

47 Skills You Need to Survive Homeownership

Too bad a house doesn't come with an owner's manual. And a week-long seminar where you learn what every button, switch, and wire is for. Alas, the keys to the castle come with no troubleshooting guide to dog-ear—and, we're betting, no wise master to unlock the mysteries of the place you call home. Then again, that's what we're here for: to provide fast fix-it advice when it's time for you to do your home owning duty. Because at some point, you're going to have to know how to change out a light fixture without zapping yourself to kingdom come. Or paint a double-hung without gumming up the works. Or stem the flood when the toilet overflows. And you're going to want to do things right, the first time. So consider these 47 tips a crash course in homeowner self-confidence. And study them well. 'Cause owning a house means you're going to have questions. Lucky for you, we've got some answers.

1. Fix a leaky faucet

This particular type of water torture is likely due to a failed washer inside a handle. The faucet is just the messenger. To replace the washer, turn off the water supply valve under the sink. Stuff a rag in the drain so you don't lose parts, and then take the handle apart. Pop the screw cover on top, remove the screw, and pull off the handle. Use a wrench to disassemble the stem, and line the parts up on the counter in the order they came off, so you know how it goes back together. Examine rubber parts or plastic cartridges for cracks, and take the offending piece to the hardware store for an exact replacement. Reassemble the parts you've laid out, in reverse. Then revel in the ensuing peace and quiet.

2. Move a refrigerator by yourself

Clarence Yuzik, aka The Fridge Doctor, has two words for you: Magic Sliders. Put these little plastic disks under the fridge's front feet (you can lever them off the floor with a long pry bar), then pull. Most refrigerators have wheels in the back, so the whole unit should glide forward effortlessly.

3. Dig a hole

A stomp on a pointed shovel, that's easy—and so is electrocuting yourself when you slice into a buried power line. Which is why any prospective hole-maker should first visit digsafely.com to find the agency in his or her area that keeps track of underground utilities. It'll send someone out to your place, mark any lines you have, and save you from getting buried yourself.

4. Locate a stud

Say you want to hang a shelf. Knuckling the wallboard can pinpoint a stud. But to better the odds when your electronic stud finder's gone missing, use deductive reasoning. Most studs are placed at 16-inch intervals, so once you know where one is, you can usually find the rest. Start at a corner, where there's always a stud. Or take the cover plate off an electrical outlet and find out on which side it's mounted to the stud. From there, measure 16, 32, 48 inches, and you should hit a stud at each go. Eliminate all guesswork by using a thin bit to drill a test hole at the top of the base molding, which you can easily repair with a dab of caulk.

5. Deal with a seized lock

Hit the 7-Eleven before you call that \$100-a-visit locksmith. Some WD-40 sprayed into the keyhole will lube the mechanism quickly. If that doesn't do it, you may have a broken spring or tumbler—and need that pro after all. If so, keep the new lock from locking up by giving it a yearly spritz of long-lasting Teflon spray.

6. Check for termites

Despite your worst nightmares, you won't hear a distinct munching sound. And these guys don't hide in plain sight, so you need to scout out places where wood framing is exposed, like crawl spaces. Inspect them for raised, branchlike tubes that, when broken open, reveal cream-colored or yellowish insects. Also, check where siding meets the foundation for salt-size droppings or tiny clumps of dirt next to pinholes. If you spot even one, you need a qualified exterminator to squash those tunneling bugs.

7. Unclog a sink

Chemicals rarely clear a stoppage—they only make a small hole. A full stoppage requires mechanical clearing. Remove the stopper and block off overflow holes. With water in the bowl—the water puts more pressure on the clog—plunge with a flat-faced plunger. If that's not enough, get under the sink and take off the trap to see if that's where the clog is lodged. If the blockage is deeper, rent yourself a hand snake. Slowly push the coil down the drain, carefully twisting, pulling, and pushing

when you hit the blockage. If the snake fails, then the still waters truly run deep. Call a drain-clearing service to get things flowing.

8. Hire a handyman

Skip the classifieds—no one any good needs to advertise. Try the local hardware store instead. The guys behind the counter know who's buying supplies for paid jobs. Or find out who does the maintenance at the school or town hall. Maybe he moonlights. Just be sure to check references, and find out whether your town or state requires a license. Also ask if he carries liability insurance—otherwise, be sure your homeowner's insurance will cover him.

