

Universal Design: Actions You Can Take Today

by Konrad Kaletsch • May 29, 2009 ©

"I am tomorrow, or some future day, what I establish today. I am today what I established yesterday or some previous day." —James Joyce

INTRODUCTION:

These are improvements you can make right now. Some may add years of usability and safety to your home. Many cost nothing more than a few dollars and a few hours of time; some require a trip to the store or to the dump. Many don't require much more than a screwdriver to install.

Maybe you will work on your closet for 30 minutes, simply reducing clutter and tossing out a few things that you never wear. Over the following three days you'll notice how your closet suddenly got exciting. Now you can find things in it and there is room for new clothes! Revel in your accomplishments like this one. As you sense the delight of the first change, pick another item from your action list and repeat the process.

As you take action steps, also notice how some areas in your life that originally appeared limited, finite, or stuck begin to have a sense of flow to them—and in some cases begin to be fun. Universal design is so much more than handicap access. It is a transition from working on your environment to your environment working for you.

GENERAL HOME ACTIONS:

- To ease the opening of double-hung windows, have an auxiliary handle handy. Also keep your windows clean and clutter free. Add glare-inhibiting film to existing windows to reduce disorientating glare.
- Add self-sticking, non-skid safety tape or non-slip dots to bathtubs, shower floors, steps, laundry areas and entrance ways (add to any floor that is slippery when wet, not just bathroom). Alternatives to stickers: non-slip mats and non-skid paint
- Reorganize stuff: Put your frequently-used items within easy reach. Remove items that are no longer used.
- Increase the number of resting spots with chairs and benches. Add a bench near the primary entrance so you (and your delivery guys) have a place to deposit bags as you unlock or lock the door.
- Create seating such that it is easy to look out the window without experiencing a cold draft.
- Raise the height of your computer monitor (stack a few oversize books). For laptop users at a desk, you might acquire a remote keyboard; I have a wireless model and love the opportunity to work in varied positions.

- Remove hazardous throw rugs that are easily tripped on. If keeping throw rugs, use double-sided carpet tape to hold them securely in place; replace thick rugs with thin.
- For round doorknobs that are hard to use, add a lever handle that slips over the existing round one.
- Acquire a wheeled cart to move stuff about.
- Create a place where you can sit comfortably and have everything within reach, including ample light, phone, TV (and remote), radio/music, computer, tissues, wastebasket, beverages and snacks, reading and writing materials, and medications (maybe a remote front door opener, too).
- Make use of remote control devices for lights, fans, air-conditioning, television, and music. Have one place where you keep them all.
- Switch to fonts on your computer that have a higher degree of readability on a screen. These tend to be sans serif fonts such as Helvetica, Arial and Verdana. When choosing fonts for printed matter, the serif fonts, such as Times New Roman, are more readable.
- Remove clutter! Clear out hallways and stairs for trouble-free walking. Tidy-up other trip hazards, such as extension cords.
- For stairs, two railings, one on each side, significantly increases the safety of stairs if balance is less than perfect. Professional services might be required – get an estimate today!
- If cabinets and drawers have handles that are hard to grasp, such as plugs, replace them using what are called clam, “C” or “D” shaped handles.
- For front loading washers and dryers, raise them onto platforms and reduce the bending needed to reach inside.
- Add insulation to pipes that get dangerously hot.

LIGHTING ACTIONS:

- Increase light output by using higher wattage lights or adding fixtures (a word of caution: Do not exceed the wattage limit set by the manufacturer of your lamps).
- Add task lighting fixtures under your upper cabinets.
- Add nightlights for dark rooms, hallways, stairways, bathrooms, and in the kitchen.
- Buy flashlights and keep them ready with fresh batteries, and handy. Keep a pocket or keychain flashlight with you to ease reading in low-light situations such as reading menus in candlelit restaurants.
- For dark cabinets or closets, purchase an easy-to-install, battery-operated light.
- Consider the popular X10 home automation system for adding remote control features to your existing lighting.
- Use two-bulb (or more) fixtures as often as possible. This way, you will still have light even if one bulb burns out.
- When replacing light bulbs, especially in ceiling fixtures, use compact fluorescent bulbs. They require less maintenance and use less electricity. A

drawback to consider is that most, but not all, fluorescents will not work with dimmers.

