

From Sun Senior News, January 2011, reprinted by permission

Electric Solutions to Start Your New Year Neighbors InDeed Advice Column

BY DOUG BROWN

It's Dr. Handy Helper here from Neighbors InDeed, with solutions to your electrical issues. Do you have questions you'd like answered over the phone or in future columns? Give us a call at 223-2763.

Dear Dr. Handy Helper:

A few nights ago, my smoke alarm started chirping. Drove me nuts. Couldn't sleep with the racket, and couldn't figure out which of three alarms were chirping, so I went up on my ladder and pulled all three smoke alarms out of their sockets. The chirping stopped! Did I do the right thing? And now what? – Sleepless on Slawson Lane.

Dear Sleepless:

Well, sure enough you stopped the chirping, but meanwhile you don't have operating smoke alarms in those rooms. So, no, it wasn't really the right thing to do. First, reinstall the alarms, and the one that's faulty will have a RED LIGHT FLASHING. Next, replace the old battery with a FRESH one (9-volt – we like Energizer or Rayovac brands). Finally, with a small hand vacuum or gentle brush, carefully remove any dust out from the inside of the alarm. Reinstall and you should be good to go. But NOTE: if you haven't changed all your smoke alarm batteries in the last year, while you're about it, change them all! – Dr. HH

Dear Dr. Handy Helper:

I've changed my smoke alarm batteries and one of them keeps on chirping even after several attempts to reinsert the battery. How long do smoke alarms last before they need replacing? – Frustrated on Fremont Lane.

Dear Frustrated:

Smoke alarms should last about 10 years. If your house is approaching that age and the smoke alarms have never been replaced, Dr. H recommends replacing ALL of them. For about \$15 a pop, they can be purchased in local home maintenance stores. Look for BRK-9120B FIRST ALERT alarms – they fit all our receptacles here (see photo). Need help? Call Neighbors InDeed (223-2763) and one of my assistants will come over and replace them for you. – Dr. HH

Dear Dr. Handy Helper:

My granddaughter stayed over with us last night and as she used her hair dryer, she turned on the faucet to splash some water in her hair. Ffft! The electricity went off in the guest bathroom. The circuit breaker (on the outside wall of the house) was still on, but I reset it anyway, and still no electricity. What am I doing wrong? – Perplexed on Perdita Lane.

Dear Perplexed:

Bathroom outlets (along with those in the kitchen, patio, and garage) are all on GFI CIRCUITS (a.k.a. GFCI: Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters) that are more sensitive (4-5 milliamps) than your circuit breakers and will trip off at the slightest provocation (especially anywhere around water). No doubt your GFI circuit tripped, and now your next challenge is to find the little tiny switch on an outlet that controls your guest bathroom. Sounds easy, right? No, GFI outlets for the second bathroom are sometimes in the master bathroom, and guess what, sometimes in the garage! Look for an outlet that's marked "GFCI" and has two tiny switches between the top and bottom plug-ins (see photo). To restore power, press the "reset" button (usually a red button), and go back and check your guest bathroom power. Oh, yes, remind your granddaughter to steer clear of water splashing anywhere near a running hair dryer! – Dr. HH

Dear Dr. Handy Helper:

There's a mysterious switch by our door leading to the patio. It seems to operate nothing. What is the purpose of this switch? – Mystified on Millpond Lane.

Dear Mystified:

Some homes were equipped with a wall switch INSIDE the house that operates one of the two plug sockets in an OUTDOOR receptacle on the patio. This was to facilitate turning landscape lighting off and on from inside the house. You may not have noticed it because perhaps you never used both plug sockets or the

switch has been in the “on” position all along. Remember, if it’s an outdoor outlet, a GFI breaker will be associated with it. And guess what, that reset button might turn out to be in your garage, of all places! Mystery solved! – Dr. HH

A final note from Dr. HH: Would you like some free help with electrical or any other home maintenance problems? Call Neighbors InDeed at 223-2763 and we’ll be right over. Happy New Year!