

# HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

## Episode 11: Hosting Part Two: The People

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules.  
Welcome to Episode 11.

Today we're jumping in with part two of our little hosting series, be sure to listen to Hosting Part 1: Episode 10: The Mood and the Food.

Hosting is more than cooking and decorating, or what we call the mood and the food. If you are preoccupied with stirring, basting, timing and simmering half the day, not only will you not get to enjoy your guests, you could start to resent the holiday or the event. One way to help make sure that doesn't happen is to focus on the three people to consider every single time you host.

By the end of this episode you'll understand the three people you've got to always keep in mind when you're hosting.

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There are three people to consider every time you host—your guests, obviously, yourself, and your people (and that includes anyone who lives in your house). Today, I'm going to start with you, the first person you need to consider is yourself.

Wait, what? Doesn't that sound selfish, starting with ourselves? How dare I? Hosting is all about others, right? Well, it is.

A welcoming host is prepared to be present to her guests. I call this having a hosting mindset. Helping your guests to feel truly welcome starts with you. The smaller the gathering, the more impact that your mindset has on the overall feel. Are you ready to listen and engage? Have you arranged your day so that you can be present and undistracted when your guests arrive? Have

you given yourself time and space to prepare so that you aren't a ragged, stressed-out mess? If you want to create the worst experience ever for your guests, show up as a distracted, worried host and they'll show themselves out as quickly as possible.

One time, Chad and I were invited to dinner at someone's house, and as soon as we got there, it was obvious we had walked into the middle of low-grade chaos. This couple was definitely not in the hosting mindset. The wife was not even there, she had just run out to the store. The husband seemed really flustered, and Chad and I felt like we were in the way. That feeling lasted all evening. It would have been better for all of us if they had just canceled at the last minute or told us they forgot but suggested meeting for dinner at a restaurant. They were doing their best and I so appreciate them valuing us enough to invite us over.

The entire point of having people over is connection and if for some reason you're not in a place where you can do that, and especially if it's a small group and it's your role to be a main connection player, it's not only okay, but I would say it's honorable to postpone or cancel. I'm really thankful to have had this experience I just shared because it helped me to learn that hosting another couple in the wrong mindset is worse than not hosting at all, I had made the exact same mistake. And of course, a few years later it was my turn to have to practice what I learned.

Chad and I had met a new couple and we had talked about inviting over for months. After lots of back and forth and comparing schedules, we finally found a date that worked for all of us. But the day they were supposed to come over for dinner happened to fall at the end of an unexpectedly hectic and crazy-stressful week for me. Physically and emotionally, I was exhausted and done. The southern lady thing to do would be to push through it and have these new friends over anyway while I pasted a fake smile on myself. Thankfully, I was too tired to even try to fake it, especially with new people. So we called and apologized and rescheduled, there didn't have to be any fake lies about not feeling well, no. I just said that we are just too busy and we aren't going to be able to give you or tonight the attention it deserves. They were fine with that. It wasn't selfish; it was simply the right thing to do. The selfish decision would have been to have them over anyway, knowing I was depleted and I had nothing to give. I was in no place to ask good questions, to listen, and to connect. And connection is the main point of getting together. I might have been able to pull together a decent meal and maybe a welcoming home, but if there's no room, hope, or energy for connection, then having people over is pointless.

As a host, it's my job to create an atmosphere and mood and that starts with my own personal atmosphere and mood. If those are not in the right place, my hosting is going to be real bad. Now, we can't postpone a holiday or a birthday or a celebration like that, but also, we're not going to forget the holidays are coming and often there's a large group event, so we can rely on others to create the hosting mindset. We know exactly what to expect so the question is, what can you do to honor your own personality?

As an introvert, that means if I'm hosting 30 people for Thanksgiving, I'm not going out with friends for dinner and brunch in the week leading up to Thanksgiving. I have to say no to social things and save my energy for the big social event of the season.

It probably means I'm going to get up early a few mornings leading up to hosting and make sure I'm enjoying the parts of hosting that I personally love. I think everyone has parts of hosting they love, even if they don't feel like an accomplished host. Maybe you like to decorate, or the prepping of the meals, or planning games, or meaningful conversation. Maybe you look forward to making memories, taking photos, or eating the food, seeing your favorite people, or setting the scene and letting everyone else enjoy.

