

FIX IT UP!

Bruce Turner

Happiness is a Warm Caulking Gun

When we last met, we talked about the importance of vent fans to keep your bathroom happy and healthy. But why don't bathrooms stay healthy? Why, in a home that could last a hundred years, does the bathroom wear out in 20?

Two words – traffic and water. The bathroom is often the most heavily used room in the house. And water, of course, is the constant enemy. It's continually flowing, dripping, evaporating and condensing, and anything permeable it touches, it eventually destroys.

Construction quality and maintenance are the keys to a durable bathroom. A well-built, well-maintained bathroom can last for decades, but more often than I would like, I see shortcuts have been taken in the construction of the bathroom – a builder will do something sloppily or omit a detail, when ultimately it will be years before anyone sees the defect behind a wall or under a floor. A friend of mine remodeling his bathroom discovered the builder had never hooked up his shower drain pipe – it had been leaking through the sub-floor for almost 20 years, and the floor was literally collapsing.

Shower walls are equally vulnerable. When we put in a tile shower, we use a mortar backing underneath it, which should give the homeowner a good 30 years of use. One shortcut is to glue the tiles to the sheetrock, but it's a bad idea. The first spot of grout failure will allow water intrusion and eventually destroy the wall from behind.

Proper maintenance is another critical issue. About 75 percent of bathrooms that fail are the result of a leak in the tub or the shower, and half of those leaks are easily detectable – a crack in a joint between a shower door and the tile, or between the tub and the tile, or between the shower or tub and the floor. That's where water goes to hide.

It doesn't hide forever – the damage eventually shows itself. Mold or mildew, either in the bathroom or in adjacent rooms (because water can “walk” along walls and joists) is one indicator. A discolored wall, cracked caulking or paint, even a musty smell can alert you to a problem – when it's already too late.

Almost every time, the problem was preventable. We rebuild tons of bathrooms that would have lasted 20 years longer if they'd been minimally maintained with a little caulk and a little awareness.

Your caulking gun is your friend, and you can give your bathroom a little TLC (tender loving caulking) by yourself. First, check the grout and caulking between your tiles or in the corners and seams. Wherever it's loose or crumbling, scrape out the loose material using a v-groove tool you can get at the hardware store (although an awl, an icepick or just an unbent safety pin can work just as well). Any grout that's loose or sandy, scrape it out – careful you don't scratch the tile in the process. Wipe down the area with a damp sponge, dry it with paper towel or hair dryer, and then insert the grout. Once it dries (give it a day), a layer of caulking will seal the deal. Make sure you have caulking that matches your grout – there are smooth grouts and sanded grouts, and the caulking should match it.

To paraphrase Charlie Brown, happiness is a warm caulking gun. If you re-caulk the vertical and horizontal joints, corners and seams on a yearly basis, you'll prevent about 99 percent of the leak problems that kill bathrooms... and yours might just last forever.

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