

'I Need a Little Help Here!'

Moving something heavy. Fixing a drippy faucet. Repairing a loose step. It's not always easy to get someone to do small jobs around the house. Use this advice to find the assistance you need.

BY ELLEN SEIDMAN • ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID DORAN

HOW MANY HOMEOWNERS does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Just one, but when the fixture hangs from a 12-foot ceiling, it's no joke. Even if

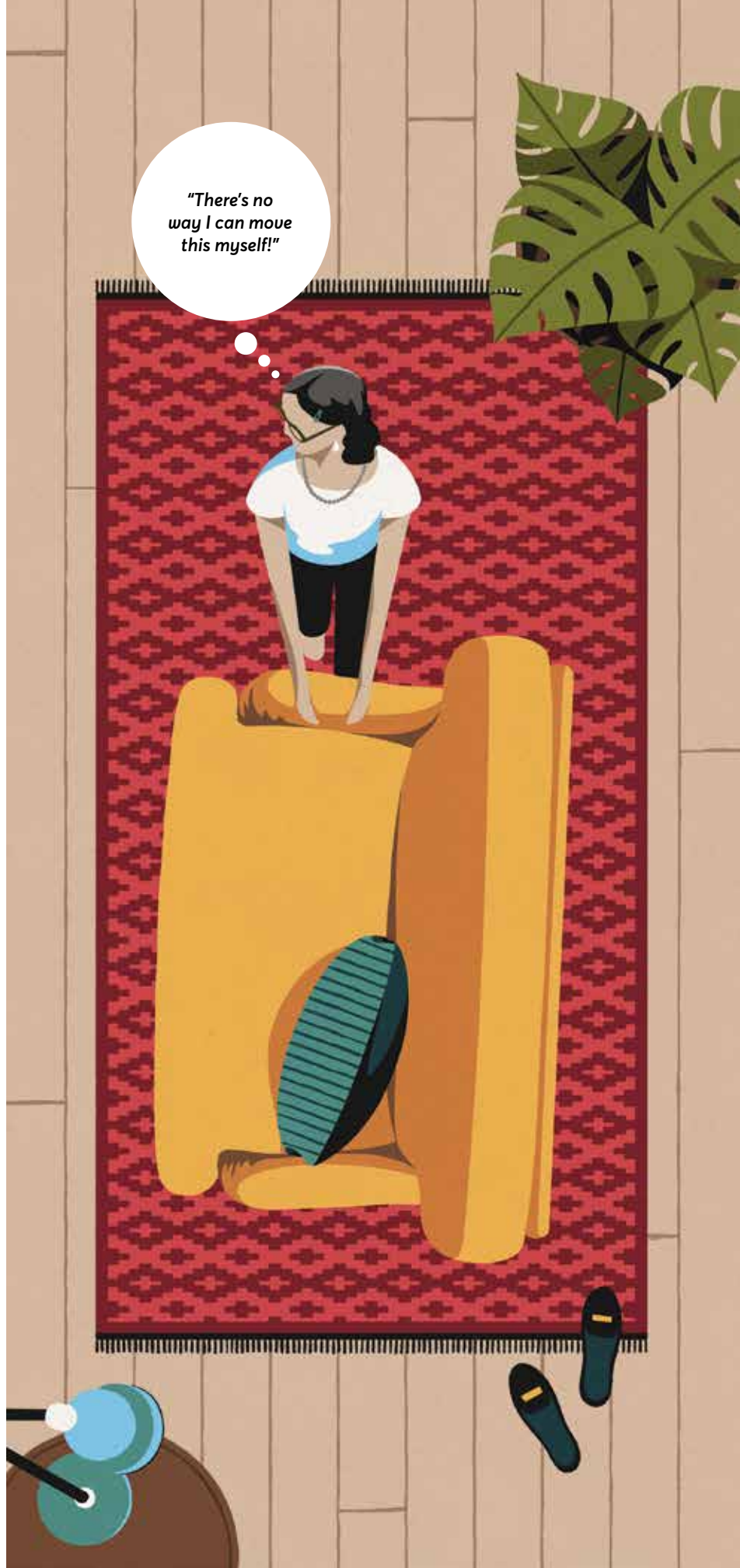
you're the handy type who has always clambered up ladders and wielded tools, there comes a time when the risk outweighs the reward. What if you lose your balance? It's just not worth it.

