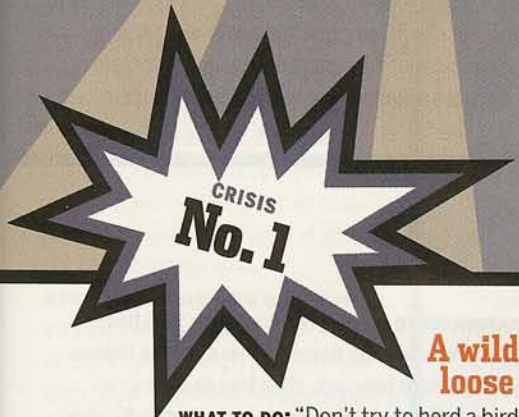




FLOODS HAPPEN. SO DO COLLAPSED CEILINGS, TRAPPED CRITTERS, AND SMOKE-BELCHING FIREPLACES. BUT WITH OUR **HOMEOWNER SURVIVAL TIPS**, YOU'LL KNOW JUST WHAT TO DO WHEN TROUBLE STRIKES

Flirting With Disaster

We know you'd never intentionally tear out a bearing wall, open your door to a rabid raccoon, or flush your cell phone down the toilet. Still, bad things do happen to good people. And so, just as every Boy Scout learns to fashion a tourniquet from a T-shirt and a stick, every homeowner really ought to know what to do in the event of some worst-case scenarios in and around the house. Here's how you can squeak out of 9 household emergencies with your life—and your dignity—intact.



A wild animal is loose in the house.

WHAT TO DO: "Don't try to herd a bird with a broom or tennis racket. It'll just panic and try to hide," says Tom Scollins, a zoologist turned wildlife-control agent in Baltimore. "Instead, turn off the lights and open the windows, drapes, and blinds. It'll feel the air currents and fly toward the light." The same technique works for squirrels and raccoons, if you can corral them in a room and shut the door. If that fails, you'll need to call in a

professional wildlife wrangler or your town's animal-control officer.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: "Prevention is so much cheaper than removal," says Scollins. Chimneys and dryer vents are common entry points, so install chimney caps on the flues and snap-in screens inside dryer-vent openings. To deter burrowing rodents, keep mulch thin around the foundation. And if you've got lots of starlings or sparrows in your yard, remember to shut the screen doors, because those are the birds most likely to fly inside.



CRISIS No. 2

You may have just taken down a bearing wall.

WHAT TO DO: Look into the ceiling. If the joists are perpendicular to the old wall and their ends sat on it (probably overlapping it slightly), it was a bearing wall—i.e., it held the weight of the house on its shoulders. Build two temporary walls, one on either side of the removed wall, by securing 2x4s to the floor and ceiling and inserting a stud between them under each joist. Cut the studs $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{3}{16}$ inch longer than needed, says *This Old House* general contractor Tom Silva, and wedge them in place with a sledgehammer. Then call a contractor or engineer, who should be able to cut back the joists and install a beam in the ceiling, at which point you can take down the temporary supports and enjoy your open floor plan.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING

TO YOU: Do your detective work *before* you demo the wall. For the most part, an interior wall is load-bearing if it is perpendicular to the joists or rafters above it, rides directly over a basement beam, and has an exact match on the story above and/or below. If you're unsure, hire a contractor or engineer to look at the house, or take the blueprints to your local building department for assistance (and be prepared to apply for a permit for the removal job).



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CRISIS No. 3

The basement is under 3 feet of water.

WHAT TO DO: If the water is coming from a plumbing problem (that is, if it's not teeming outside), shut off the main right away—unless you have to swim to it. Newer houses typically have electrical wiring at least a foot off the ground, but if your heating plant is old, its electrical feed may be just inches off grade. The water could be electrified even if it's only ankle deep. Call an electrician or the utility to cut power to the building. If it's a burst pipe, call a plumber. If it's a rainstorm, sit tight and wait for the water level to drop before attempting a cleanup.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: You can't do much to prevent pipes from bursting, other than never letting them freeze. But you can protect your basement from rain-induced flooding. "Make sure your yard slopes away from the house and that your gutters are working properly," says Clark Campbell, the owner of an Atlanta basement-waterproofing company and president of the National Association of Waterproofers. If the problem is persistent, you may need to plug foundation cracks with epoxy or install a sump pump in the basement floor.

CRISIS No. 4

The painter left a window open while doing the exterior, and now there's lead-paint dust inside.

WHAT TO DO: Move the kids out of the house until it's decontaminated, says Chicago pediatrician Helen Binns, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics's Committee on Environmental Health. Take them to the doctor for a blood test to check for elevated lead levels. Then vacuum up all debris with a HEPA vacuum and thoroughly wash all belongings, from bedding to toys to cookware. "The one thing that can really never be cleaned is the rugs," says Binns. "They should be removed and discarded."

