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Self Service

What professionals say you can do yourself—
and save time and money in the process

PANIC SETS IN SO EASILY: The blasted computer won't respond; the hallway lights blink eerily, then go dark; the clogged drain makes the sink resemble a scene from *The Poseidon Adventure*.

You know not to call 911, of course—it's not that kind of emergency—but you do want to call a professional, someone who can save you from your predicament. Still, the pros say that all too often they get called for problems that can be easily fixed without them. With a little know-how, a few tools, and—most important—some confidence, you can make the following fixes yourself. So the next time you find yourself thinking SOS, just remember DIY instead.

WRITTEN BY ERIK FORREST JACKSON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID PRINCE

“Anybody who has any doubt about the ingenuity or the resourcefulness of a plumber never got a bill from one.”

George Meany, president,
American Federation of
Labor (1954)

Before You Get Out Your Checkbook...

... follow the experts' advice on these everyday fixes, for everything from your computer to your car. You'll end up saving yourself a lot of hassle—not to mention money.



Thaw a frozen computer

Try to force-quit out of the programs you're using by holding down the **OPTION + APPLE + ESCAPE** keys (Mac) or **CONTROL + ALT + DELETE** (PC). If that doesn't work, turn your computer off—by holding the power button down for 10 seconds—and then leave it off for at least a minute, says computer technician Karen Simon of PC Tech Associates, in Santa Monica. If you're on a laptop (and the steps above don't solve your problem), try unplugging the computer's power cord from the wall and then removing the battery from the machine. Wait about 10 seconds, put the battery back in, plug in the computer, and turn it back on. You may lose any changes in the files you were working on—which might happen even with an expert's help—but your computer should run normally.

PROS CHARGE: \$75 or more.

DIY COST: None.



Reset a circuit breaker or change a fuse

If the power goes out in just part of your house, the problem is probably in your circuit breaker or fuse box. (Homes have one or the other, usually located at the back of the house, in the utility area, or in the basement.) A circuit breaker (shown above) has a series of switches, while a fuse box has a collection of fuses that look like glass bottle caps. If your circuit breaker is "tripped," one of the switches will be between the on and off positions. Press it all the way to the off position, then turn it back on. If you have a fuse box, check to see if a fuse is blown. (You'll know because the glass will look cloudy.) If so, unscrew it and take it to a hardware store, where you can buy a replacement. If you feel heat coming from a circuit breaker or a fuse box, call an electrician.

PROS CHARGE: \$65 to \$100.
DIY COST: None, or \$1.25 (for a new fuse).



Mend upholstery

While torn upholstery fabric should be either replaced or patched, you can mend ripped seams. Use strong nylon thread and a curved upholsterer's needle. (If you can't find these at a fabric store or a megamart, go to Conso Products Company, www.conso.com, to find a retailer near you.) Pin the seam together, then use a blind stitch. (For a guide to blind and other stitches, try *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Sewing*, by Lydia Wills; \$17, Alpha Books.)

PROS CHARGE: \$35 and up.

DIY COST: \$25.50 (\$6 for thread, \$2.50 for a needle, and \$17 for the book).



Unclog a sink

First try a plunger. Fill the sink with enough water to cover the plunger's head as you place it on the drain. Then push the handle up and down vigorously, keeping the rubber head in place over the drain. If that doesn't work, try an over-the-counter chemical drain opener, like Liquid-Plumr, as long as your pipes aren't more than 25 years old. If they are older, they can be damaged by chemicals, experts say, so try using a wire hanger instead: Unwind the hanger and snake it through the pipe, trying to push the clog through, or at least poke enough of a hole in it to allow water to flush the rest through the pipe. (Be careful not to scratch the surface of your sink in the process.) For more stubborn clogs, call a plumber.

PROS CHARGE: \$100 or more.

DIY COST: About \$6 (for a heavy-duty sink plunger) or about \$4 (for Liquid-Plumr).



