

Advice for the Home Team Toolbox

by Dr. Debi Warner



*Dear Dr. Debi,
We are afraid of working on a project together because if something goes wrong we may get in a fight and who needs that?
Signed,*

Avoiding Tense Times

Dear Tense Times,

It is too bad to skip over fixing your house together just because you might find some tension. I hate to see people drop their dreams out of avoidance. There may even be some things you can learn about teamwork and overcoming difficulties by determining to do a project together!

Let's take your worst fear, perhaps the wall you are working on caves in and you end up surrounded by broken sheetrock, wood and dust. These kinds of things do happen, but life also has similar surprises. In facing your renovation, you can learn the inner and team skills to deal with such surprises as they arise.

Many folks become overwhelmed when such a surprise hits them and might find themselves saying things they will regret, or getting mad and perhaps breaking a bit more materials as a result. It doesn't have to go this way.

I have found that the first steps toward panic under these circumstances begins with the notion of blame – that it is someone's fault, then that the accident should never have happened, and – of course, that no one else would ever have had such a calamity. Then the second set of problems comes when folks get mad at themselves because it happened and because they could not fix it right away.

Actually all of these initial reactions are unfounded. Everyone makes mistakes; accidents happen to all sorts of people, and, no matter who is to blame – they will happen anyway. The key is to figure out how to adapt a personal and team plan to handle accidents. Towns have emergency squads that practice their response, so that under crisis conditions they will have rehearsed how to react. You can do the same. Let's start with understanding what tools you will have available when facing startling surprises.

Your brain is your number one tool on the job. Like any tool, you will want to know its power capacity under various loads. When the brain is startled, it automatically changes gears – to seeking the cause of calamity and simultaneously taking a course of action. This works fine many times, as we brush off a glowing spark, grab a child from traffic, or remove a bee from a teammate's neck. Yet, if we start with some faulty notions, we might jump in with both feet, right into our own mouth! As you renovate, you are new to the job, and other than immediate safety, you will likely need to practice a response plan with some time to re-group before doing much else.

Why does the brain do this? Well, the brain has some interesting things go on when it has so quickly changed gears. Science has taken pictures of the brain when it is stressed in this sort of fashion – there are parts of the brain that go dark! Those parts control problem solving, time management, orderly planning, our understanding of other's points of view, and even our feeling of being ourselves. These parts don't stay dark, but if you react while they are dark or dim, you are likely to use only a tiny bit of your brain. You are not likely to enjoy the result. You don't drive your car when the lights are obviously dim from a loose belt, so why try to use your brain when it is squealing from its overload? Practice giving yourself a short break to let yourself power up and return to full capacity. You are likely to think better and talk better as a result.

Now, knowing your tool's load capacity better, go ahead and sit together with your Home Team and figure out some steps you can all take to handle accidents and startling events when they happen on your project. Perhaps one early step might be to check safety and then NOT ask questions. Instead, perhaps reduce chaos or just provide space. After about 10 or 15 minutes, the Home Team might can do Reconnaissance, Relieve stress (non-alcoholic), and Regroup. Talk it out with your Home team – about how you would like these three steps to look for you. These Three R's of load recovery will be a great sequence to insert in your Home Team's rapid response plan!

Dr. Debi

Dr. Debi Warner is the Founder of Renovation Psychology® radio host, and author of the book, Putting the Home Team to Work, available now online at RenovationPsychology.com. Dr. Debi provides advice for greater domestic harmony to folks who are renovating their home – for True Home Improvement. This column is offered for enjoyment and enhancement and is not intended to replace your personal medical care. Photo by Bob Jenks, St. Johnsbury, Vt.

Dr. Debi has a consultation practice, from her studio in Littleton, NH, with house calls all over the East coast.

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