

The New York Times

Even to Save Cash, Don't Try This Stuff at Home

By SUSAN SAULNY

Published: May 16, 2009



Carol Taddei ended up having to repair a downstairs bathroom ceiling damaged when she tried to replace a toilet above it.

CHICAGO — Saving money never cost quite so much.

When the toilet in Carol Taddei's master bathroom began to break down a few months ago, she decided it would be cheaper to buy a new one than pay for repairs. Ever frugal in this dismal economy, Ms. Taddei, a retired paralegal, then took her economizing a step further, figuring she could save even more by installing the new toilet herself.

Initially, things looked good with the flushing and the swishing. That is, until the ceiling collapsed in the room below the new (leaky) toilet. Rushing to get supplies for a repair, Ms. Taddei clipped a pole in her

garage. It ripped the bumper off her car, and later, several shelves holding flower pots and garden tools collapsed over her head.

“It just kept getting worse,” Ms. Taddei said, ruefully describing what came out to be a \$3,000, three-day renovation at her suburban Minneapolis home, finished by a professional from Mr. Handyman, a home repair service that takes emergency calls.

With the sour economy has come a class of ambitious do-it-yourselfers who are tackling things that, before the days of rampant penny-pinching, might have been left to paid professionals. An unlucky few like Ms. Taddei have learned that being thrifty sometimes comes at a high price and can bring along with it a new scourge of the times: saver’s remorse.

“Oh, tell me about it,” Ms. Taddei said. “Sometimes it’s better just to bite the bullet.”

Certain things are almost always true when times are tough, experts say, and they are not all bad. People drive less to save on gas, so there are fewer car crashes. People smoke less because cigarettes are expensive. Diets simplify and, sometimes as a result, become more healthful. Stress levels, on the other hand, tend to increase.

And while there is no national database that tracks do-it-yourself home injuries in recessions, experts say that there does seem to be an increase in the kind of accidents and mishaps that come with spending more time at home, based mostly on anecdotal evidence.

“We are seeing an increase in minor injuries, sprains and contusions,” said Dr. Peter Lamelas, who operates four urgent care centers around Palm Beach County, Fla.

The centers are seeing an increase in patients in general, perhaps because urgent care centers are a less expensive alternative to hospital emergency rooms. Based on figures for this year so far, Dr.

Lamelas is expecting to have 20,000 more visits from patients than last year.

“We’ve been seeing a lot of musculoskeletal problems from people lifting heavy things, maybe moving or doing things they’re not accustomed to,” Dr. Lamelas said. “A lot of back injuries, shoulder injuries. Lacerations all the time.”

Ramon Estrada has saver’s remorse, foodie style. Hoping to save on groceries and avoid costly restaurant meals about three months ago, he accepted almost two dozen steak and fish filets from someone who offered his family their uncooked party leftovers. Being a culinary student, Mr. Estrada jumped at the chance to spend an evening chopping and seasoning and grilling, then cooling and repackaging the bounty of free food for dinners and lunches during the week.

The family ate some of the surf-and-turf on the spot. It tasted delicious, but about four hours later, “I’m completely feeling horrible,” said Mr. Estrada, 27. “Cramping stomach, the most horrible thing ever.”

Mr. Estrada’s brother had to be rushed to the emergency room. Mr. Estrada became so dehydrated that he also had to see a doctor a few days later, at the cost of at least \$400 for drugs and treatment and four days of missed work.

“We learned something,” he said. “Saving money wasn’t worth all of that.”

Hair stylists and auto mechanics are often among those called to the rescue when things go wrong for money-savers.

“One of my clients decided to bleach her hair all over instead of coming in to get a full head of highlights,” said Sunny Brewer, a stylist in St. Clair, Mich. “She put bleach on her scalp and pulled it through to the ends and left it on for an hour. She had hair down past the

middle of her back and now she's sporting a chin-length bob because her hair broke off."

The client, somewhat mortified, did not want to be mentioned by name in this article. But she did allow Ms. Brewer to tell her story as a cautionary measure.

We had to go in and do corrective color," Ms. Brewer continued. "I charge by the hour, and I worked on her for four hours. So by the time it was over, she ended up spending close to \$1,000 to have her hair corrected when it could have been \$175."

Don Tommasone, the owner of Village Automotive, a car care center in a Chicago suburb, says he spends a lot of his time these days doing corrections, too.

"We open the hood and can tell the guy tried to do it himself with cheap parts," Mr. Tommasone said. "We see at least one a day like that. At least. The No. 1 part replaced: the battery."

Sasha Bernstein is among those who decided to skip out on the salon. About six months ago, Ms. Bernstein, 26, decided she would save \$60 a month by buying an at-home kit and waxing her own bikini line. All she can say is that it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Often, though, the wounds are only to one's pride.

Tony Contreras, who works at a nonprofit legal service clinic in San Francisco, saves money on his daughter's haircut by trimming it himself. His wife, Sierra Filucci, called the latest style "a horribly uneven mess."

But both parents keep telling Lola, 4, how cute she looks, even though they said they cringe anytime people mention their daughter's creative hairdo.

In suburban Baltimore, Lynne Sherman was the temporary fix when her husband's attempt to hang molding ended up puncturing a pipe,

which sent water spouting into their daughter's bedroom. Ms. Sherman plugged the hole with her finger until a carpenter arrived.

“My husband said, ‘I took woodworking and shop in high school, so when we're ready to do it, I'll do it,’ ” Ms. Sherman, 50, said of the project gone awry, which cost \$250 to fix, and about which her husband swore her to secrecy. “You can't print what his reaction was, and I started that nervous laughter, ‘Oh, God what do we do?’ Now I have to say, we don't do things ourselves anymore.”