Get rid of your dog's bad breath

Purchase toothpaste from your vet (yum! poultry flavor!), or opt for nonfoaming tooth powder for humans (foam scares some dogs). Feel free to use any human toothbrush. "Brush once a week, or as often as you can," says Kim Nicholas, D.V.M., past president of the Washington State Veterinary Medical Association. By doing so, you'll reduce plaque and tartar, helping to prevent gum disease, which can lead to loose teeth. Nicholas says not all dogs will put up with brushing. (It's best to start when they're puppies, but some older dogs can be trained.) He suggests you start by running your finger inside the dog's mouth every once in a while. Move to a soft cloth and then a cloth with toothpaste before graduating to a toothbrush.

PROS CHARGE: \$100 or more.

DIY COST: \$8.50 (about \$6 for toothpaste and \$2.50 for a toothbrush).



Test your tire pressure

"By keeping tires properly inflated, you can reduce accidents and even save your life," says Deanna Sclar, a mechanic and the author of *Auto Repair for Dummies* (Wiley, \$22). Try to check your tires once a month: Buy a tire gauge, or find a gas station that has an air pump with one. Unscrew the air-valve cap and apply the gauge; a rulerlike instrument will extend from it to give you the reading. (Don't worry about the air that escapes when you apply or remove the gauge—it won't make a significant difference. And if the gauge shows that you put in too much air, just push down on the center of the valve to let it out.) Proper pressure is listed on each tire near the rim or provided in the car's owner's manual.

PROS CHARGE: You should tip the attendant a dollar or two.

DIY COST: \$5 to \$15 (for the gauge).

DIY Resources

Itching to do more on your own? Check out these guides.

■ **Dare to Repair**, by Julie Sussman and Stephanie Glakas-Tenet (HarperResource, \$15). A do-it-yourself guide with a smart approach to home repair.

■ **Troubleshooting Your PC for Dummies**, by Dan Gookin (For Dummies, \$25). This straightforward guide makes finding the solution to a specific PC gripe easy.

■ **Reader's Digest New Fix-it-Yourself Manual** (Reader's Digest, \$35). It's more in-depth and technical than most home-repair books.

■ **The Complete Idiot's Guide to Car Care and Repair Illustrated**, by Dan Ramsey (Alpha Books, \$19). A quick read with easy-to-follow advice on the basics of car repair and maintenance.

■ **Auto Repair for Dummies**, by Deanna Sclar (Wiley, \$22). A basic but thorough guide to car repair and maintenance. It also offers tips on how to keep your car looking its best and how to deal with car emergencies.

■ **Country Living Gardener Gardening Basics**, by Ken Beckett (Sterling, \$20). A visually appealing book that helps you design, create, grow, and maintain the garden of your imagination.

—Megan DeFelice

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Check your car's fluids

Do this every month and "you can avoid 70 percent of the reasons cars break down on the highway," says Deanna Sclar. To check coolant or antifreeze, use the owner's manual to locate the coolant reservoir. Then, with the engine cold, look for the embossed "fill to" line on the plastic container. Do the same for windshield-wiper and brake fluids. (Brake fluid will ruin a car's paint, so be extra careful with it.)

To check the engine-oil level, use the manual to locate the dipstick, then "pull it out, wipe it off with a lint-free rag, shove it back in, pull it out again, and read it," Sclar says. Also make sure your oil is clean. "Take some between your forefinger and thumb," she says. "If there are little bits of grit in it, you should go in for an oil change."

PROS CHARGE: \$25 or more.
DIY COST: \$2 (windshield-wiper fluid), \$12 (brake fluid), \$3 (motor oil), or \$10 (coolant).

Prune a shrub

Pruning at least once a year makes shrubs look better and keeps them healthier. While pruning rules that affect appearance are specific to each plant (for example, prune a forsythia in late spring, a rose of Sharon in late fall), those having to do with health are more general. You can prune dead or broken branches from a shrub at any time of year. To determine if a branch is dead, gently scrape the bark with your pruning shears to reveal the color underneath. Green or white means it's alive; brown or black means it's dead. Use sharp shears (to avoid crushing the wood, which can kill the whole branch), then make a cut about six inches into the live growth of the branch. Your cut should be angled, sloping away from the buds on the branch.

PROS CHARGE: \$45 or more.
DIY COST: About \$40 (for pruning shears).

—Additional reporting by
Stephanie Abramson