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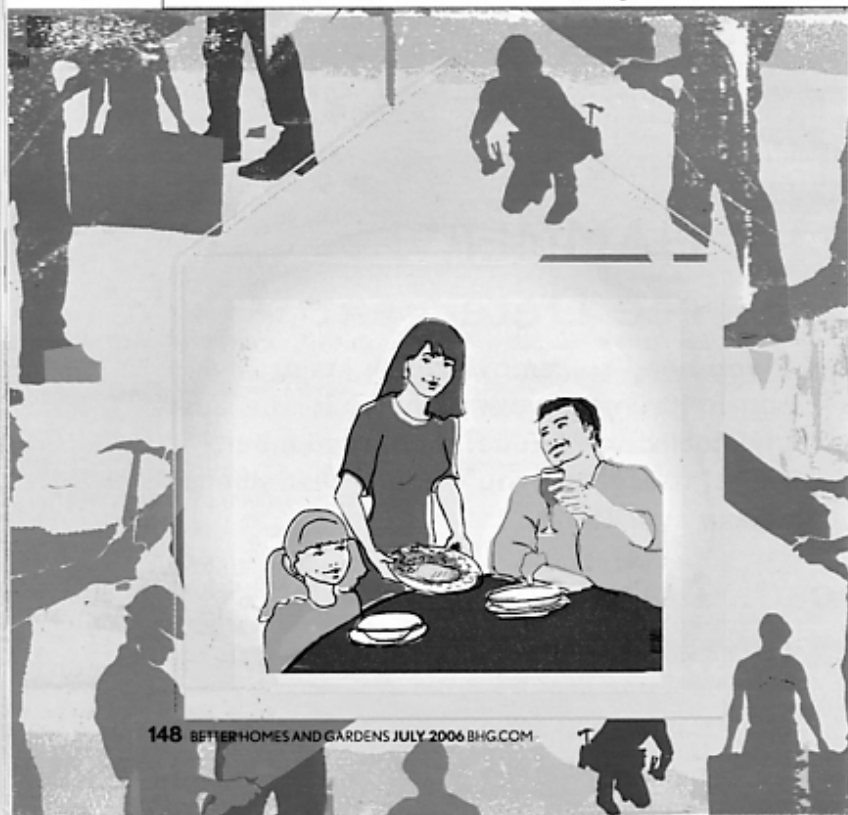
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HOW TO Survive A Remodeling

Home renovations can stress out any family. Learn how to keep your privacy—and your sanity—while the contractors do their job. BY TERI CETTINA ILLUSTRATION BY JEN RENNINGER



Shannon and Matt Cherry of Albany, New York, know a thing or two about the stress of renovating a home. In addition to dealing with anxiety over money, mess, and making the right decisions, the Cherrys were also about to become first-time parents. Shannon was pregnant with twins, and the top floor of the Cherrys' 1853 brownstone—with a new double-size nursery—was scheduled to be completed only about a month before Shannon's due date.

As if that weren't hectic enough, the couple also faced a mouse infestation, a budget battle with the contractor, and myriad unexpected problems with the electrical system of the old house.

Oh, and the Cherrys are still laughing about Shannon's near-naked run-in with the contractors. "The workers were in the house all the time, so they had keys to go in and out," recalls Shannon. "One Saturday, they

came in unexpectedly to pick up some equipment and I was standing in the kitchen in just a short T-shirt and underwear! From that point on, the guys always rang the doorbell before coming in."

Rare sitcom moments like this weren't really a problem as much as the daily annoyances that proved most nerve-wracking for the Cherrys: the constant rain of plaster dust on every floor, night after night of microwave dinners. Worst of all, says Matt, was the feeling that he and Shannon were nothing more than "refugees in a single room with just a TV" in the confines of their own house. Despite all their planning, the couple didn't anticipate how stressful and disruptive a home renovation could be.

If there is a home remodeling project in your future, preparation and creativity can go a long way toward pulling you and your family together while your house is being torn apart.

■ **GET IT IN WRITING** A remodeling project that takes two months longer than promised or goes way over budget can definitely raise blood pressure. Many potential surprises can be avoided if you plan for them in your construction contract. Nicole Persley, a real estate agent in Boca Raton, Florida, who is in the midst of remodeling her fifth personal residence, is now a pro at getting everything on paper.

After discussing details with contractors, for example, Persley stipulates the latest possible starting and ending dates for all projects and writes them into the contract. "If workers start a project late, or don't finish when they promised, they know they won't get full payment," she says. "It tends to keep them on their toes."

If you're not exactly sure which stress-busting details to include in your contract, talk with friends or prior customers of your contractors. Ask them what unforeseen issues came up during their projects. Your state's construction and contractors licensing board may also have suggestions for what to include in a thorough renovation contract.

■ **BUDGET FOR SURPRISES** Hidden costs always arise when you're renovating a home. That's why many professionals suggest budgeting for and setting aside an extra 20 percent of the estimated project cost. The Cherrys, for instance, found out halfway through their recent remodeling that the contractor had

neglected to budget certain supplies into his bid. The couple negotiated with him but still had to pay more than they had originally planned. Setting aside a little extra in your budget can help cushion an unexpected financial blow.

■ **PLAN FOR PRIVACY** Although the Cherrys can laugh about Shannon's semi-undressed encounter with her home remodelers, the story does raise one of the most common concerns families have during remodeling: maintaining a level of personal security and privacy.

