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Aging, with style

Basic home modifications allow folks to stay independent longer

BY ANNIE GROER, The Washington Post

When Charlotte Goldstein was in her 80s, she bought new living room furniture.

"Two very handsome love seats and two wing chairs that were easy to get in and out of" replaced pieces so low and plush she could not rise "unless somebody gave you a good pull," says Goldstein, now 90. To steady herself on two flights of stairs (she likes to climb them for exercise), she put new handrails opposite the existing bannisters in her Washington home.

Those changes are part of Goldstein's plan to stay put as long as possible. About 90 percent of the 41.5 million Americans over age 60 hope to grow old at home or in their community, according to AARP.

The key to aging in place, experts say, is to embrace rather than deny the need to adapt living spaces to meet physical changes as mobility, eyesight and hearing decline.

Many people incorrectly fear that remaining at home requires extensive, expensive renovations to accommodate a wheelchair, such as replacing a bathtub with a roll-in shower or putting a bedroom and full bath on the first floor.

But there are dozens of minor ways to make homes more senior-friendly at very little cost and in just a few hours. The chief requirement is creative thinking.

Modifications can be as generic as replacing doorknobs, which can be difficult for arthritic hands to turn, with lever-style handles. Or they can be as specific as Jeanne Crockett's solution of relocating the coffee maker in her Baltimore row house.

For years, she or her husband, Jeffrey Schraeder, would pad downstairs to the kitchen every morning and carry just-brewed coffee up to the second-floor library. But when Schraeder, 62, took a fall last year, Crockett, 59, had what she calls a "light bulb moment" about their morning routine.

"You haven't even had coffee yet, and here you are climbing the stairs with a hot pot and two mugs in hand every morning," she said. "It started to feel dangerous." Solution: She moved the java station up near the second-floor bedroom.

Crockett was wise to anticipate trouble. Each year, falls cause an average of 5.1 million injuries and deaths in adults older than 60, says Meri-K Appy, president of the Home Safety Council, a nonprofit research group in Washington formerly affiliated with the Lowe's home improvement chain.



An open plan with no hallways on the main level maximizes sight lines in this home remodeled by Quality Design and Construction of Raleigh. Each doorway is at least 3 feet wide and the finish on the floor minimizes glare. Zoned recessed-can lighting and task lighting, controlled by easily manipulated rocker panel light switches, improve visibility throughout the house.

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Serious falls can create lasting physical problems that lead to loss of independence, Appy says, and yet "they are very preventable without spending a lot of money." Her suggestions include putting lights at the top and bottom of all stairways for better visibility.

"My drumbeat is to be proactive rather than reactive," echoes geriatric care manager Marion Somers, author of "Elder Care Made Easier." "Most people don't think about these things until something happens."

Somers, 67, put high-wattage light bulbs throughout her Brooklyn loft and installed grab bars by the tub and toilet. And in her apartment there isn't a single throw rug -- "accidents waiting to happen" she calls them. Those who don't want to part with their small carpets should hang them on the wall, Somers says.

"We minimize risk in our financial investments. Why shouldn't we do it in our homes?" says Elinor Ginzler, 55, AARP's director of livable communities. "Look at the finish you are putting on your floor. Don't do a high-polish wax. It can be something as easy as putting a bench with a back at each exterior entrance to your home. You can sit on it, put down packages. With one hand you turn the key, with another you hold on to the bench."

A growing willingness among some baby boomers -- the oldest are now 61 -- to rid their homes of potential hazards has increased "almost the way green has taken off," says architectural historian Bill Lebovich of Chevy Chase, Md., author of "Design for Dignity: Accessible Environments for People With Disabilities."

Moreover, he says, interior designers and decorators have begun paying more attention to a specific market niche: decor for seniors and others with physical challenges. (At 59, Lebovich has bad knees that make climbing stairs difficult.)

In fact, the American Society of Interior Designers' Web site urges members to expand their business through universal design: interiors and exteriors that work simultaneously for old and young, able and not-so-able.

Donna Ralston-Latham, owner of DRL Total Environments, an Alexandria, Va., firm specializing in kitchen and bathroom renovations, has routinely practiced universal design for more than a decade.

"We don't even ask clients if they want grab bars in the bathroom. We just do them. They are not ugly anymore, which is a nice thing," says Ralston-Latham, 60, who says her own history of arthritis, cataracts, lung ailments and neck surgery has made her especially sensitive to the needs of others.

Diplomacy has always been part of her pitch, from the time she started her career doing general interior design. Rather than tell older clients about the benefits of sofas and chairs with higher cushions, set-back arms and firm backs, "I would sit someone on a low, soft, cushy sofa and I'd sit on a firmer, higher one in the showroom and then say, 'Come sit next to me.' It's showing by example."

She also discusses the concept of "visitability," to shift the focus from the clients' limitations to consideration for their guests. "It's not just about you, but accommodating friends and family," Ralston-Latham tells them.

Appy uses a similar tactic. "Folks tend to be more willing to make a safety change on behalf of someone else, rather than embracing their own declining capabilities," she says. "So as a strategy, I have people think about their grandbabies or other people they love."

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