Sure, in some cases you could phone a friend or family member. But it often makes more sense to find someone else to do the work. Yet you can't exactly call an electrician to change that lightbulb, a contractor to de-squeak a single door hinge, or a mover to haul an armchair to the curb. Dozens of tasks fall into this category: relatively small yet requiring strength or special

skills—and, in some cases, involving risk. Ladders, for example, are a prime cause of ER-treated injuries for adults, according to a Consumer Product Safety Commission report released in January. Steven T. Haywood, MD, an emergency medical physician at Magnolia Regional Health Center in Corinth, Miss., has treated broken ankles and ribs from tumbles off ladders, back injuries caused by moving heavy furniture, and severed fingers from power tool mishaps. "People think something is just a quick task they can handle, but a mistake could lead to months in a cast or major surgery," he says.

Fortunately, there are more options than ever for taking care of small jobs without taking chances. Read on for CR's get-it-done (safely) guide.





What Kind of Help Do You Need?

Certain jobs, of course, require specialized training. “For any work that could cause a fire or flood or involves structural changes, you definitely want to hire an experienced and licensed tradesperson,” says Joseph Truini, author of eight home improvement books and a former contractor and custom cabinetmaker in Roxbury, Conn. That means a roofer for major roof repairs, an electrician for wiring, a plumber for projects involving pipes inside walls. For smaller tasks, you can often turn to someone we’ll call—for the sake of simplicity—a general handyperson. There’s no formal training for these pros, so skills vary.

But some states and municipalities require licensing. “The value of a license is if something goes wrong, you have a governmental body you can go to,” says John Breyault, vice president of public policy, telecommunications, and fraud at the National Consumers League, an advocacy organization. “And if someone is supposed to have one and doesn’t, that’s a red flag.”

Regardless of licensing requirements, anyone you hire to do repair work should have general liability insurance. Then, if they damage your home or cause an injury—say, you trip over a tool belt—a homeowners insurance policy won’t be the first or only coverage, says Michael Richmond-Crum at the American Property Casualty Insurance Association.

Where to Find the Right Pro

There’s nothing like a referral from a friend or neighbor—or, if you’re an apartment dweller, hiring someone in the building (say, the super) to do the work you need. If those options are dead ends, experts suggest asking local real estate agents for recommendations because they often hire help to fix up homes for sale. You can also get referrals from contractors and carpenters who have done projects for you in the past, says Aaron Enfinger, president of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry. Or maybe there’s a contractor working on a nearby home whose work looks good. Here’s advice for looking farther afield.

HOME SERVICE MARKETPLACES

These allow you to browse a large pool of pros for free, but the onus is on you to evaluate them. Workers self-report license and insurance information, so vet anyone you’re considering and read reviews on these sites (and online). A few examples:

► **Taskrabbit** is geared toward one-off chores like furniture assembly and TV mounting, with hourly rates displayed. Same-day booking is possible. You’ll pay a service fee (a percentage of the total price of a job) plus something called a “Trust & Support Fee.” (Details aren’t disclosed on the site, and Taskrabbit declined CR’s request to share further information on its fees.) If a job isn’t done right, you may be out of luck. The site’s “Happiness Pledge” mentions property damage, bodily injury, and theft but not shoddy work.

► **Angi (formerly Angie’s List)** lists specialists in plumbing, electrical work, and construction management, as well as handypeople. It lets you request job quotes from several candidates with a couple of clicks. You must first submit a phone number and email address, and agree to receive texts and calls, however, which means you might get hit with a barrage of messages.

