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JIM: Welcome to this week’s show, and we have a repeat guest in Rob Horkheimer and Rob is a practicing physical therapist and renowned home accessibility consultant and national instructor. I’ve got to tell you that I have changed my approached with my clients after visiting with Rob for the first time. The thing is, it really got me thinking you know a lot of people as they’re approaching retirement are sometimes looking to downsize the home or get a new dream home or whatever the case may be. When we’re in our 50s and maybe even 60s we’re not really thinking about the future and the safety of that home if one of us were to become limited in our capacity to do different things physically or mentally and if we end up transferring to a home that has lots of steps, maybe narrow hallways, or different things like that - if we’re going to transition homes and we want to be able to stay at home or have the opportunity to stay at home, it’s a good time to be thinking about that. For those folks that might be at the point where they already have limited mobility would like to stay in the house, you may not be aware of some of the solutions that are available today and I know Rob you’ve spoken all over the country about this. I really appreciate you taking time to share with us today.

1:29

ROB: Thank you for having me, I appreciate it.

1:31

JIM: Like I said, you opened my eyes. I remember from a past conversation that we had one of the problems that you say is that a lot of people, you have contracts that usually will modify the home and they have the blue sticker on there that shows its handicapped-equipped and you’ve got someone who has no knowledge of someone’s physical abilities or what that means and then if you’ve got a spouse as a caregiver or a family member they don’t know how to assess their abilities to help that person and man, that was an eye-opener. You’re kind of like a general contractor, but you have the medical background, and I can’t imagine why I never heard of this stuff before and nobody put that together before in today’s day and age until you came and visited me. Now you’re training people over the country. I think that’s awesome.

2:23

ROB: Thank you very much. Yeah, actually my wife is an occupational therapist, and obviously I’m a physical therapist and my mother-in-law being a PT as well we saw a lot of, with our patients, the disconnect in terms of modifications that are being done and really wanted to kind of bridge that connection. A lot of contractors that are out there don’t necessarily have a good idea in terms of how people function or what they need safely. Everybody is unique. Everybody’s an individual. Every home is unique in terms of the family dynamics and caregiver dynamics, and so it really is important to look at individual. One of the great things is that there are so many new products that are out there with the aging baby boomer demographics. There’s a lot that’s come out on the marketplace, but the other question is how do you tailor, how do you find the right solution in terms of what an individual needs to move to be more independent. What a caregiver needs to keep themselves safe while they’re caring for somebody. Our approach is to tailor to individuals, and I encourage people who are working with their physical occupational therapist to ask them for advice. Sometimes, we as therapists, we think about the clinic and especially when we work in a hospital setting or a clinic setting we don’t necessarily always think about the implementations that people are doing at home, but there’s a lot of valuable perspective that the therapist can provide in terms of how people are setting up things in the home to keep themselves more safe and more independent.

4:00

JIM: Well, you know one thing is I do a lot of retirement planning and one of my questions is do you plan on staying in your house or are you planning on moving when you retire? A lot of people have started to think about that, and then I’ll ask them okay well if you’re going to stay in your house is your house safe if you have a problem. I get mixed answers on that, and then my next question is if you had limited mobility would you prefer to stay in the house? If they say yes, then I ask is that house easily modifiable to be safe for people. I learned that all from you, Rob, so why don’t you talk about a little bit what are some of the benefits for home modifications and what are the considerations that people should be looking at because you’re talking about, right now, at the stage where they already need help but can’t people be proactive before they get to that point because I always look at it as we age having the change becomes more and more difficult, so if you change because you have to change due to limited mobility, imagine what that’s like leaving a home that you might have so much stuff in that you’ve accumulated over the years and it’s been difficult to get rid of and then all of the sudden you have to get rid of a bunch of stuff and you have to relocate. That can be difficult but if you plan while you’re healthy and the skies are clear that’s so much easier to be ready for that event when and if it happens.

5:32

ROB: Right, it applies not only with aging, but I see a lot of people because I still work part in a hospital setting. Then I do home modifications as well, so I’m kind of half and half. In the hospital setting, to be honest, I see a lot of people who are younger who are in their 20s, 30s, 40s. Obviously, the likelihood we’re more prone to have mobility limitations as we get older, but even as a relatively younger person too it’s having a home that is manageable and more easily accessible is helpful because we can’t predict when we have a fall or when we have an injury. One of the reasons that we should modify homes to be more accessible to make them more easily accessible and safe is preventing the cost of injury and I’ve been thinking about this. I have - just last night I was thinking about this. My dad is struggling with Alzheimer’s dementia, as he’s aging. My mom is primary caregiver, and as football season is upon us, and it was within the last week, there was a severe injury with one of the football players. We hear about when the football player’s seasons are put out by a bad injury and how that affects them, well my mom as my dad’s primary caregiver if she twists an ankle or tweaks her back or gets injured it is life-changing. It’s a real hardship just in terms of caregiver support. Even again, for myself, as a younger person if I’m hospitalized and then find myself in that situation where I either need to go to a rehab facility or I have a home that’s more easy to get back to I would rather get back home as soon as I can rather than being in a facility type of care.

