

Claire's Tips and Tools for Relationships That Work

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How I Remodeled My House and Stayed Married at the Same Time

If you're thinking you haven't heard from me for awhile, you're right. I'm embarrassed to say that I got sidetracked by a big project and I let my newsletter slide for several months. What could derail me that much? Something extremely absorbing, surprisingly emotional, and ridiculously expensive. My husband John called it "The Great Disruption." Home Depot calls it "Making Your Dreams Come True." Most people call it remodeling.

What amazes me is how the project turned our lives upside down especially since nothing went wrong. Really. The storage container driver had some trouble with his truck and had to come a day late. That was it.

Even more amazing, nothing went wrong with my marriage. I think we had two arguments during the entire project. "What's so amazing about that?" John wanted to know. Not that I'm a pessimist, but everyone knows remodeling can turn a relationship inside out. I've had clients who were driven to counseling by a remodeling or building project.

When my clients have a success, I ask them to figure out where they went right. So I made my husband sit down and help me figure out what we learned that might help you with your next big project.

Years ago, I cornered a contractor at the Seattle Home Show and asked him why couples fight over remodels. He said, "They go over their budget and then they blame each other." Keeping that in mind, the first thing we did right was spend a lot of time getting clear about our goals, and making sure we were both bought in. (Actually, we spent so much time on this it might qualify as analysis paralysis, but that's another article.)

Our goal was to sell the house in about two years. Knowing that helped us avoid what techies call "feature creep," and the resulting cost overruns. Every so often we would stray into dream house territory, but when we remembered we only wanted improvements that would pay for themselves, decisions were not that hard, and we stuck to our budget.

The second important thing was my husband rescued me at a critical moment. I was the chief organizer of the project. Which was fine with me. To be honest, I liked the control.

However, there was one point when we needed to revise our budget and I was just overwhelmed. Without a word, he read my mind, stepped in, and took over. I can't tell you how wonderful that felt. I'm always talking to my clients about the importance of understanding first, problem-solving second. And boy, did I feel understood. I think John knew I needed a help before I knew it.

But even I like to let go of control now and then. And that's another reason things went smoothly. John and I have different styles, and when we let ourselves be influenced by the other, we come up with results neither of us would have alone. This adds richness, not just to the finished project, but to the experience. Sometimes it's a lot more interesting to get out of the driver's seat, let my husband run with his idea, and see where it goes. After all, I already know what my idea looks like.

For example, John picked out tile for the entry way that was busier than what I wanted. My mind started to travel that well-worn groove of marshalling my arguments in favor of my position. I'm sure you know what I mean! Then I saw that he really wanted that tile. And I remembered that he has good ideas too sometimes! So I said, "O.K." And now I love it.

John says it's like cooking. When you put in all your favorite spices, all your dishes end up tasting kind of alike. Sometimes, you need someone else's recipe to add a new flavor.

Many times I said to myself, "How strange. We've had much bigger fights over much smaller stresses." My theory is that we rose to the occasion. We knew that the risk of relationship pain was high, so we zeroed in on what the other's big needs were and cut each other more slack on the little stuff.

Now, if only I could figure out how to remodel without losing track of the rest of my life, I might even be interested in doing it again. For now, I'm glad to throw away the paint chips and get back to what I really enjoy-helping people build happy marriages.

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