Hadley

Hadley Presents: Nuts and Bolts of Home Repair and Maintenance Part 1

Presented by Ricky Enger

November 25, 2019

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss performing home maintenance and repairs with a visual impairment, and our experts are experienced home repair and woodworking enthusiast, Gil Johnson, interviewed by Hadley Learning Expert, Jennifer Ottowitz. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Jen Ottowitz: Hi.

Gil Johnson: Thank you.

Ricky Enger: This is something, and I know I say this on a lot of these shows, but it turns out that I know very little about a lot of things and home repair is one of those things that I know very little about and so I'm really looking forward to diving into that and figuring out how to use a hammer on something besides my own thumb. So before we do that, before we get into that, I want to get just a quick introduction from both of you and tell us about who you are and what you do. So Jennifer, let's start with you.

Jen Ottowitz: Hi, everybody. I'm Jennifer. I'm a Senior Learning Expert with Hadley. I've worked as an instructor with Hadley since 2013. I'm also a certified vision rehabilitation therapist, which means I work with adults who are losing or have lost their vision, and in the course of my career, I've had the chance to teach folks how to do home repair tasks. I'm also blind myself and have had occasions to do minor home repairs, so I'm excited about today's topic.

Ricky Enger: Very cool. How about you, Gil?

Gil Johnson: I'm Gil Johnson. I'm totally blind. I've had worked for 44 years in the field of blindness. I started as a rehabilitation counselor for the blind and then a supervisor and worked my way up through the ranks into administration. But my love has always been woodworking and being able to do home repair. I started that when I was very young, and at my current age I still do.

Ricky Enger: I'm looking forward to hearing all about that, I bet you have some interesting stories to share with us. So, Jennifer, I will hand it over to you and off we go.

Jen Ottowitz: Well, Gil, one of my favorite Christmas presents that I got from my parents was when I had one of my first apartments and it was actually a toolkit. It was called a “Lady's Toolkit” and it came in a pink box and all the tools, they were what I would call the starter set of hand tools, but what I really liked about the present was that there was also an expectation that I, even though I was visually impaired, could learn how to use these tools like anybody else and I did learn how to use them, I still have them today and still use them. But I know that when people first lose vision especially, that not everyone has those expectations. And I'm just wondering with your experience, what words of encouragement or advice do you have to help people know about the possibilities in terms of how someone can perform home repair and woodworking tasks when they have a visual impairment?

Gil Johnson: I have known a number of blind and visually impaired people, many of whom have recently or relatively recently become blind or visually impaired. All of the things that we know about losing vision and adjusting to it are truths. It's an adjustment and some make it more easily than others and one of the things that is typical of people that lose vision is their fear and the fear of others around them that they will not be able to do, certainly not be able to operate power tools or hand tools very well or to do home repair. It's part of the adjustment process to learn that, "Yes, indeed I can. I can overcome it."

Blind visually impaired people can do almost anything they want to if they have the basic skills or can learn them. The most important thing is having belief in themselves. Every time that I've seen somebody have some success, it has done nothing but encourage some more. Not everybody wants to do home repair work or carpentry, but for those who do, I can tell you it is very possible and today, we'll talk about some examples of things that have been done and some projects and some tips that I've developed over the years for myself and for others.

Jen Ottowitz: It really is about whatever level you're comfortable with, right? I mean there may be times when it's better and easier to call in the professional to do the work, but we certainly want folks to know that if you have a desire to start or continue doing these tasks, don't rule it out just because of a visual impairment. But I wanted to ask first because safety is so important anytime anyone does home repair tasks and I know that it's especially a concern for people who have trouble seeing and like you mentioned also their family members who may worry about their safety. What are some tips that you can share to help keep people safe when they're working on a project?

Gil Johnson: There are some very obvious things about being able to do things safely. One of them is to be organized. Whenever I go into somebody's workshop and I find that it's cluttered or there's stuff all over the floor or there're things just lying around here and there, I get a little nervous because that is not safe. That would be one thing. Another is that there needs to be good lighting for those who have some vision. For all of us, having good ventilation is really important as a safety feature because if there's dust or stuff in the air that can cause all kinds of problems and a good metal lighting system will help with that. You want to have a good selection of the right tools to do what it is you want to do. If it's a fairly simple repair task a set of screwdrivers or pliers or a wrench or two, you might need hammers, of course. Something a little more involved might require a drill.