Another consideration, in terms of home adaptations is the fact that we can make things more safe and also keep it aesthetic or even upgrade the aesthetics of the home, so it doesn’t have to institutionalize the home to make it more accessible. We’re fortunate with our organization BILD that have an interior designer who manages the construction that we do, and so that’s an important consideration is that we can make things look nice. Again, there’s a lot more products that are out there for accessibility that look really nice too just with the aging population, which is of benefit to us as well. We can make things look nice, prevent the need for going to facility, which is a big cost and a big hardship.

Again, if we do end up with a short hospitalization we also can make our homes more visit-able for other individuals who are wheelchair-bound or limited in mobility. That’s important too, and actually rewinding in my life back about eight years ago, again, talking to my parents at their house in terms of talking to my mom of justifying getting railings on the front of their house, she was not interested for their own benefit or their own sake at that time. When I talked about how my uncle was having a hard time getting around, then my mom was a lot more open to it. It was of more value to her or more interest and me as a son of an aging parent or both aging parents I was thinking about their safety but it’s a big value to a lot of individuals, a lot of seniors, or families for that matter, even young families, to have their home more accessible for individuals, family, friends, who are more limited in terms of their mobility.

The other thing, too, is that as we have this aging again baby boomer demographic there are a lot more individuals, even younger individuals, again who are surviving trauma because medical care is constantly improving. There’s a lot more individuals who have limited mobility who are going to be potential buyers of our homes as well, so actually making your home more accessible can improve the resale value of the home as well, and so that’s another big benefit in terms of both financial and quality of life for modifying the home.

9:48

JIM: Alright, well we’re going to take a short break. When we come back, I know you talked about a couple ways that people modify the home. Let’s talk about some of those home modifications and let’s say somebody’s even looking to purchase a new house. What are some things to look for and what are some things that maybe people want to avoid? Please stay tuned.

[BREAK]

10:07

JIM: Welcome back as we continue to visit with Rob Horkheimer who is a practicing physical therapist, but more important he’s a renowned home accessibility consultant. He’s got his own company, BILD, where they do general contracting to help make homes safe for both the care receiver and the caregiver. Rob, I really appreciate you sharing today. I think this topic is something that needs to be talked about more because until you’re in the situation, most people don’t even see that it exists. Then when it hits you, it’s life-altering. With some of the work that you do, you can help people and families have more normalcy in their life and maybe not have it altering to the point where they even have to leave the home. Here’s ways that they can stay because you know what they say, there’s no place like home. Rob, what are some of the home modifications that you’ve been involved in and what are some of the products that are available that help make a house safe?

11:09

ROB: There’s a lot that we can do in terms of home modifications. One thing that’s interesting about how you just stated it too. A lot of people are reacting to injuries or to life events, and it’s less common for people to be proactive in terms of making their home easier to manage, but it’s certainly a lot less stressful and oftentimes less expensive if we can be proactive, rather than reactive. Some examples of common adaptations for the home; obviously bathroom safety is a big challenge and it is a tough area to manage safety wise in terms of falls. A lot of people, unfortunately, as they age or as they recover from a stroke or injury a lot of them have a lot more difficulty managing with the bathroom mobility or being safe and not having falls in the bathroom. One of the things that we do a lot of is grab-bar installations for bathrooms. There’s a lot that’s available in terms of more decorative grab-bars, functional grab-bars, and different unique types of grab-bars in the bathroom to keep people safe. That’s important. Even myself, I actually, a couple of weeks ago, I threw my back out and just having a grab-bar for extra support makes it a lot easier physically. Just in terms of safety, it can help prevent a serious injury.

Also, there are inexpensive non-slip, roll-on, anti-slip flooring treatments that are inexpensive as well and that’s a real low-cost, easy way to make the bathroom more safe and more accessible. We can do these in outdoor areas as well too, but that’s a real low-cost way, again, to make things more safe and more accessible.

12:55

JIM: Let’s say someone’s looking to buy that retirement home. Everybody’s healthy. What kind of things would you stay to stay away with like tri-level homes or what are we looking for?

