

It's not a disease exactly. And chances are good you won't find it in the pages of psychiatric journals. But as every remodeler knows, the anxiety that homeowners feel as their house is assaulted by workmen bearing saws and hammers is very real. I call it Remodeling Stress Syndrome, or RSS, and I've learned that having a system set up to manage it effectively is just as important as dealing with change orders and subs.

Remodeling is not continuously stressful for the homeowner. RSS comes in waves, depending on the stage of the job. Some of the low points can be predicted — when the plumbing and wiring are being roughed in or when finish work stretches on and on. But it is the disasters — water pouring through a leaky tarp at 4 a.m. or the sub's employee who waltzes out the door with your customer's stereo set — that are most stress-provoking for homeowners.

By anticipating the stress points, you can prepare your customers and make things smoother for them and for yourself. But the real challenge is in being there for your customer when a disaster strikes, even if it's not your fault. This not only builds trust, but it goes a long way toward securing referrals and future business.

Who's at Risk

Any remodeling job causes some anxiety, but some jobs are more difficult than others. A second-story addition or a bath and kitchen in tandem are among the worst. Any job where the client is pressed for time or is under some other type of pressure causes problems. Adding a child's room when the couple is expecting any day is a good example. Pregnancy is stressful enough without dust and noise and decisions about where to put the electrical outlets.

One of the toughest jobs we've ever done was installing an elevator for someone who'd recently been confined to a wheelchair. Not only was our client learning to cope with a disability, he was also stuck downstairs until we could get the elevator finished.

Since we often work with husbands and wives, there are all kinds of couple dynamics to cope with. We've had couples who tried to hide information from each other (specifically on how much money was being spent), or who constantly argued. We've also had a few heading for divorce. This can be really difficult since the couple may complain wildly about hairline cracks or nail pops, but what they're really expressing is their frustration about their personal situation.

The lesson here, and the first step in successfully coping with RSS, is never lose your cool. People react to stress in different ways. Some-

THIS LOOKS LIKE A CASE OF...



REMODELING STRESS SYNDROME

BY KELLEY HALE

MINIMIZE THE ANXIETY HOMEOWNERS FEEL DURING A REMODELING JOB BY PREPARING THEM FOR THE STRESS POINTS

times they criticize everything or they may suddenly become stiff or overly polite and formal. Occasionally they get hostile.

You have to harness your emotions and remember that your clients are reacting to stress. It's hard not to get angry, especially when people are blaming you for everything from the dust in the living room to the bad day they had at the office. But staying calm is the hallmark of professionalism (see "Tips for Staying Calm," next page). It shows that you are in control and that your

clients can trust you. It also means you have a good chance of getting an apology once the customer cools down.

Preventive Medicine

There are some good techniques for diffusing stress when you see it. But the best policy is to avoid it in the first place by preparing your customers and being prepared yourself.

Preconstruction conference. This is one of the high points of every job. The customers are anxious to get started and your relationship with them is unrestrained. I hate to scare my customers at this point by telling them we're about to put them under a great deal of stress. So to soften the blow, I give them a letter I've written (see "Remodeling Blues," next page) that lets them know they can expect some hard times, but presents the issue in a gentle and humorous manner.

The preconstruction conference is also a good time to talk about the potential for change orders and the stress that accompanies the additional outlay of money.

Draft a realistic schedule. By having something in writing, customers can see for themselves just how long it takes for demolition or finish work. I create a bar chart and give a copy to the subs as well. This helps them see where they fit into the greater scheme of the job and encourages them to show up on time. Be sure to update this any time there are change orders.

Less dust equals less stress. By building a good, strong dust barrier, you are showing your customers that you are conscientious and, more importantly, that you care about their private space. We pressure-fit some 1x4s across the opening and lightly tack them in place. Then we cover the opening with plywood. This not only blocks the view from the homeowners' living space, it also helps deaden the noise. Next we put up a sheet of polyethylene and tape all the edges.

Even though our work area is sealed off, we always clean thoroughly at the end of the day.

Who's got the key? If you want to see your customers get angry, tell them you lost the key to their house. It's easy to do if you're leaving it under the mat or beneath the third rock to the left of the door.

We've simplified security arrangements by installing a lockbox similar to the type real estate agents use. Leaving the key there ensures that it never leaves the site. We install the lockbox somewhere near the front of the house, on the gas meter, for instance. We don't use the doorknob since this announces to intruders that the clients aren't home. We have a combination on this that

TIPS FOR STAYING CALM

It's not easy to stay in control when you're faced with an angry client — especially if they become insulting or start to yell. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, you have to muster everything you've got to keep yourself from becoming angry. Here are a few of the techniques I use to stay calm:

- Take time to let anger diffuse. Tell your customers you need to look into what they are saying and will call them the next day. Then get away as quickly as possible.
- Remember that this is not a personal attack. Your clients are probably reacting to the stress that comes with having their house remodeled.
- Ignore any insults and instead focus on what your customer is really trying to say.