9. Ensure a light bulb's long life

You know that popping sound that signals another light bulb has burned out before its time? The cause: The little brass tab inside the lamp socket that makes contact with the bulb base is dirty or bent, interrupting the connection and causing the filament to imperceptibly flash on and off, shortening its life. With the fixture unplugged or the circuit breaker switched off, clean the tab with a Q-tip and rubbing alcohol; then nudge it up with a screwdriver so that it stays in contact with the bulb base.

10. Get a plumber to show up on a holiday

Everyone has a price: a fat check, a bottle of Scotch, a plate of homemade oatmeal-raisin cookies. And when the powder-room toilet won't flush just hours before the relatives are to descend, you'd better know what your plumber's is. These guys appreciate loyalty, so if you frequent the same pro (and he knows it), he'll be more inclined to return your frantic call. But you should also know a 24-hour plumber who's equipped for off-hours emergencies. The truth is, there is no plumbing emergency. If a plumber can talk homeowners through shutting off the water main, they can wait till the next day. Rapid response will cost you—at least 20 percent more than a standard weekday service call. But for people whose lives are disrupted, I guess it's worth it.

11. Remove a stripped screw

We recommend a hand screwdriver appropriate for the screw and a double dose of elbow grease to fix this unfortunate bit of handiwork. Gently hammer the screwdriver into the head. Then use as much downward force as you can while you slowly back out the screw.

12. Avoid stripping a screw

That's what the clutch, that sliding ring of numbers on a drill/driver, is for. It stops the bit from turning when the motor feels a certain amount of torque, or twisting resistance—less at lower numbers, more at higher numbers. As a rule, set it low for small screws and high for large ones. But use a low setting when putting up drywall, so you don't sink the screw's head too far and break the paper. When dealing with hardwoods, a higher setting may help get the screws in, but first drilling a pilot hole is even better.

13. Remove the base of a broken light bulb

Cut a raw potato in half and, with the power off or the lamp unplugged; press the cut end onto the jagged glass. For a comfortable grip, select a potato with a tapered shaft.

14. Drill through tile without cracking it

Go get a drywall screw and a hammer. Place the tip of the screw exactly where you want to drill, then tap it ever so gently with the hammer to pierce the glaze and create a little divot. Now load a masonry bit into your drill driver and use the divot to hold it in place as you start drilling. No fissures, no scratches, no fuss.

15. Hardwire a light fixture

Anything powered by electricity requires that the current make a full circuit to and from the main box. So all the wiring in a house has two lines: one that brings in the electricity (the hot wire) and one that carries it back (the neutral wire). Connect hot wires to each other and neutrals to each other. And just make sure you don't become the conduit in between.

The hot is usually black and the neutral white. But if yours look different, use a circuit tester. With the electricity on, touch one node of the tester to the wire and the other to something metal—that is NOT touching you. If the light goes on, that's your hot wire.

Turn off the electricity and connect the black ("hot") wire to the black wire or the brass screw on your fixture and the white (neutral) to white wire or silver screw. If your fixture has two like-colored wires, the one with writing or grooves connects to the white wire or silver screw. Be sure to connect the copper grounding wire from the cable to the green grounding screw in the junction box, then to the grounding wire coming from the fixture, if there is one.

16. Pick an interior lock

Your 2-year-old is in the bedroom bawling, you're out in the hall, and there's a locked door between you. On the door's knob or on the plate around it, there should be a small hole that's made just for this situation. Take a slim piece of metal, such as a small flathead screwdriver, and slip it in the hole. Compress the spring inside or slip the screwdriver head into the slot on the spring and turn. Door unlocked, toddler safe, shoulder not broken.

17. Unstick a door

Doors stick for a lot of reasons: a loose hinge, too much paint, a settling house, or humidity in the air. If the door suddenly jams in dry weather, your problem is the hinge, likely a loose screw. A door that's been painted too much or is sticking because the house is settling can be sanded or planed at the trouble spot, then repainted. If the door is swelled by humidity—often a front door or bathroom door—it's usually because part of it wasn't painted and moisture is getting into the wood; check the top and bottom edges. Shave down the door as little as possible to make it just fit. Normally you want a crack the width of a nickel around a door, but in this case make it a dime. Then paint over any exposed wood on all six sides to seal it. When the humidity lessens, the door will shrink to a perfect fit, opening without a hitch.

18. Bypass the electric garage-door opener when the power is out

That red cord dangling from the ceiling-mounted operator—haven't you always wanted to pull it? Now's the time. Doing so disengages the chain drive, so you can manually slide the door up its track.

19. Clean stained grout

All grout can be cleaned. The secret weapon: a steam cleaner, which brings most any stain to the surface so it can simply be wiped away. Brushing on a penetrating sealer will keep the grout stain-free.

