



**Basic Home Modifications for Those Desiring to
Age in Place**

By

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Description of the issue

As a person grows older his/her needs and limitations evolve in respect with the suitability of one's home. Whether it is restricted mobility due to arthritis, poor vision from cataracts or a loss of security due to the death of a spouse... These changes can typically be addressed by resolving to psychologically accept them, seeking advice from well intentioned experts, and making the recommended improvements in a timely fashion.

Common barriers

The most common road block to making improvements is that the person living there does not accept the fact that they have a problem. At times, the impediment could be a spouse or an adult child that is a decision maker. Accepting that there are issues to be dealt with and resolving to move forward is paramount in having one's surroundings be as safe and comfortable as practical.

Economics can play a major role in limiting the access to home improvements. Remodeling and repair work is as expensive as it ever has been, and will continue to escalate with both material and labor costs ratcheting upward. However, there are many modifications that can be done on a budget.

Because access to experts who perform specialized modifications may seem difficult, people tend to be shy about seeking advice for fear of being seen as ignorant or vulnerable. This is especially the case when the spouse who handled all the home maintenance issues passes away leaving the surviving spouse to carry on. Fortunately, there are resources available to help.

Solutions to overcoming barriers

For those persons who realize the need to make changes... They are already ahead of the game. For those persons who don't want to, or can't recognize the need for change then they need the assistance from someone in their support system. Alzheimer's patients can be a challenge in this scenario, particularly in the absence of a care taker.

Once needs are identified, prioritized, and priced from reputable contractors... Then an overall budget plan can be assembled. Different sources of funding for this type of work include reverse mortgages, home equity loans, savings/investments, and family members. There are some government and private grants available, but the access can be limited. Again, a family member or supporter may need to be involved in some or all of this process.

Identifying, establishing rapport, and hiring the right contractor for this type of work is something that should be easy, but often becomes a stumbling block. The most important traits to look for when hiring a contractor are honesty and experience. Professional contracting associations, referrals from family and neighbors, and care givers can assist in referring a reputable contractor. It is important to identify a contractor that is experienced in this type of work and has a wide range of capabilities.

Specific actions that can be undertaken to implement the solutions

Ask a Certified Aging in Place Specialist (CAPS) contractor or a barrier free consultant to evaluate (also called a Home Audit for Independence) your home's suitability to accommodate one's existing physical condition. Future health conditions should also be considered. This evaluation process is usually done for a nominal fee and most professionals will credit the fee against future services. As many decision makers as possible should be present for such an evaluation, I.E. spouse, children, etc.

Once an evaluation has been completed, then the process of establishing a budget can begin. Ask a few contractors to review the evaluation list, and get written contracts to perform the work. Some common improvements include:

1. Widen parking spaces so that there is a min. of 36" to the sides of the vehicle. Fall prevention.
2. Adding stair rails at all entrance steps. Fall protection.
3. Ensure stairs have non slip surfaces and closed risers. Fall prevention.
4. Ensuring that your street address number is visible from the street...even at night. Security.
5. Installing a peep hole in the front door. Security.
6. Re-keying all your door locks for the same key. Manual dexterity.
7. Exterior lights should have multiple bulbs and controlled by a photo cell. Security. Fall prevention.
8. Pruning shrubs near doors and windows to eliminate hiding places. Security.
9. Replacing thick pile carpet with low cut type. Trip hazard.
10. Increasing the amount/brightness of light fixtures. Vision.
11. Raise washer and dryers atop a platform. Spine injury prevention.
12. Replace shower/tub valves with pressure balanced type. Anti-scald for blood circulation.
13. Adjust water heater to reduce maximum temperature. Anti-scald for blood circulation.
14. Ovens with side opening doors. Applicable for wheel chair users.
15. Stove tops with front mounted controls. Applicable for wheel chair users.
16. Glass front wall cabinet doors in the kitchen. Helps those with memory problems (Alzheimer's patients).
17. Comfort height commode. Universal.
18. Lever door hardware and faucet handles. Universal.
19. Large rocker switch for light fixtures. Universal.
20. Grab bars in bathing areas. Universal.
21. Shower/bath seats. Mobility issues.
22. Grasable railings at all stairs. Fall prevention.
23. Widen doorways to a min. of 32" where possible. Wheelchair and walker access.
24. Eliminate thresholds where possible, or at least provide a transition. Mobility.

The contractor should provide a written contract detailing the specifications, how change orders are dealt with, the price, a payment schedule, warranty, and reference the contractor's building license number. Lastly, you'll want written confirmation of up to date worker's compensation and general liability insurance. Remember to get plenty of recent referrals. Do not always go for the lowest price. Do you trust the contractor? Remember, that you get what you pay for.

Making changes to improve the suitability is a smart move especially when done in a timely fashion. In some situations improvements may be so costly that consideration should be given to relocation to an institutional type setting. Whether one decides to age in place or relocate to an institution...My best advice is to be proactive in addressing the issue before it becomes too late.