Keeping family and work spaces separate was definitely an issue for Kathie Schwend, her husband, Selby, and their children when they renovated their Victorian farmhouse in Millboro, Virginia. At one point, workers removed all interior and exterior doors at the same time—including those for the bathroom—so they could paint them outside, assembly-line fashion. The arrangement was practical for the workers, but failed to take the family's basic needs for privacy into account.

So Kathie got creative. "I brought in some decorative trifold standing screens," she recalls. "They became our privacy curtains in each bathroom." Later, she moved the screens into her teenage daughter's bedroom so she could dress behind them.

When Roberta Carlton Hefferman and her husband, Nathaniel, added on to their Lexington, Massachusetts, home, their remodeling firm offered a sturdier privacy solution. Workers barricaded the construction zone from the family zone with a thick plywood wall. The workers also had a separate entrance. The walled-off area was a safety feature, too, because the older of the Heffermans' two sons was a toddler at the time.

There was some compromise involved, because the Heffermans temporarily lost access to their kitchen and downstairs bathroom, but they say the safety and privacy that the arrangement gave them made it a more than worthwhile trade-off. "Sometimes we barely even noticed the workers were there," Roberta says. >> on 152

CALLING FOR CLEANUP

Watching a home turn into a mess during a remodeling project is a common source of stress for families. One sanity-saving option: Treat yourself to a thorough clean-up job by hiring a professional cleaning crew after the renovation is done.

"I've found that many contractors' spouses and relatives run cleaning services, so ask them for recommendations," suggests Nicole Persley, a real estate agent in Boca Raton, Florida, and a veteran of many remodelings.

If you'd rather do some of the cleanup yourself, consider renting a professional-quality shop vac. Whatever you do, avoid using your regular home vacuum to clean up construction mess. Dust and debris could easily clog and ruin it, and that's one more renovation headache you don't need.

■ **AVOID MESS STRESS** Heaps of drywall scraps, stockpiled equipment, and wall-to-wall construction dust can eventually bother even the most laid-back homeowner. Persley's personal bugaboo was popcorn-ceiling debris. After she and a contractor removed the 1970-era ceiling texture from one of her homes, remnants continued to show up everywhere. "We covered the furniture and everything else really well, but I am still finding that stuff in my clothes and boxes."

While that mess might not have been avoidable, Persley now knows to prearrange with contractors to keep dirt and dust to a minimum. One idea: Ask your contractor to clean up daily—including vacuuming and mopping—and not just at the end of the job. "It's your house and you need to be able to live in it comfortably while the work is being completed," she says. Ditto for other messy habits, such as workers who smoke or leave litter in your yard.

Some mess—especially dust and plaster—may be unavoidable throughout the house. If family members have allergies or asthma and are easily irritated by this kind of debris, make sure their sleeping areas are as far removed from the construction zone as possible. And consider purchasing a HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) filter to collect airborne pollutants while they sleep. Find these devices in most department and home improvement stores for as little as \$100.

■ **STICK TO FAMILIAR ROUTINES** Remodeling is disruptive enough. If you let go of favorite family rituals

during the renovation process, you can set yourself up for more stress.

The Schwend family made a pact: "We decided not to obsess about things related to the renovation in the evening. When the workday was over, it was family time," says Selby.

Routines are especially important if you have young children at home, says Carol Ummel Lindquist, a Laguna Beach, California-based psychologist who has survived several remodeling projects herself and counseled many clients through theirs. According to Lindquist, sticking to a familiar schedule can help children feel less anxious about the changes taking place in the house.

"If Friday night is usually your family's movie night, rent a video and watch it together, even if you're all crowded into the one clean bedroom," she says.

■ **GET OUT A LITTLE.** Look on the bright side. A home renovation is a good reason to get out of the house. During the loudest or messiest parts of the project, take a few day trips, try new restaurants, or even hole up in the library or a bookstore and bask in the silence. If you have school-age kids, the library is a distraction-free place for them to do homework in the afternoons while construction is still underway.

If you work from home, as Shannon Cherry does, you might reduce stress levels a bit by working off-site during the noisiest portions of the remodeling. During her home renovation, Shannon often took her laptop and cell phone to a local coffee shop. During an unexpected power outage, she even shared office space with a client for a few days.

Your community may also offer shared workspace for temporary or long-term use. The Brooklyn Writers Space in New York, for instance, offers partitioned desks and access to a kitchenette, bathrooms, and roof deck to members who pay a quarterly fee.

■ **KEEP THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE** Your best strategy for shaking off remodeling-related stress might simply be maintaining your sense of humor and keeping your eye on the big picture. When Kathie Schwend became tired of her

Some families take vacations during remodeling, but if you stay at home, stay true to your family rituals. Renovations shouldn't stand in the way of movie night.

home's disarray, she posted a saying on her refrigerator: "This, too, shall pass." It reminded her and her family that the renovation was only temporary, and that someday they'd have great stories to tell their friends.

Therapist Lindquist suggests that you also remember that going through home remodeling, however difficult, is still a privilege. Lindquist and her husband took their two sons to Mexico while their home was being renovated. While there, the family helped build a home for a needy Mexican family.

"That was a really sobering experience for all of us," she says. "My boys, especially, learned that at least we can afford to remodel our home. That's a whole lot more than many people in this world can do." ☺

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