

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Drip, Drip, Drip

You read the comic strip Blondie, don't you? Heck, our grandparents read it. It's been around for 75 years. And for every one of those 75 years, the strip has been a friend to America's plumbers. Because every time Dagwood tries to save money on a plumber by fixing a leak himself, he floods the kitchen. Or whacks himself with a wrench. Or both.

But if Dagwood and a few dozen old TV sitcoms have conditioned you to believe that you can't touch your own pipes without causing a high tide or drowning the dog, shake it off. The fact is that you can do your own elementary plumbing repairs with just the tools you have on hand – a monkey wrench or crescent wrench and maybe some silicone sealant.

First and foremost, before you begin, always know where the main water shutoff to your house is. It's usually outside, typically at the front of the house, often positioned near the gas shutoff. But you need to know where it is and how to access it quickly.

Why? Well, most faucets in your house have shutoff valves at the point where the pipe feeds into the fixture. But I've had the experience of shutting off that valve, disconnecting the pipe and finding myself in the middle of a tropical storm because the valve didn't do its job. So water is pouring across the floor, and that's the time to head for the main shutoff in your house – fast, before the water does some very expensive damage.

All right, so you're hearing that drip, drip, drip from underneath the sink, and when you go under there, you find that one of the connections has sprung a leak. Well, the good news is that 90 percent of the time, just laying on a little wrench action and tightening that connection will stop the leak. You turn it right, or clockwise, to tighten. (If you forget which way to turn, just recite "righty-tighty, lefty-loosey" and you'll never go wrong.)

If just tightening the connection doesn't stop the leak, shut off the water and disassemble the whole pipe. Sometimes the leak isn't coming from the connection you thought. Unscrew all the connections, inspect all the pieces for possible damage or deterioration, replace any damaged pieces or gaskets at the hardware store and then screw everything back together again. Tighten it snugly, but don't over-tighten. If this doesn't work, it's time to call the plumber.

Got a drippy faucet? Well, most older faucets have washers (modern faucets are washerless), and the problem usually starts there. Take the faucet apart at the stem, remove the old corroded washer, replace it with a new one of the same size and put the faucet back together. End of drip.

Is the water pressure from your faucet not what it was? Most of the time, that's the easiest fix in the world, because the problem is that the strainer at the end of the faucet has gotten clogged. Just remove that little piece of mesh, clean it out or replace it, and put it back on.

You can even change out your own faucets and fixtures. It does require a few specialized tools and the ability to contort yourself into a human pretzel under the sink, but you'll find the instructions on most fixtures pretty easy to follow. It's fun, and if you get a little damp, so what?

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