As an introvert host, if we are hosting a large group, I allow myself to take breaks during the hosting event itself. So, I will often disappear around the halfway point of our event. I go up to my room and lay flat on the bed for 10-15 minutes, close the door, usually have my phone and just veg out for a little bit. The more people here, the more I need it, the less people even notice I'm gone. No one has ever noticed I'm gone. Obviously if we are just hosting another couple, I don't do this – but I don't really need it then. But, I find it's easier to host a large group as an introvert than a small group with my limited introvert energy. Now my husband Chad is an extrovert, so the bigger the group the bigger his excitement. We've figured out that hosting is one of the things we do best together. I love to plan and set the atmosphere and he is always ready to talk, tell funny stories and get to know everyone who walks through the door.

Now, let's talk about your people.

This is the second set of folks you always need to consider when you invite guests into your home. It's the other people living in your house. I admit, I have been the worst at this. I sometimes got so caught up in prepping for guests that I'd forget to sit down with my boys – especially when they were younger to let them know who would be coming and why and what our expectations of them were. So we'd have a great night with friends, but once they left, our boys would be in tears because the Lego Millennium Falcon that they worked so hard to put together six months ago was in a million pieces all over the floor. That could have been avoided if I had let them know the ages of the kids coming over and reminded them to put away anything they didn't want those kids to play with.

A couple of my boys are introverts. This is important to know because understanding what fills up and depletes the little humans and other people in your family will help you prep them and create the right expectations for everyone. I can remember when my boys were younger, we hosted a family with children all day at our home and I realized my son was in the basement alone playing the piano. For a split second I felt bad – Oh my gosh, he's not "entertaining" the guest he didn't invite over in the first place. First of all, my assumption that my 12 year old introvert son will want and have the capacity to entertain a 7 year old girl and her younger siblings for hours on end was a bit much. Not only that, he had never met these children before and most likely was never going to see them again.

He had actually done a great job, he showed them around and introduced them to a game they were playing and hung out for awhile. He had helped me gather some toys and stuff to do and bring them into the family room before the family arrived. He had also spent the previous five days prior at school full of people and came home and cleaned his room for more people and woken up to guests and hadn't really had any alone time in days. This child needed to be by himself and I needed to let him.

Yes, I want my children to be kind and understand how to interact with new people. But no, I can't expect my children to entertain new children for me and their mother all day long.

What if you and your partner have different priorities when hosting? Well, most likely you do. You have to communicate. Find common ground. Although I'm a major introvert and Chads an extrovert, we both have a role when having people over and finally we can respect the other person and how they need to be. Because for both of us, opening up our home to people we love is worth the trouble and I'm guessing it's worth the trouble for you too.

Lastly, the third person that you are going to think about is your guests. This is the no-brainer, right? Of course you are thinking about your guests—that's the whole reason you invited them over. You want them to feel welcomed, thought of, cared for.

The main way to show them this is to simply be prepared for them. When you put time and effort into creating a welcoming home where the focus is on connecting with people, it shows. I admit, in the past my focus when preparing to have people over used to be all about me, my outfit and my house and getting our family ready so we could be impressive. Or at least not embarrassing. Now, I focus more on what kind of experience my guests will have.

How do you want your guests to feel when they enter your home? I want our guests to feel relaxed, at ease and welcomed into a safe and slow place where imperfections are not a surprise, where people are more important than stuff, and where there's room and time for everyone to be heard. I also want to foster connection by providing something we can do together with our guests.

In his book *Get it Together*, interior designer Orlando Soria says to "set the scene, then make a scene." I laughed when I read it but he's so right. It's one thing to set the scene and get the atmosphere prepped, but it's just as important to create something interesting for your guests to do: that's making the scene.