- In closets, lower the coat rod for an easier reach.

ACTIONS IN THE KITCHEN:

- Replace items that are hard to use with ones that are easy to use. Many common kitchen utensils are now designed with bigger handles, smarter design, and reduced strength requirements.
- Consider removing upper cabinet doors in the kitchen and removing doors where ease of access would become an advantage (for instance, the doors of a closet).
- Put a lazy Susan in each of your corner cupboards.
- Make sure a stepstool is sturdy. Buy or replace the one you have if it doesn't provide adequate safety. Look for non-skid, wide steps and (ideally) a grab handle for balance.

ACTIONS IN THE BATHROOM:

- Unplug all appliances in the bathroom after their use. Never leave them plugged in. Your bathroom outlets should be GFI (the ones with the red and black test and reset switches on them). If they are just standard outlets, have them replaced. The GFI cuts power much faster than your breaker panel should an appliance fall into water.
- Have bathmats that are backed with rubber and lie flat.
- Add slip-on rubber grips to faucet handles that are hard to turn.
- Add a bench next to the bathtub, maybe a seat in the shower.
- If the bathroom mirror is poorly positioned, add a counter-top or wall mounted adjustable mirror.
- Remove shower doors and replace with shower curtains and grab bars.
- Replace the showerhead with a handheld unit. They work as a regular showerhead, and now serve a variety of purposes such as pet baths and plant watering.
- Move medications to a location where there would be no risk of small children injecting them. Properly dispose of expired medications or those no longer needed.
- Although you might need professional services, install grab bars in the bathroom as needed.
- If a higher toilet seat is needed, purchase one from a medical supply store; they come in a great variety of models and some include a bidet feature.

HOME EXTERIOR ACTIONS:

- Remove any outdoor objects that could be tripped over, such as hoses, branches, small decorations, and so forth.

- Assess the condition of walkways; schedule any needed repairs. If visibility at night is poor, solar powered lanterns can be added along the pathway.

COMMUNICATION ACTIONS:

- Install more phones, especially in the bathroom, and wherever a cordless could accommodate the lack of a phone jack. Look for large illuminated text screens when you choose the new phone.

EMERGENCY ACTIONS:

- Make an appointment for your fire department to review your fire safety needs and make recommendations.
- Test and inspect your smoke/fire detectors right now; replace batteries if not done in the last ½ year; replace the units themselves every 5 years (the sensitivity decreases over time).
- Make sure you have at least one smoke/fire detector per floor; if doors to bedrooms are closed, those rooms should have their very own detectors.
- Replace smoke/fire/security devices with ones that have strobe and possibly vibration alerts, in addition to sound alerts.
- Install carbon monoxide detectors especially in garages and utility rooms.
- Have easy-to-reach and easy-to-use fire extinguishers especially in higher risk areas such as the kitchen. Maintain them yearly and after every use. Match fire extinguishers to the area of use (a greasy kitchen fire gets a different extinguisher from an electrical fire).
- Check emergency supplies: water, food, medications, alternative heating supply, etc. Be prepared to survive one week should you be cut off from emergency services.
- Create a family emergency exiting plan and practice it. Include a meeting place outside the home.

CONCLUSION:

Although not directly an application of universal design, remain social; stay in regular contact with friends and family. Keep in touch with co-workers and service providers even if it only means a friendly hello. Universal design is about things working for everyone. One does this because our very nature is to be social. One does this so you and everybody else can get out and about to work together, to play together, to pray together and to celebrate or grieve together. We do this because our nature is communal. Isolation is a recipe for depression. Making all these changes to your home and community isn't just an improvement for your life, it's a boon all around. Everyone benefits.

About Konrad Kaletsch, CAPS

Konrad Kaletsch is a writer and consumer advocate for universal design. His forthcoming book and website provide both useful information, and more importantly, an understanding as to why this new building paradigm matters. For additional information, go to Universal Design Resource at <http://www.universaldesignresource.com/>. For professional networking, please join the universal design Network on LinkedIn, http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=1291067&trk=anet_ug_hm.