- Apologize only when you are wrong. Otherwise resentment and anger will build inside of you.
- Resist getting pulled into an argument by keeping your answers to any accusations neutral. Some good responses: "I can certainly understand how you're feeling" or "I can see that you're angry about this." Once they've vented their anger, you can start communicating with them.
- If you're feeling really angry, give your clients an excuse and get away from them. Then write them a note later on when you're in control. Chances are you'll have to toss the first few versions until you wind up with something like, "Thanks for your input. We'll do all we can to remedy the situation."
— K. H.



REMODELING BLUES

Dear Homeowner,

Remodeling is an ordeal. It is like having a woodworking shop located inside your house. It means taking your house apart in order to put it back together again, only differently. All the while, your home is a workplace to a dozen strangers.

The purpose of this letter is not to frighten you away from your project, but to prepare you for the stress you will inevitably feel. Every remodeling job creates some amount of disorder, dirt, and confusion. Privacy may seem a thing of the past. Your house might feel more like a bus station with inspectors, subcontractors, and crew members coming and going. We will work hard to help you maintain your comfort and privacy despite these conditions. Our employees understand that this is not just a work site, it is your home.

Remodeling proceeds in stages and some of these are more difficult than others. Chances are you've already gone through the first stage, the inevitable delays and frustrations that come in dealing with planning departments to secure permits and zoning variances.

The next stress cycle comes with the demolition phase of your project. At this point, you see your house, your chief asset, crumbling around you. Electrical, plumbing, or heating service may be temporarily interrupted. The house may seem cold if the siding has to be removed on an exterior wall. You know you are paying for all this and start to wonder whether anything that looks so bad will ever look good again. All we can tell you at this point is that you will see progress every day. Once we start framing, your project will begin to take form.

Meanwhile, dust has an amazing ability to penetrate even the tiniest cracks and holes. We'll do our best to keep this to a minimum by sealing up any penetrations and keeping the job site neat. But some dust is an inevitable part of the process.

After the major structural work is completed, the job seems to slow down as your house is invaded by a new group of people: subcontractors and inspectors. The work at this step has become more detailed and less impressive. But it is one of the most important stages. So hang in there because the next phase, when the drywall is installed, is one of the most exciting (despite a layer of fine, white dust that seems to be everywhere).

The last and often the longest stage is the finish work. The steps involved at this phase make for very slight daily changes. Rest assured we are working! We'll do the best we can to meet any deadlines you've set for us, but our original schedule is based on our bid. Anything that happens along the way, including back-ordered materials or change orders, will cause delays.

Finally the day comes when you can begin using the space as you intended. We may be back on the scene to do a few little jobs that remain, but you can breathe a sigh of relief — you've survived the worst of it.

Kelley Hale

we change from job to job.

Train your employees. It's been said before, but it bears repeating: You can teach employees construction skills but you can't teach them people skills. Hopefully, the crew you've hired is sympathetic to the homeowners and tuned in to signs of stress.

The same goes for your subs. One of the many job-site stories that makes me wince every time I repeat it is the roofing contractor who, when his shoelace broke, went downstairs and pulled one out of a pair of my client's shoes. Your subs need to remember they are working in someone's home.

Four-day week. If your crew is willing to put in longer hours four days a week, you can offer them a three-day weekend and give your customers an extra day of peace and quiet.

Don't give false hopes. Let your customers know you will do everything you can to expedite their job and to keep it at or below budget, but don't promise things you can't deliver. Doing so ultimately adds to their stress level.

Emergency Cures

Even when you've taken great care to secure the house, hire only the most trustworthy subs, and keep change orders to a minimum, you are not immune from disasters. Last August, while at that critical stage in a second-story addition when the roof is off, we had a torrential down-pour — weather almost unheard of in this part of California at that time of year. We had the house tarped but, I'm embarrassed to say, only for a light rain.

That night, with the kind of antennae that remodelers develop over the years, I woke up with a pounding heart just as the rain started. As I sat in bed trying to organize my thoughts, the homeowners called. Rain was soaking through the plaster ceiling and drenching their furniture. I called my foreman and, within a half-hour, we were on the scene helping our customers mop up the water and move furniture. Fortunately the rainstorm was brief and caused no serious damage.

Our customers were very nice about the whole situation, partly because we were there so promptly and partly because we did all of the dirty work for them. But just to make sure they realized our commitment to helping them, I showed up later that day with a bottle of wine and a \$75 gift certificate to a good local restaurant.

So, here are three steps toward making an emergency situation tolerable for your customers:

- act fast
- be sympathetic
- give a gift and deliver it personally

Drawing the Line

Because most remodelers are service oriented, we try hard to make things better for our customers. So when your customers are downhearted and stressed out, you may hate to tell them the extra electrical outlet will cost an additional \$15. Certainly you don't want to nickel and dime them, but remember, you're on the job to make money, not to make your customers feel good about themselves.

Drawing the line between giving good service and giving in may be difficult. But doing so will help you maintain your self-respect, as well as the respect of your customers. ■

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