate interview process is a crucial opportunity to learn about someone in a short space of time and to disclose what you're looking for from a housemate and a house share. It's important to get a sense of if there's a connection there, but arguably more important to glean the information you need to know if you're compatible.

I struggled with accepting that it was OK and perfectly normal for a housemate not to become a friend. Like most of us, I'd grown up around schoolfriends and lived with people at university who became friends. So when I moved into a professional house share, it was the first time I was encountering this new type of relationship: not a friend but more than an acquaintance. I think there's a need to normalise and unpack this sort of less intense housemate relationship, which doesn't sit within the structures we're familiar with.

I see now how building a less intense housemate relationship that remains steady is a beneficial approach. There's a real need to celebrate housemate relationships that are simply good enough – where you rub along just fine, your values align far enough for you to live harmoniously together and you care about each other to a certain extent but it remains a less intense, low-stakes relationship.

'Weak ties' is what Dr Meg Jay, clinical psychologist and author of *The Defining Decade: Why your twenties are the most important years of your life* calls these low-stakes connections. She advocates for looking outside our 'urban tribes' and suggests that living with close, likeminded friends in our inner circle can actually limit our personal and professional growth, whereas someone on the periphery of your circle could present opportunities. "Weak ties promote, and sometimes even force, thoughtful growth and change."

Lisa Monks, the Nanny who mistakenly marketed her Brixton house share as a party house, and then paid the price, has moved house twice since then. Now, she lives with three others in East Dulwich. She, like plenty of women I speak to, actively chose not to live with friends and enjoys the set up she's in where they are friendly towards each other but don't socialise. After a few wrong turns, she refined what she needs from a housemate: Someone with some social skills, who can hold a conversation and who doesn't clash with her values.

It's not that she doesn't care who she lives with, but that there are certain criteria that she focuses on. "Everyone wants to get along with the people they live with, No one wants a toxic home environment, but my bar is very low. I want to get along with my housemates and I'll stand in the kitchen and chat to them for ages, but now I'm older and I have my social circle, I don't have the time or energy to invest in socialising with my housemates. I'm not saying I'm going to move in somewhere and act like an asshole, but this is where I sleep and keep my clothes and that's it. From the general vibe of both the ad I responded to and the meet up with them, it was clear that it would be great if we all got along but we've got our own stuff going on."

When a room in her current house share became available, the remaining housemates decided to cover the rent for a month rather than rush and fill the room with someone who wasn't a good fit. So there's still a selection process when you're living with weak ties, and it's still a good idea to give it time and thought to make sure it's a good match.

Pausing like this to make room for an information gathering phase before moving into a house share or choosing a housemate isn't something that comes naturally when we're under pressure to find somewhere to live. I know whenever I've been looking, the need to find a place to live has always

felt very immediate, because I wasn't happy where I was living, starting a new job or I'd given notice on an existing contract. I've always felt under time and financial pressure to find somewhere, which makes it hard to hold out for the right person.

I've learned to see it as a kindness to myself to give the searching process the time and head space it warrants, even when it doesn't feel very practical. Lodging in a friend's spare room, sofa surfing and staying with my mum for stints in between house shares meant I didn't need to rush into signing myself up to a contact I was unsure about.

I entered my eighth house share last year at the age of 32: a new-build two-bed flat in Bow that overlooked the canal. The excitement I felt about living there reminded me of how I'd felt about Emma's East Dulwich flat. I'd recently broken up with my boyfriend and this flat represented a new beginning. I wanted to live there so badly, imaging myself in this new area, which was close to my friends and an easy commute to work. But I remembered, equipped with all that I'd learnt, to keep my feet on the ground. I met Martha, my new prospective housemate, with my eyes wide open. I had my list of non-negotiables and I'd viewed a few other flats already, so they rolled off my tongue very easily by the time we met for my first viewing. I had to keep reminding myself that this process wasn't about being liked. I viewed the room and asked lots of practical questions about the place. And then, over a cup of tea, I bit the bullet and asked her what her dating habits were, whether she went out a lot, how her relationship with her last housemate had been, how she spent her weekend and if she hoped we would hang out together occasionally.

Having prepared these questions in my mind ahead of time made it a lot easier to focus on compatibility and not get swept up in the connection – because I did really like her as a person

and we giggled over one another's dating and work stories. I was able to put the laughter and likeability factor to one side during the interview. I reminded myself that it might be a sign of a connection, but it's not the sign of a good housemate and I still needed to dig deeper to get to the practicalities that would make our house share harmonious.

I opened up about my house share with Emma and how I'd learnt that I couldn't live with a partier, and she shared with me her own concerns about living with someone who might bring strange men back to the flat and disrupt the calm. That she had a dog who visits sometimes. I told her I wasn't a massive dog person but I quite liked walking them. Opening this honest conversation revealed a lot about her, and me, and I could see that we had similar ideas about how we would live together. It is, to date, the best house share I have lived in: one defined by mutual respect, shared values (or enough of them) and realistic expectations.

## Chapter reflections

### *What are your nonnegotiables?*

Approach the information-gathering phase with a list of your non-negotiables. Maybe it's that you want your partner to stay twice a week, or you love cooking and want to make it clear from the beginning that you will be in the kitchen a lot. Ask others who have lived with you for information they think might be important for future housemates, reflecting on past experiences of what you like or don't like in a housemate. The more you can share upfront, the better. It's important to remember not to get caught up in being liked: this is about finding a housemate who is compatible with how you want to live.

What do the people who know all your different sides think? Taking time to discuss prospective housemates and house shares with the people who knew me best was really valuable. Sometimes they pointed things out that I hadn't thought of, or were able to point out things I'd mentioned were a priority and help me hold out for the right thing when I was tempted to accept something that wasn't quite right.

What are the things you find most challenging about sharing your space with others in a house share? Compile a list of those things that have really been getting under your skin – even if they seem small and petty. They are contributing to a level of dissatisfaction that you have the power to overcome. After you've made your list, take each niggle and think about how in an ideal world you would resolve this conflict. Even if you don't feel ready to act on it now, having that plan and knowing how you could use it to resolve your problems will help you to feel more in control. If the moment strikes and you feel able to tackle your frustrations, you've already got a loose plan in place.

What does your ideal house share look like? Manifesting can be really powerful. When you think about your dream house share, are you living with friends? How many? How

often do you see each other? What boundaries are in place? Is there a good balance of having your own space as well as having the option to chat in communal spaces? Whether you're imagining a big kitchen where you all sit and eat together of an evening or a peaceful space where you can enjoy solitude, write down or draw all the things that are important to you in a house share scenario. Keep this image in mind while you are searching, or think about how you might adapt your current situation to align more with this vision.

What are your red flags and green flags when it comes to a housemate? Make a list. It's taken me six house shares to get a clear picture of these flags so use mine as a template to map your own flags – add your own, too, if there are more that come to mind.

### **Red**

- Someone looking for a temporary living fix
- Someone who is not committed to making the house feel like home
- Bad work-life balance
- Party animal (excessive drink and drugs)
- Brash or very loud personality

### **Green**

- Have positive anecdotes of house shares they've lived in
- A clear idea of what they're looking for (for the house to feel like home)
- A balance of social activities and relaxation
- Considerate personality