

Couples Therapy: My partner is a slob. His dirty kitchen and bathroom are a real turn off – do I tell him?

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Couples Therapy

Different housekeeping standards are a common problem in relationships, says couples counsellor Cate Mackenzie. She weighs in on how to broach a conversation about it



House keeping is a normal problem in relationships (Photo: Thomas Northcut/Getty Images)

By [i Team](#)

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I started seeing someone a few months ago and we live in different cities which means that he comes to me some weekends and I spend other weekends at his place.

I like him a lot, we get on well, the sex is good and I think mostly our communication is good. There is only one problem that I'm too embarrassed to bring up with him – he is a slob.

When I go to his flat I find it really hard not to judge the dust everywhere, the piles of washing drying in the kitchen, and the mouldy bathroom.

In the run-up to me visiting he talks about how he is going to spend the night before cleaning for me, and I think that he actually has made an effort, but my standards are different and I find it really hard not to feel turned off by the mess.

He joked that his ex-wife was a neat freak and I don't know how to tell him that I am too. It seems such a small thing but it really bothers me and I don't know how to say it in a nice way.

Couples counsellor and psychosexual therapist Cate Mackenzie says:

This is quite a normal problem. Most people have different housekeeping standards and this is often the difficulty in living together. It's good that you want to address this before the tension builds.

The key is to go one step at a time. Don't expect to turn him into a domestic god overnight.

Before you talk to him, ask yourself what would you ideally like from him in terms of how his place looks and is cleaned? Is it clean sheets, hoovering, the washing up done or is it a deep clean? Really work out what you need and want, and write it down. Is there one place that would be a good start – would that be the bedroom or kitchen or is it everywhere?

When you think of the mess: what do you feel? What comes up for you? Again write this down. Did you grow up with mess or any trauma or distress or clutter or was your home meticulous? And what did any of that mean for you? Sometimes it's the meaning we give things that is the problem, more than the thing itself. For example when you see his mess do you take it that he doesn't care about you? Or do you worry that it's a sign of deeper chaos and disorder? Are there memories from previous relationships or childhood coming up?

Now, another question: is it possible that housekeeping is simply something he might not know how to do? We might take it for granted that everybody knows how to do certain things, but this is not the case.

Imagine an area you might not understand that he understands more. For example, if you didn't know about sport then a football match might sound like noise but if someone explained the characters and the history in bite size pieces you might get engaged.

It could honestly be that cleaning is a blindspot that he doesn't know how to address, or that he does not see his home in the same way you do. You may need to educate him, kindly, gently and one step at a time. For example, could you take the time to explain to him how much delight you get from clean sheets, or how much more turned on you are in a bedroom that's hoovered and has no clutter? If he picks up on this feedback and acts on it, appreciate this. You are then showing him how this really makes you happy and it can motivate him – he might not want to tidy for himself but if you do this well he might do it to support you.

If he doesn't pick up on these kinds of comments, ask him if he is willing to talk about something that means a lot to you. Then express how much it matters to you to have things a certain way in your physical environment and that it would be a huge help if he could accommodate this in your visits. Make it about your preferences and be sure you are not shaming him or making him wrong in any way. You do this by using I statements.

It is so important that your tone is not patronising or passive aggressive but is a genuine open request. It is important too to listen to his response and to understand how he sees things. He says his wife was a 'neat freak' and so it could be that this is an area he feels sensitive about.

When we get together we have a lot of happiness hormones travelling through us and this makes everything have a pink glow. We accept our partner how they are. As things get more serious and we start to think about committing, we see things differently. It's when power struggles may begin.

You might want to change the other person to fit in with your beliefs, or become so relaxed you stop making any effort. Learning how to communicate kindly and from the heart while being present and handling what may come up will change your life in so many ways. It can be crunchy when you first start but over time it will lead to new levels of intimacy.

As told to Marianne Power