20. Know which breaker to turn off

When you finally get around to putting in that dimmer switch, you won't want to be stumped by a poorly labeled breaker box. Ditch the pencil and paper chart—you're not changing your wiring anytime soon. Instead, write directly on the metal next to each switch with a fine indelible marker. Have a friend plug lamps into all the sockets in a room and tell you via cell phone which ones go dark when you flip a switch. Then, be specific when you write it down.

21. Dry out a flooded basement

After a disastrous storm, water below ground level must be removed slowly to equalize pressure on both sides of the basement walls. Pumping it out too quickly or too early can cause structural damage or a cave-in. The water in your basement is pushing back, preventing your basement walls from collapsing. Test groundwater levels by digging down a few inches just outside your basement. If the water pools, wait a day or two to hook up a submersible pump. Don't go in without turning off the electricity first (if you can't, call your utility and don't go in at all). Don gloves, eyewear, and a mask to protect yourself from cleaning agents or wastewater that may have seeped into the basement soup. On the first day, remove just one foot of water (send it as far from the house as possible, preferably to a storm drain) and wait overnight. If the water level is back up, it's too early to pump. Once the water stops rising, pump out two or three feet each day until the basement returns to dry land.

22. Make friends with the new neighbors

It's just a matter of time before your kids trample their tulips, the dog makes a mess of their lawn, or you want to put up a fence or cut overhanging limbs from their tree. So when they've barely unloaded the moving van, arrive with a warm coffee cake or an invitation to join the school carpool. Tell them funny stories about the crazy widow who used to live in their house. As time goes on, offer to take in their mail when they're away or clear their driveway during a storm. Be sure to invite them to your annual holiday cocktail party. Being neighborly will help keep the peace—and your property as you want it.

23. Deal with a downed power line

Always assume any downed line is energized. Just 100 volts can deliver a lethal jolt, and residential power lines carry 7,200; a ringing phone line, 70 to 120. So stay far away from any downed line, and call your electrical provider to turn it off.

24. Hang heavy objects on drywall

Those thin cone-shaped plastic anchors aren't for wallboard; they're meant to sink into plaster. A toggle bolt provides the best holding power in drywall. The metal bar folds or pivots to go through a hole in the wall then flips open flat against the back of the board to brace whatever's screwed to the front of the wall.

25. Use a fire extinguisher

Work fast—the typical extinguisher has as little as 8 seconds of life, so know how yours works in advance. And make sure to stow it near an exit so you can back out as you fight the flames. Then remember the acronym "PASS": 1) Pull the pin. 2) Aim the nozzle at the base of the flames. 3) Squeeze the trigger. 4) Sweep the spray from side to side. And don't assume the fire is out just because the flames are gone. Call 911 and wait for the fire department to give you the high sign.

26. Dispose of leftover paint

Unless it has dried to a solid, you need to take special precautions; tossed in the trash, paint solvents can eventually contaminate groundwater. You can speed up the drying process by putting cat litter in the can. Or go to earth911.org for links to programs in your area that recycle paint by giving it to schools or charities. The site also lists the 2,000 household hazardous waste centers in the country that accept all sorts of hard-to-dispose-of stuff, from batteries to cleansers.

27. Cut down a big tree

In 2004, 45,300 people were hospitalized from chainsaw, ax, and hatchet injuries, and that number doesn't include the thousands hurt by falling trees. If the tree's big enough for you to climb, call a certified arborist to remove it.

28. Solder a copper pipe

Learn to sweat a pipe properly and you can save some bucks by doing simple plumbing repairs yourself. Just make sure your joint starts with clean pipes (no water or grit inside).

- 1) Deburr inside the pipe ends with a reamer, and then polish the outside with an emery cloth.
- 2) Coat both parts with flux and fit them together—wherever the flux is, the solder will flow.
- 3) Hold a propane torch flame on one side of the joint. When the flux bubbles, touch the solder to the other side of the joint and move the flame away. The solder will be sucked all around the fitting. The heat draws the solder toward the hottest point.
- 4) Immediately wipe the joint with a damp rag. New joint, no sweat.

29. Deal with the strong smell of gas

A closed-up kitchen with gas flowing from an open unlit burner can create a combustible atmosphere in as little as 10 seconds. So if you smell gas—we mean really smell gas—do not turn on the lights or use a telephone, cell phone, flashlight, or computer, all of which could create a spark, blowing the place sky high. Instead, haul everybody out of there and call the gas utility or the fire department immediately.