7 QUESTIONS TO ASK

Before you hire someone to do repair work in your home, nail down these points.

1

Are you insured? Licensed?

The handyperson should have a certificate of insurance (COI). Also confirm that the pro is compliant with any required licensing in your area.

2

Who will do the work?

If another helper is coming over, find out about their credentials and how long they’ve been

working with the pro you’re hiring. Along the same lines, when a handyperson who hasn’t been personally referred comes to your home for the first time, you might want to have a partner or friend around to make you feel more comfortable, and take safety precautions with valuables, says Ira Rheingold, executive director of the National Association of Consumer Advocates.

3

Have you done this type of thing before?

A pro might be a jack of all trades but a master of only a few. “You don’t want someone learning on the job,” says Larry Towner, co-host of the “Handyman Pros Radio Show” podcast. Sandi Ledet of Mandeville, La., learned a lesson the hard way when she had to replace two doors leading to a patio. “The handyman came



recommended by our neighbor, and I just assumed he had the skills," she says. When he finished, one door had a sizable gap on top and neither was properly aligned. She ended up hiring another pro to reinstall them, essentially paying twice for the job. As a client, make good choices: Don't try to get a handyperson to take on work they aren't qualified to do.

4

Can I call your references?

Ideally, you want to chat with someone the handyperson has worked with for several years. One good starting question from Aaron Enfinger, president of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, is "Would you use them again?" You can also ask for an example of a time something didn't go right and how it was resolved.

5

How long will the work take?

A pro should be able to ballpark the timing and tell you while on the job if that changes.

6

What will you need?

If the worker is buying materials, confirm whether you'll be charged for the time it takes to pick them up, and request receipts. Get detailed specs

from them for fixtures like a ceiling fan or faucet that you'll pick out, so you don't waste time (theirs or yours) with something that doesn't fit.

7

What guarantees do you offer?

Protect yourself from what's known as the "taillight warranty" (as in, a home pro's support ending once they drive away). Verify that they'll stand by their work, and for how long.

► **Thumbtack** is similar to Angi. It offers more details, like a pro's average response time, specifics about the work they do, and photos of past projects.

FIX-IT FRANCHISES These businesses—Ace Handyman and Mr. Handyman are two national options—vet and insure their staff. “They have a name and reputation to protect, so they want you to have a good experience,” Enfinger says. Hourly rates might be on the higher side (see “What Help Costs Right Now” on the facing page) and come with additional service fees; ask about those. Also ask what happens if the pro exceeds the estimated time.

SOCIAL NETWORKS If you post a request for a handyperson on Nextdoor or in your local Facebook group, you'll probably get responses—and might even land a recommendation from someone you know. With strangers, be cautious. Users can set up fake accounts to leave reviews, Breyault says.

JUNK REMOVERS When you have to get rid of heavy furniture, companies like the Junkluggers and 1-800-Got-Junk will usually send a truck, give a price on the spot, and offer to do the job right away. They typically charge by how much of the truck your stuff fills. The average cost for half a 1-800-Got-Junk truck is \$360. You might be able to get the job done for free by posting the piece in a local Buy Nothing Facebook group. Be clear in your post that the recipient needs to be able to move the piece themselves; confirm this point before pickup. The Salvation Army will also remove and take away certain large pieces in good shape, like couches, armoires, and cabinets.

CONCIERGE SERVICES A new generation of businesses manage ongoing house repairs and preventive maintenance for homeowners.

A subscription gets you a manager who schedules appointments with trained staff or vetted external pros as needed. Some companies charge a flat monthly or annual fee for a set number of hours; others have separate hourly rates. Honey Homes, a 4-year-old company that serves the San Francisco Bay area; Los Angeles; Dallas; Austin, Texas; and Chicago, offers a dedicated handyperson and 42 service hours per year for an annual up-front fee of \$3,540, which breaks down to \$295 a month; if you cancel during the year, you get a prorated amount back. To find a local service, search online for “handyman concierge near me.”