But you need the right tools, and back to the kind of organizational theme of this, they need to have their place and so they're not just lying around partly because of safety, but also if you're trying to do something and you're groping around looking for this screwdriver that, "Oh, it was here just a minute ago, where the heck did it go?" That can be frustrating. The kind of clothing you're wearing is important because if you're in a shop, whether you have just hand tools or you have more involved tools if your clothing is loose and flops around, it can catch in things and that can be dangerous. I always say if you have long sleeves if they don't fasten close together at the wrist, button them. If you have buttons or put a rubber band around them. Anyway, keep it clear. Same would be true with hair length. Hair can get caught in things. You bend over and the hair flop down and that would be true for men or women, doesn't matter.

Wearing closed-toed shoes is important. All of us drop things. You drop a tool, you drop a piece of something you're working on and if it hits your foot and your foot is not well-protected, you're going to get hurt. If there are loud sounds where you're working, you may want to consider earplugs. You may also want to wear goggles if there's a lot of dust flying around or if you're chipping cement for example. So those are some of the safety tips that these are all pretty basic and it would be true for anybody whether they have a vision problem or not.

Jen Ottowitz: And I think that tip for protecting your eyes, that's one I often forget about because I think that, "Well I don't see so well anyway, so it doesn't really matter," but it does because like you said, dust can get in there and cause injury or possibly infection. So that's an important one to remember. Going back to being organized, I'm just wondering for you personally, are there particular ways that you stay organized?

Gil Johnson: I have a rack on a pegboard for my screwdrivers, for example. Now, not everybody's going to have that many screwdrivers or they're not going to have a pegboard. If you don't, then having a drawer where you can put screwdrivers, wrenches and so forth in as orderly way as you can. We all gather a lot of nails and bolts and screws and washers and nuts and all the kinds of fasteners that you need. A lot of people just throw them all in one place. I don't, I have probably 30 or 40 little wooden boxes that over the years I've built, so that nails of one size go in a box and bolts of another size will go in another box and I could not operate the way that I do if I didn't have things sorted out like that. But when I first started, of course, I didn't have that.

Jen Ottowitz: Can you share a little bit, I know when it comes to safety, it's natural for people to want to look at what they're doing, but sometimes you can't always get close enough to something or leaning in close to see it may not always be safe. So what tips do you have to help people use their remaining vision and all of their other senses to help them when they're doing a project?

Gil Johnson: If you're totally blind as I am, then you want to use every sense that you still have. Sense of touch, sense of smell, hearing. Smell, in particular, is one that people don't think too much about, but you can sometimes realize that something isn't going quite right because of the odor you get from it, so that would be one thing and that would be true whether you're totally blind or have some vision. Everyone that I've known that has some remaining vision, they want to use it and I say, "Why not? You should, but use it in a safe way." If they have prescriptions, prescription lenses, you can get those prescription lenses actually fitted into goggles that would protect your eyes and still give you the magnification that helps you see a little bit better.

Another thing that people with low vision that depend on a lighting source, you can use a lamp, there're different kinds of lamps, but those was kind of a flexible gooseneck where you can get the light focused on the work that you're doing can be very useful and enable you to use the vision that you have with the correction that you have for it with a good light source.

Jen Ottowitz: I know too with my pink-handled tools, there're some interesting things you could do with contrast too, just like maybe putting some colored tape around the handle, so when you lay down a tool you can find it easier and there are a lot of different strategies like that for folks with low vision. And I know you've got tons of tips and other suggestions like that and we are going to talk about more specific things in upcoming podcasts, but just wanted to ask you a little bit, so describe some of the projects you've worked on and tell us a little bit more about any general tips you have for folks to get them started or restarted doing home repair and woodworking.

Gil Johnson: My first major project when I was about 14 or 15 was I built a desk out of using birch wood. Now, this is not home repair, but it's using a lot of the same skills that you would use if you were doing something around the house. We are still using that desk today and the pride I took in that and the pride that my parents had that I could build something like that that looked good and it's sturdy. One of the things that was really a kind of if you excused upon an eye-opener for me, my parents had a home and the attic in their house had some storage space but it didn't have a light and I looked up there and I saw where there was what they call a junction box. It's a metal box where wires come into it and I've kind of figured out which wires did what and I installed a light bulb socket into the junction box and it worked and it didn't blow a fuse and that gave me a lot of confidence. I was impressed with myself. Every time you do something and you accomplished something you didn't think you could feel, good about it, brag about it because that reinforces your confidence in being able to do something else that you didn't think you could do.