30. Stem a flood--and save your wiring

As a safety measure, you should know where your main water and electrical shutoffs are. The water shutoff will be near where the water enters the house. Look for a metal wheel or a flat handle like a paddle. Or check outside for a mini manhole cover—the shutoff may be there. The main electrical switch will be in or near the main box. On an old fuse system, it may be a big lever or a handle that pulls out a whole block. On a modern breaker box it will be an isolated switch near the top of the box. Flip it to keep the circuits (and you, too) from getting fried.

31. Spot asbestos

Can't always tell by looking, but there are likely places you'll find the carcinogenic mineral fiber, widely used in homes built before 1970. If your pipe and water-heater insulation resembles troweled-on plaster, don't even touch it—the tiny particles get airborne quite quickly. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, asbestos may also be in the metal used for these pipes and furnaces, as well as in other kinds of insulation, artificial ashes in gas fireplaces, ceiling tiles, cement siding shingles, textured paint, patching compounds, and vinyl floor tiles made before 1986. Undisturbed, the material shouldn't pose a risk. But to be safe, you should have a qualified asbestos abatement contractor encapsulate or remove it.

32. Keep grout, cement, or plaster from roughing up your hands

Clean your hands with lemon juice or vinegar. The acid neutralizes the caustic alkalinity in these materials and keeps skin from drying out.

33. Paint a double-hung window

Toss the blue tape. Your number-one tool is a 1 1/2- to 2-inch sash brush. Its angled bristles come to a point, giving you a fine line. Raise the bottom sash and lower the top sash so they've almost switched places.

- 1) Paint the exposed parts of the top sash (now on the bottom), including the muntins.
- 2) Carry a thin line of paint onto the glass to seal the glazing. Next, nearly close the window and
- 3) paint the rest of the top sash, as well as
- 4) the entire bottom sash, without getting paint between the sash and the stops (the pieces of wood in front that

hold them in place).

5) Then paint the casing, sill, and apron. Before the paint dries, move the sash up and down.

34. Secure a loose screw

You'll need to fill in the hole before you can get the screw back in tight. The best filler is more wood, held in place with yellow carpenter's glue. Matchsticks, toothpicks, golf tees, packed in tightly, will do the trick. But better yet is a piece of 3/8-inch dowel. First, use a 3/8-inch drill bit to enlarge the hole. Cut off a small length of dowel with a utility knife or small saw. Dab it with glue and tap it into the hole. When the glue is dry, use a chisel or the saw to slice off the excess. Then drill a new hole and reattach the hardware. And put those golf tees to their intended use.

35. Repair a doorbell

A doorbell has three parts—the switch, the bell, and a transformer between them. If you don't hear anything when you press the button, check the switch's wire connections (no worries the voltage is too low to hurt you). Try touching the two wires together; if the bell rings, then you need to replace the switch. If the chime doesn't ring or makes a funny noise, check the bell. Clean it, inspect the wiring, and make sure the hammer isn't bent away from the bell or jammed by dirt. If you still don't hear that welcoming ring-a-ling, then it's likely the transformer is the problem. To fix that, you'll need an electrician.

36. Open a door with no knob

The key is engaging the spindle—the four-sided bar connected to the knob that retracts the bolt or latch. If the knob is off but the spindle is still sticking out, use pliers to grip and turn it. But if the spindle has fallen irretrievably on the far side of the door, find a suitable substitute—say, a large flathead screwdriver or even a fat pen. Fit it tightly into the spindle hole and turn.

37. Work safely on an extension ladder

Make sure the ladder's rung locks (those hooks that grab onto the rungs) are anchored in place and the pulley rope is tied to a rung. Use levelers on the feet if you're on uneven ground and a stabilizer at the top if you can't lean on anything sturdy. To set it at the right angle, stand with your toes at the ladder's feet and extend your arms straight out in front of you; your fingertips should brush the ladder's rails.

Face the ladder as you ascend or descend, and never climb higher than the fourth rung from the top. Once there, keep your hips centered between the side rails as you work. This is one situation in which you don't want to overreach.

38. Stop an overflowing toilet

A toilet works by gravity: The water in the tank—just enough to fill the bowl—drops down and pushes waste through the drain. The float drops, opening a valve that lets in water to refill the bowl and the tank simultaneously. The valve closes when the float rises far enough to shut off the water.

If the water from the tank can't leave the bowl fast enough, and then the refill will spill over. To stop the refill action, take off the top of the tank, grab the float, and pull it up to close the valve. That should give you time to reach down and shut off the water, or at least wait for some of the water in the bowl to drain.

