



Creating Community,
one Neighbourhood at
a Time



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Making the Most of Your Cohousing Visits

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Adapted with permission from Finding Community: How to Join an Ecovillage or Intentional Community (New Society Publishers (<http://www.newsociety.com/>), 2007).

If you'd like to join an already-built cohousing community, each of your visits, whether sitting in on meetings or participating in common house dinners, is a rich and fertile cross-pollination point. The residents are most likely seeking people who will help build their community culture and physical infrastructure: you might have exactly the right energy, physical skills and social skills they're looking for. And you'll probably be asking yourself, "Will I feel at home here?" "Are these my kind of people?" These unspoken issues may hang potently in the air during your visits and can involve some ambivalence and anxiety. In some ways, visiting your prospective new home is like going on a blind date, applying for a job, or being a new kid in school.

Community etiquette: What hosts would like from visitors

One really good way to get an "inside" sense of the place is to arrange an overnight visit as a guest in the common house for a few days and take part in the life of the community, from meetings to work parties to shared meals. Whether you're visiting for an hour or a week, following "community etiquette" can help make your visits more enjoyable for you as well as for the community. Visitor etiquette can be boiled down to three points:

- Follow the rules.
- Be socially sensitive. "Ask if you can ask."
- Work.

Follow the rules

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so on.

- Absolutely keep the group's agreements. Follow their requests about where you'll be welcome to wander and explore, noise and quiet hours, the use of the common house kitchen or bathroom facilities, about if or where you might smoke or use alcohol. One rule of thumb is to consider the group's whole property – all its buildings, parking areas, paths, trees, fields, gardens and outbuildings – as someone's private home (because it is). Use the same consideration and courtesy everywhere on their property you would use when visiting long-ago acquaintances or relatives you barely know. In other words, be even more courteous and respectful than you would be if you were visiting good friends.
- Ask questions about how to do things properly, especially about systems you might need to understand before working with them. These can include kitchen agreements, such as where the compost goes, the preferred way to operate the blender, whether the community air-dries or towel-dries the dishes, where clean dishes are stored and

Be socially sensitive

- Be sensitive to a cohousing resident's needs for privacy and quiet time. Don't assume someone is necessarily available for conversation when he or she is sitting alone quietly in a public area, even if you do feel really curious about something or want your questions answered. If people look busy and you want to engage with them, check in first to see if they'd like to spend some time talking with you. Notice what they're already doing: are they trying to finish a task or are they on their way to meet someone?

- Pay attention to what kind of energy you're putting out. Are you feeling anxious, needy, impatient or burning with curiosity? Are you critical of or annoyed by their ways of doing things? "Lower the volume" on these energies, if you can. Just watch, listen and bide your time. Put yourself in learning mode – you don't have to decide anything yet.
- A certain touch of humility is not inappropriate when visiting a community. The people who live there know a whole lot more about how their community functions and the background and nuances of the issues they're dealing with than any visitor ever could know. An attitude of knowing what's best for the community or how they might do things better, no matter how well-meaning, tends to irritate community members and makes the visitor look hopelessly uninformed and insensitive, not to mention arrogant!
- A golden rule of community visits is "asking to ask." Before asking your list of questions while someone is pouring that first cup of morning coffee, ease into conversation by saying something like, "Would this be a good time to ask you a question about the community?" This way you give the person a graceful way to say "no thanks" if it in fact is not a good time, or if he or she doesn't want to be a community spokesperson right then. It also demonstrates that you're respecting the person's time and energy. And it gives you a reputation in the community for being a considerate and respectful guest.
- Don't be offended if the honest answer is "No." The person is paying you the courtesy of being real with you. You could always reply, "OK, thanks. Would you tell me when a better time might be?"
"The real secret is to make personal connections," advises community activist Geoph Kozeny in "Red Carpets and Slammed Doors" (Communities Directory, 2005). "Let people see that you're not an information sponge, but an interesting person who is sensitive to their needs: someone who wants to contribute and help but who isn't pushy about it."

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The kindly gift of work

- Another golden rule of community visits is to offer to work. You could help with meal preparation, kitchen and common house clean-up, community work projects, gardening, landscaping and other projects. Sometimes the most appreciated gift, however, is just your simple willingness to pitch in and help with whatever chore needs doing at the moment.

The gift of labor is one of the most fruitful ways you can spend time during a visit. It benefits the community as well as your reputation with community members. It can be the perfect time to ask questions and learn more about the community and it's one of the very best ways you and community members can get to know one another.

By the way, attending community meetings is an excellent way to learn more about the community, but always ask first. Don't assume you are welcome to sit in on meetings, especially interpersonal processing meetings, unless you get permission first, or are invited to attend. When you do attend a meeting, please don't comment or offer suggestions unless you are specifically invited to do so.

Sometimes you might have practical information that would truly help the group: they're dealing with a legal issue and you're an attorney who specializes in that kind of law; they've got computer problems and you're a computer consultant. In that case, please do speak up. Note that the kind of information residents can use from visitors is practical, not theoretical.

What do you want from your visit?

Of course you'll want to get every bit of what you came for from your visits. You'll want to get a sense of the community's culture and experience a good personal connection with as many members as you can.

What kinds of questions will most help you open the door to personal connections with community members? Once you feel people might have gotten to know you a bit (or at least, have gotten used to seeing you around), consider asking different kinds of open-ended questions. For example:

"What do you see as the group's highest priorities?"
"What are residents most proud of?"
"How has living here contributed to your personal growth and happiness?"
"What do people tend to find most challenging about living here?"
"What are some of the most difficult issues you have had to deal with in the last year?"
"How do you handle interpersonal conflict?"

If controversy is swirling through the community during your visit and you hear about it in meetings, it's better not to ask questions during the meeting, but to speak later, outside of meeting time, with people you know best...

If people get the sense that you are genuinely interested, open-minded and respectful of the community, they will probably be willing to spend time with you in thoughtful conversation. However, if they sense that you've already made up your mind about them and are even somewhat critical, they'll be more likely to distance themselves and clam up.

If you feel critical of the way the community does things, do keep it to yourself at this point. "Being outspoken or opinionated about what you think the group 'should' be doing is an easy way to wear out your welcome, fast," cautions Geoph Kozeny. "If something you value highly seems to be missing, ask them about it. Would they be open to it in the future? Would there be room and support for you to introduce it? Present your concern as, 'Is it likely the group would be open to this?' rather than 'I couldn't live here unless...'"

"Any community's favorite visitor is the cheerful, helpful one who is genuinely impressed with the community and not very critical of its shortcomings," observes Twin Oaks cofounder Kat Kinkade in the Communities Directory, 1995.

In summary, you'll enjoy your visit – and make a good impression on your cohousing hosts – if you demonstrate respect and a genuine desire to learn about and understand the community, and are willing to help out in all the ways you can.

Good luck on your cohousing journey!

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