At big holiday gatherings we often have people over who haven't seen each other much during the past year. So I always try to provide something that acts as an icebreaker to get the conversation going. It depends on the ages of our guests, but sometimes I'll set out puzzles (well, all ages love puzzles) coloring books and markers. I love to plan a simple craft – for me, I'd rather do that than cook a dessert so I let someone else do that part. I might set out supplies for making paper snowflakes, or buy a gingerbread house kit if it's Thanksgiving or Christmas. Sometimes I'll set out old yearbooks, church directories or photo albums, anything for

reminiscing. Maybe I'll get out musical instruments, board games and card games for guests to pick up and play. We have a chess board set up on a little game table with two chairs flanking it and without fail, when we have a large group, a few people will sit down and play together.

If the weather is decent and there are kids, I like to have some kind of outdoor activity available like sidewalk chalk, a few balls or just setting up the firepit for everyone to gather around. Having something physical for guests to do can also help create memories. This is especially helpful for little children. Personally I consider it the ultimate failure if a child is ever bored at my house. Having a few things for people to do with their hands can give them a way to kind of be with the group and ease into conversation. If you want to fill in any awkward silence, make sure you're playing your seasonal playlist and if there are any lulls in the conversation they won't even be noticed.

If you are a guest for a large gathering, consider bringing a hands on item – might I suggest a puzzle from our favorite puzzle company, it's called Liberty Puzzles? They are an investment for puzzles because they are made out of wood. They are amazing. They have these cool, fun shaped pieces and all ages love them. Plus they make a great hostess gift. So a lot of times after the meal, I'll dump out the puzzle and we have everyone from the fifth grader to the oldest grandparent putting a puzzle together. It's so fun.

The entire point of having people over is to connect. That's why you care about having a cozy place to sit, providing yummy food and drink, and being fully present; they are all tools in your connection toolbelt. The goal is to create an environment for meaningful connection with anyone you invite into your home.

One final idea for hosting a large group is something I learned from my sister, Emily. I call it group time. She says that when a group of people gets together, she always tries to make sure there is at least one group conversation. It doesn't have to be hours long or really deep or led by a certified leader. Group time is simply a conversation when everyone is present in the same room listening to one person at a time. This could look like going around and sharing a favorite memory, sharing something for which each person is thankful or you could read a passage of scripture, a blessing, The Christmas Story or a prayer. Ideally this is a time for anyone who wants to be seen and heard to do so. As the host it's your job to make sure this happens. That doesn't mean you have to lead it; you can ask the most peopley person in your family to do that. Just don't let the day screech by in a flurry of activity if you can help it. Make time for purposeful connection. I promise, it will solidify your time together and help it feel meaningful and complete.

People are the heart and soul of why we open up our homes. I'm glad you wont make the mistakes I've made in the past when I used to focus on myself and what our guests would think of our home, the food I served, and me. Redirecting your focus to caring for and connecting with others will change your hosting life.

If you follow the hosting trinity formula by focusing on the mood, the food, and the people, your gatherings will be simple, memorable experiences of connection for your guests. This is the kind

of hosting that even the host can enjoy. There's no need to turn into a crazy person cleaning every real cobweb only to put up fake ones in the fall, feeling like you have to buy a new sideboard before your guests come over, or getting a personal makeover. When I find myself focusing on me, my house, my outfit, and my stuff, it's a red flag.

**Hosting is never about the host, and hospitality is never about the house.**

As a host, you are the conductor of the orchestra but you aren't expected to play all the instruments, that would make the worst music ever. The most important aspects of hosting are The Mood, The Food and The people. When you host, get help from others who are gifted in each area.

If we really believe in the power of imperfections, that they put people at ease and allow us truly to connect, then we won't have to erase all signs of imperfection and real life before we invite people over. We'll realize that sharing some of our everyday imperfection is an essential part of connecting with people. We don't have to finish every project, redecorate every room, overthink or overspend. People remember being loved, welcomed, invited, and thought of. They don't remember whether the coat closet was organized. This season, let go of overboard expectations. Welcome people into your home with love, in the midst of the mess, and be human together. Your guests are going to love you for it.

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Much of this content can be found in my last book *Welcome Home: A Cozy Minimalist Guide to Decorating and Hosting All Year Round*. It's a New York Times Bestseller that's helped thousands of seasonal decorators and hostesses like you focus on what really matters. If you want more hosting and seasonal decorating encouragement, be sure to check out *Welcome Home* from your local library or anywhere books are sold.