39. Pick up a big paint spill on carpet

Cut two pieces of cardboard from a box. Use the edges of the cardboard to corral the pool of paint. Then use the pieces to form a scoop, and lift the liquid back into the bucket. When most of the liquid has been cleared, get two more buckets—one with fresh water and one empty. Saturate the remaining spill with the clean water, then scrape and scoop it up with a fat spoon and put it in the empty bucket. Work fast and continuously, replenishing the clean water as necessary. Rent a carpet cleaner to follow up; just be sure to keep the paint spot wet until it gets there.

40. Pull out a nail without marring trim

Use a block of wood as a fulcrum under the claw of your hammer. The additional height will give you more leverage and the hammer head will push against the block without damaging the trim.

41. Catalog your house for insurance

What should make the master list? Whatever's not nailed down, from furniture and rugs to furs, dishes, and jewelry. If you kept the receipt when you bought these items, great; jot down the value. If not, note where and when you got it. Then photograph, or better yet, video every room, from every angle. Burn the information onto a couple of disks and send one copy for safekeeping to Aunt Becky on the other side of the country. A tip: Go to knowyourstuff.org for free software that lets you create a virtual replica of your home online and then tally the value of what's in it.

42. Shovel snow without having a heart attack

Heart attack fatalities spike after a heavy snowstorm. Avoid early morning snow clearing; your blood clots more easily after you've been sleeping. And don't drink coffee or smoke before shoveling, because caffeine and nicotine speed your heart rate and constrict blood vessels. When you do go out to tackle the white stuff, try pushing it like a plow instead of lifting. Wet

snow is a lot heavier—about 20 pounds per cubic foot

and won't push well. If that's the case, then make sure to keep your back straight and your knees bent as you drive the shovel into the snow (1). Lift with your legs (2), then walk to the place you want to dump it (3). Spraying silicone on your shovel before you use it makes the snow slide off more easily. If you get winded, take a breather, have some cocoa, and come out later to finish the job.

43. Keep in contact during a blackout

Remember that outdated push-button phone you tossed in the attic—the boxy one with only 12 keys, a tangled spring cord, and no electrical plug? That will work, unlike your cordless, which runs on electricity, or your cell phone, which relies on a tower that runs on electricity. If you sold yours at that garage sale years ago, purchase a cheap corded phone. Then find a place to plug it in, so it'll ring on when the power's off.

44. Fix a hammer mark on trim

If the ding's on a finished surface, poke the area repeatedly with a needle, then flick several drops of water on it. Cover it with a damp rag and iron it on the cotton setting. The water absorbed into the wood will evaporate and expand the crushed wood cells. Concentrate the iron's heat on just the shape of the ding by placing an upside down bottle cap over it. Repeat until the wood regains its shape.

45. Reuse paint thinner

Clean brushes used to apply oil-based finishes in a wide-mouthed jar filled with paint thinner, then cover the jar and let the paint residue settle to the bottom. After a few days, carefully pour off the clarified solvent into another jar. Cap the jar and save it for the next cleaning. Let the residue in the first jar dry and harden (keep it away from flames), then discard.

46. Get free advice from the guy at the hardware store Like a wise neighborhood pharmacist who dispenses free advice, your local hardware store clerk is a pro on demand—and in demand. So don't wait until you're renovating to get on his radar. Make his place of business a regular pit stop for essentials on the way home from work or in the afternoon; avoid Saturday mornings. Make friends in his down time, and you're guaranteed special attention when you need it.

47. Safely lash lumber to your car If you must haul your stack of 2x4s home rather than wait a day for delivery (which can also put you out \$50 or so), lay the boards from front to back on the car roof to minimize wind resistance. Cushion the load with cardboard so you don't scratch your car's paint, and stack the wood neatly. Secure it at two or more points with ratcheting straps, wrapping the straps through your open front and rear car doors before closing the doors over them. Bypass bungee cords, which won't allow you to close the doors. Have an employee at the lumberyard check your work, and fasten a flag to it before you drive off—carefully.

Resources

- AARP's Tips for Older Shovelers
- Consumer Reports' Advice on What to Do in a Blackout
- DIY.com's Drilling Into Tile Walls
- ORU's Downed Power Lines—a Deadly Danger
 - The Fridge Doctor's Tips
- Handyman Online (Local Handyman Directory)
- DIY Termite Control's Choosing a Termite-Control Firm
- Texas Government's Advice on Propane and Propane Products
 - Digsafely.com (Tracks Underground Utilities)

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