Jen Ottowitz: I completely agree and sometimes you may find that you're doing it a little differently now that you're having trouble with vision that maybe you did before but you're still able to do it. And they could be something as simple as tightening up a knob on maybe a drawer in the kitchen or doing a major project. I know you've made furniture so that's pretty major, so it could be anything from small to big and like you said, success breeds success. I wondered if you could just talk briefly about your Gil's Guide to Home Repair. The books on home repair and then the woodworking for the blind.

Gil Johnson: I wrote eight different guides. It's really a step-by-step guide and those will be available or the links to those will be available. Just to give you an example, one of them was changing light bulbs. You wouldn't think there would be much to that. But for somebody that is not sure if they have the ability to do something you may think, "Well, I can't change that light bulb. It's hot." Well, then turn it off. Replacing fuses and circuit breakers. All of us overload a circuit in the house. Sometime we put too many things in and all of a sudden nothing is working and it either has a fuse that protects the house from burning down or a circuit breaker and so this guide describes how to find those and how to go about replacing them safely.

Replacing faucet washers, a faucet that drips is annoying, and it makes noise and it wastes water and it costs money, and with the right approach can replace faucet washers very easily. Unclogging stopped up drains is another one. A sink can get clogged up and there're different ways you can go about unclogging that.

Installing a ceiling fan. Living in California I can tell you ceiling fans here are a must and they're almost as good as air conditioning not quite, but almost. And that's a little more of a complex task. But again, it's very doable. I've probably have installed a dozen of them myself. Fixing toilets that don't seem to want to shut off after they've been flush. There can be some very, very simple fixes for that or sometimes it couldn't be more difficult, but there's a guide describing how to do that.

How to replace a faulty light switch or a wall outlet, electrical wall outlet. This again may seem kind of more challenging that a lot of people would want to do, but if you turn the circuit breaker off then there's no electricity there, you don't have to worry about it, but you do have to wire it right, so there's a guide describing that. So those are the ones that I've written. I have three or four others that are kind of in one stage of being written that I haven't finished up yet, but they're step-by-step guide and it really is aimed at people who are totally blind or have usable vision.

Jen Ottowitz: And there's a lot of great information in those guides and Gil's also provided us with a list of some books that are available through the National Library Service, otherwise I call it the talking book service, and these are books in audio format that you can get on doing home repair. Now, I don't think they're necessarily about doing home repair as a person with a visual impairment. They're general information, but you can take that and use the techniques that Gil's suggesting in his Gil's Guides, put them together and be on your way, right, Gil?

Gil Johnson: Right. I think there's five books that NLS has published over the years and there may be more, some that I didn't happen to catch, but these cover a whole range of topics and they can be useful. There are many communities have an organization or a group of either woodworkers or home repair people that they get together and they talk about how to do various projects. Again, not necessarily aimed, targeted toward blind people, but the ones I've seen, once you get to know some of the people in there, they can be an awful lot of help to you. There’s a group called Woodworking for the Blind and it's a group of blind and visually impaired people from the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain who their main interest is woodworking, but we all do home repairs. And then finally, if any of you have questions about how to do a certain thing or repair around the home if you want to send your inquiry into Jennifer, she can pass that on to me. And if I can, I'll tell you what I know about it or try to put you in touch with somebody else who can.

Ricky Enger: Excellent, and we'll have your written work linked in the show notes, and so if people do have questions, perhaps they want to ask you, Jennifer, or they have a specific question for Gil that they'd like to pass along to you, how can they contact you?

Jen Ottowitz: Sure you can reach me by email at jennifer@hadley.edu or by phone. I'll give our main toll-free number 1-800-323-4238 and just ask for Jennifer Ottowitz.

Ricky Enger: Thank you both so much for all of this information. I feel like anyone who is kind of starting on this journey of either home repair or woodworking or perhaps both now, there are lots of places that they can begin looking just to get an idea of, "How might I go about doing this?" And all of the wonderful tips that have shared, those are incredibly useful as well. Thank you, Gil. Thank you, Jennifer. I appreciate your both joining us and thank all of you for listening.

Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.