

Respect the ABILITY

Supporting Neurodivergent Students in Residence Life
Practical strategies for housing and student support professionals

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Session Outcomes

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

Identify common
residence hall stress
points

Use communication
practices that build
trust

Apply strategies to
realistic housing
scenarios

Support self-
regulation in the
moment

“I used to think that the worst thing in life was to end up alone. It's not. The worst thing in life is to end up with people who make you feel alone.”

— Robin Williams

**Belonging is built through everyday interactions;
consistent and respectful staff relationships reduce risk.**

Where Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Shows Up in Residence Life

Self-Awareness

Sensory input
Stress + triggers
Emotional reactions to shared space

Self-Management

Regulating during overload
Sleep, hygiene, and routines
Responding vs. reacting

Social Awareness

Understanding roommate perspectives
Navigating differences
Reading social expectations

Relationship Skills

Roommate agreements
Conflict resolution
Communication with RAs/staff

Decision-Making

Social choices
Policy navigation
Safety + help-seeking

**Residence halls are where students practice SEL every day
—through roommates, routines, and relationships.**

Why Residence Life Matters

Residence halls amplify sensory load, unpredictability, and social negotiation.

Small staff actions can help prevent escalation and strengthen belonging.

Predictability + dignity = better outcomes for everyone.

Common Residence Life Challenges

- **Safety procedures:** fire drills, access, and overnight policies
- **Roommates** and conflict resolution
- **Sharing** space, belongings, routines, and rigidity
- **Social navigation**, free time, and bullying risk
- **Personal care routines**, sleep/wake cycles, and sensory needs

Understanding Neurodiversity in Residential Spaces

Neurodivergent students **may experience the environment differently—not incorrectly.**

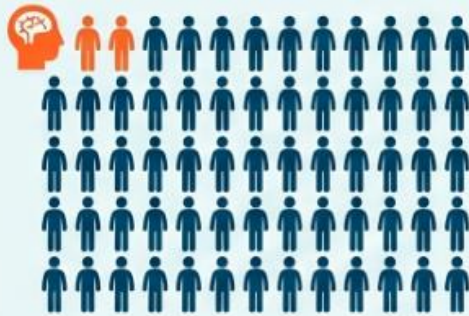
Common pressure points include sensory input, transitions, routines, and social expectations.

Assume competence and ask what helps the student feel comfortable.

High Co-occurring Mental Health Needs

Neurodiversity on Campus: Understanding the Student Experience

PREVALENCE & MENTAL HEALTH



**0.7% to 1.9%
Prevalence**

Estimated percentage of college students who meet the criteria for ASD.



**65% Experience
Co-occurring Needs**

Up to 65% of neurodivergent students face anxiety or depression alongside their primary diagnosis.

THE SOCIAL INTEGRATION GAP

Difficulty Meeting New People



Neurodivergent Students

Peer Group

41% of neurodivergent students struggle with new connections vs. 31% of their peers.

Heightened Risk of Loneliness



Neurodivergent Students

Peer Group

35% of neurodivergent students experience loneliness – compared to 22% of the general population.

Predictability Supports Regulation

- Comfortable vs **Uncomfortable**
- Expected vs **Unexpected**
- **Predictability supports regulation**; surprises increase stress.
- **Preview** what will happen next when possible
- **Respect routines and perspective-taking** without stereotyping.



If you know one person who has autism, you know one person who has autism.

Communication That Builds Trust

Allow extra processing time—and **then check understanding.**

Write it down: steps, expectations, and next actions.

Be explicit about the **What, Why, Who, and When.**

Replace vague directions with **concrete expectations.**

LISTEN...



Clarity builds trust.

Clarity Is Kindness

Example: “Quiet hours begin at 10 p.m.” instead of “Be respectful.”

Use plain language, written follow-up, and predictable next steps.



“What helps you feel comfortable here?”

“Here is what will happen next.”

Avoid rapid-fire questions during stress.



Concrete language lowers demand during difficult moments.
FIGHT, FLIGHT, RETREAT, FREEZE



Facilitating Connection Without Singling Students Out

Support connection while respecting privacy and autonomy. **DON'T SINGLE ME OUT!**

Teach unwritten rules of dorm living **explicitly**.

Use neutral, **non-confrontational** mediation language.

What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas!



Where can Residence Life build connection without spotlighting a student?

Regulation comes before resolution.

- Reduce sensory input: noise, lights, crowds.
- Offer two simple choices and, when possible, move to a quieter space.
- Save analysis and lecturing for later.



Pause and Reflect

What has made you take a moment in your school?

Where have you felt unsure about the “right” response?

What patterns do you notice: time, place, triggers, or transitions?



Case Study: Joe & Sam — Shared Space and Sensory Needs

Joe reports that Sam keeps throwing Joe's food away whenever it is left in the room.



- 1 What underlying barrier might be driving the conflict?
- 2 What does each student need to feel safe and respected?
- 3 What concrete roommate agreements could reduce future conflict?
- 4 What would you avoid doing as staff?

Case Study: Sue — Withdrawal and Avoidance

Sue is refusing to leave the room, is not attending classes, and will speak only a little with the roommate—not with staff.



- 1 How can Residence Life reduce pressure while keeping the door open?
- 2 Who might be a trusted connector?
- 3 What environmental changes might help?
- 4 What predictable next step can you offer?

Case Study: Archie — Policies, Relationships, and Roommates

Archie insists that a boyfriend is allowed to stay overnight.
Archie's roommate is uncomfortable.



- 1 What is the policy issue versus the relationship issue?
- 2 How can staff validate feelings without taking sides?
- 3 What options exist within policy?
- 4 How do you keep the conversation neutral and non-confrontational?

Case Study: Cleo — Social Experiences and Risk

Cleo, a first-year student, was invited to a first party and asks what drinking is like.



1

What information is helpful, factual, and non-judgmental?

2

How can staff support decision-making and safety planning?

3

What assumptions might staff make that could be unhelpful?

4

Which campus resources are appropriate to connect?

Case Study: Andy — Hygiene and Social Norms

Andy has some less than desirable personal hygiene habits. He will pick his nose while talking to you, pass gas in the general direction of others who are eating and will often skip showering or brushing his teeth (roommate can attest to this).



- 1 How can staff address this privately and respectfully?
- 2 What concrete expectations and supports can you offer?
- 3 How will you follow up without increasing embarrassment?
- 4 What plan increases success rather than shame?

De-Escalation and Regulation Strategies

- Offer a quieter, **lower-stimulation space**.
- Allow time to decompress: “**Let’s talk about this in a few minutes.**”
- **Listen first**; feedback later.
- Use grounding tools if helpful and **revisit expectations after regulation**.

Institution-Level Practices (Transferable Across Campuses)

- **Preview safety routines** such as fire drills and evacuations with clear scripts
- Use **plain-language housing expectations** and roommate agreements
- **Train RAs** on sensory-aware responses and supportive language
- Create consistent **pathways between Housing, Accessibility, and Counseling**

Reflection: Translating Learning Into Practice

- What is one residence life practice you will rethink after today?
- What is one phrase you will start using?
- What is one barrier you can reduce this week?



Resources & Takeaways

1. Share the quick guide with staff
2. Build predictable scripts for common situations
3. Partner across offices to reduce barriers
4. Respect the ABILITY: assume competence and preserve dignity

Thank You

Thank you

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