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: If your house was built before 1978, when the use of lead paint was banned, make sure your painter follows lead-safe techniques, says Martanaze Hancock, chief trainer at Atrium Environmental Health and Safety Services, which runs a lead-safe education program for painting contractors. For exterior painting, these include sealing windows and covering the ground around the house with 6-mil plastic sheets; avoiding power sanding and power washing, which can spread dust; and properly disposing of debris at the end of every workday. (For complete lead-safe painting guidelines, indoors and out, go to thisoldhouse.com/shortcuts.)

CRISIS
No. 5

You lit a fire...but neglected to open the damper.

WHAT TO DO: Try using the poker or the log tongs to pull open the damper. If that doesn't work, limit smoke damage by closing the doors to the room, opening the windows, and shutting off the HVAC system. Then put out the blaze with a fire extinguisher. You'll almost surely have soot stains on the mantel and walls, "but that's better than if you let the fire burn itself out or doused it with water, which turns soot into liquid pigment," says Jeff Bishop, technical advisor for the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning, and Restoration Certification. Vacuum up all the residue, then scrub stains using a terry-cloth towel and a nonabrasive powdered detergent mixed with warm water.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: Step one: Open flue. Step two: Light match. Pretty simple, really. But the most important step is actually number three: "Always stay near the fire until the initial burst of burning newspaper has subsided and you're sure that it's drafting okay," says Grand Blanc, Michigan, fire chief Jim Harmes. You can also light the end of a rolled-up piece of newspaper and hold it in the firebox to get the draft going.

CRISIS
No. 6

You dropped your cell phone in the toilet.

WHAT TO DO: Those fireplace tongs might come in handy for this problem, too—otherwise, you're just going to have to reach in and go fishing. "Put on your longest pair of rubber gloves and grab it," says *TOH* plumbing and heating contractor Richard Trethewey. If it gets stuck, a plunger can make the problem worse. "The pipe gets narrower inside the trap, and if the phone gets wedged, it's going to be a bear to get out," Richard says. If all else fails, a plumber may be able to hook it on the end of a snake. Once you've retrieved the phone, remove the battery and SIM card, dry them with a paper towel, and, if it's worth the \$100 it will cost you, take the phone to an electronics repair shop, where they can open it up and dry the components inside.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: Lest you feel like a fool, nearly a third of the 20 phones fixed each day at Cell Phone Repair, in San Antonio, Texas, are suffering from the ill effects of a spin in the loo, says head technician Noel Flores. His advice: Don't multitask. That way, you won't lose your new iPhone. (Or offend your friends.)



CRISIS
No. 7

The house is haunted.

WHAT TO DO: If the signs of haunting are auditory, first rule out animals by bringing in a pest-control expert (see crisis No. 1). "Raccoons and bats sleep all day and go outside at night, so you'll hear them moving around at dusk and dawn," says critter wrangler Tom Scollins. Although ghosts seem scary, they won't harm you, says Stephan A. Schwartz, a research associate at the Cognitive Sciences Laboratory in Palo Alto, California, and spokesperson for the Parapsychological Association. "They're entities that have become trapped in the home, and they really just want help to move along." Light candles or incense; join hands; pray; meditate. "The goal is to express your intention that the spirits leave the building," Schwartz says.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: Good luck getting a home inspector to check for ghosts before you buy. But consider this: Do-it-yourself exorcisms are kind of fun, and they make great stories.

CRISIS
No. 8

Your next-door neighbor is renting to a bunch of frat boys.

WHAT TO DO: If you find out ahead of time, grab a handful of neighbors and (politely) appeal to the owner to find a renter who better fits the block. "After all, a nice, stable family would surely be preferable to the landlord, too," says Shelley Blood, neighborhood-relations officer for Hillsboro County, Florida, home to three universities. Your group could even pitch in to pay a few months' rent while a tenant is located.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: Put together a petition for a local ordinance tightening rules on how many unrelated people can live in a single home. "Any existing renters would be grandfathered in," says Blood, "but only until those particular kids moved out."

CRISIS
No. 9

A tradesman has put a lien on your house.

WHAT TO DO: Call a lawyer. Once you've paid the general contractor in full, your contract should indemnify you against any sub coming after you for money, says Ty Laurie, a construction lawyer at DLA Piper, in Chicago. If yours was a handshake deal, you may have to fend off the lien in court. Even if you win, that could cost thousands in legal fees, so it might be worth negotiating with the sub instead.

HOW TO KEEP THIS FROM HAPPENING TO YOU: Have your lawyer review the contract up front, and don't make any payments to the GC until receiving lien waivers from all the subs. Or, for a couple of hundred bucks, a title company will hold the money in escrow and disburse it to the GC or the subcontractors. ■