VIRTUAL HOME REPAIR EXPERTS The Frontdoor app, launched two years ago, offers video chats with handypeople as well as plumbing, electrical, HVAC, and appliance experts. For a \$149 annual membership, you get unlimited sessions. You can try the service for free, no credit card required. This might be appealing to DIYers—and

expert supervision can be safer than random videos on YouTube.

Take Some Simple Precautions

These steps can protect your money and ensure you're satisfied with the results.

► **Get it in writing.** Whether the document is a handwritten estimate or a digital contract, it should list every task and the hourly rate or project fee.

► **Settle the bill after, not before.** It's not unusual to be asked for a deposit, but if a pro wants more than 10 percent, move on, says Allen Lee, a handyman in Roseville, Calif., who coaches other pros. “And beware if they say they need money to buy materials. Any reputable business owner should have the funds for that.”

► **Pay with plastic, if possible.** “A credit card is the safest way to pay, because you can dispute the payment if something goes wrong with the job,” says Ira Rheingold, executive





director of the National Association of Consumer Advocates. Checks and electronic payments like PayPal, Venmo, and Zelle don't offer the same level of protection.

► **Know the scams.** Beware of anyone who shows up at your door and points out problems they can fix cheaply or offers roof repairs or driveway sealing because they were "in the area" and have "leftover materials." "It's not unusual for burglars to pose as odd-jobbers looking for work so they can get into homes," Breyault says.

Make Sure the Work Goes Well

"Have respect, communicate, and be considerate," says Larry Towner a handyman in Atlanta who co-hosts the "Handyman Pros Radio Show" podcast. A few more pointers:

► **Grab the appointment.** If a pro lets you know they're free the next day or calls because of a cancellation, jump

on it. If you're difficult to schedule, it may be hard to get someone over.

► **Keep a running to-do list.**

Jot down repairs as they crop up, or hunt around your house to compile a list. If you can offer a half day's work, you'll be more appealing than a client with fewer tasks. And it could be more economical for you.

► **Tell and show.** Walk through tasks together. Hanging wallpaper? Specify which direction the pattern should face. Installing art? Stay nearby so you're available for questions.

► **Prep the space.** Clear clutter so that the pro has room to work, and make sure your pets are in another room with the door closed, Truini says.

► **Check the work.** If the pro doesn't talk you through what they've done, take a look yourself. Immediately address concerns and requests; there's no guarantee they'll be available to come back soon to fix a problem.

► **Post a great review.** Positive public feedback is invaluable, Lee says. If you received wonderful service, share that.

WHAT HELP COSTS RIGHT NOW

Hourly fees for small jobs and repairs range from \$50 to \$150 nationwide. Some pros charge a flat rate. Those who charge for in-person estimates might apply that fee to the cost of the job if you hire them. You can also ask if it's possible to text tasks, photos, or videos to give the handyperson a sense of the scope of the job to get a firm estimate before they arrive, says Joseph Truini, a home improvement author in Roxbury, Conn. Travel to a rural area or through congested city streets could raise the price. So could problems unearthed midprocess. For example, a loose front step on your porch might reveal rotted support. Other factors that can raise the cost include:

Drying Time

Projects that require two visits will obviously cost more than those that can be checked off in one. Primer and paint need time to set, and new drywall can't be sanded until 24 hours after it's installed.

Tricky Access or Delicate Surfaces

It will take extra time for a pro to squeeze into a crawl space to do work or to replace a cabinet in a cramped spot, like a tiny powder room. And hanging shelves or artwork in older homes with delicate plaster walls requires an installer to tread more carefully than if he's working with drywall, says Larry Towner of the "Handyman Pros Radio Show" podcast.

Inflation

The cost of basic materials like drywall and concrete rose during the pandemic and remain high, according to the National Association of Home Builders. If you priced out deck work a couple of years ago and you're ready to commit now, a new estimate could be higher.