13:08

ROB: You know, steps inside of the home are very, very difficult, so if you can avoid even single step-ups, tri-levels are very difficult, but ideally you want to have - in an ideal world a ranch home with no steps once you get inside of the home and then low rises to enter into the home from the garage, from the front door, from the back door. That’s an ideal situation, but if not that you at least want to have - again no step-ups when you’re inside the home and just a straight stairway to the second floor if you’re looking at a second-floor type of place. Other big things that you want to look at inside the home are having enough width in the hallways. Narrow hallways are very difficult, having angled walls and narrowed doorways are very, very difficult. Ideally, you want to find a home that has at least 32-inch-wide doorways. I hate to give minimum numbers because, again, everybody’s different, so if you have an individual who’s 300 pounds versus somebody who is 150 pounds that’s going to change what I would recommend in terms of doorway widths, but just in general you want to have wide doorway width with, again, low rises to get into the home, open hallways. If you do have stairways, an easy fix is extending additional railing along the stairways and at the transitions at the top of stairways. That’s a simple fix that you can do but really with new homes that you’re looking at, the more open the concept is inside, the more open area and open space that you have, usually that’s going to work better in terms of being able to maneuver more easily whether you need a mobility device or if you’re walking without a mobility device.

14:50

JIM: I know we had another gal on a while back, and she and her husband build homes for people with disabilities because she, herself, was disabled. She talked about how her and her husband had just bought their dream house together or whatever, and it was full of shag carpet. She was talking how challenging that is. It might be okay to have carpet, but you might want to have a property that maybe has hardwood underneath or something like that where you can pull it up and you don’t have to completely redo the floors, but that’s a consideration as well, right?

15:22

ROB: Yeah, solid floors, solid surfaces are definitely preferable and just having a smooth, solid surface like hardwood floors are perfect. Also, the threshold transitions. Again, this is something when you buy a house there’s solutions to address the transitions and everything, but yeah like I said shag carpet would not be ideal.

15:44

JIM: You talked about a lot of different things here today. Do you have a website that has some resources like this?

15:51

ROB: We do. Our website is www.bildnow.com, so it’s bild without the u, bildnow.com. We also have an ecommerce site that has different safety equipment, grab-bars, and things like that called homesafetycomfort.com. That’s our ecommerce store. The BILD Now site, we a have resource guide, and it’s really meant as an educational resource where people can explore different topics like stair accessibility, bathroom accessibility, transfer safety, and transfer solutions for individuals and for caregivers. It’s organized by topic, and we also have PDFs that you can download that address, again, kind of knowing all the different options for bathroom accessibility, stairs, transfers, kitchen accessibility that you can access on bildnow.com. We’re designed to be a resource for people and to learn more about the options.

17:04

JIM: Now, I got to believe. I mean you’ve talked about this a few times, you do consultant work. Obviously, getting that information might be a good start. I’m a big believer in not going it alone or not trying to discover for yourself how to do something when you don’t have that knowledge and experience. I know you do that consulting work. Are you doing that all over the country or just in your geographical area?

17:29

ROB: We’re primarily seeing individuals in Wisconsin and Illinois, although we have consulted with people long distances as well too. We have a lot of flexibility in terms of how we work with individuals and we have managed projects throughout the country, at least consulted to give information to contractors and help guide them on the right solutions but our face-to-face work is primarily in Wisconsin and Illinois.

17:56

JIM: Now, I know you’ve gone around the country helping to teach other people to do kind of what you’re doing. Is there a way for somebody to find somebody like you in their area, or do you offer some referral services or how does somebody find somebody like you?

18:13

ROB: Our company is somewhat unique in terms of how we operate because we’re run with physical and occupational therapists, as well as with interior designers, so I’m not aware of a lot of other companies that fit our exact business structure or business model. If people are looking for contractors, some of the areas that I’ll refer them, there is a national organization called Live at Home that has contractors all over the country, and so they have a database of contractors. The Live At Home organization, which has actually been administered through VGM, this organization individuals who are going to become certified as certified environmental access consultants are required to do yearly continuing education to keep that up, and so I think that’s a good resource to find good contractors, especially because they have that requirement of ongoing continued education. There’s another database that’s online through the University of Southern California Homemods Program. They have an executive certificate in home modifications, and, again, they have an online national database. That’s another good referral source if people are looking for contractors. This is a pretty extensive education program that I have taken, and our staff has taken. It’s pretty comprehensive, it’s pretty rigorous in terms of the programs that are out there, and again I think contractors who have gone through that kind of they demonstrate an extra commitment to doing things the right way because there are some credentials that are out there where people will take as a marketing tool but aren’t necessarily as serious about doing things the right way in terms of accessible modification.

20:02

JIM: One thing I got to mention, though, is that as us baby boomers age, it’s definitely more preferable to be at home and in a lot of cases it can save people a lot of money. I do know things like Medicare and Medicaid, they keep scaling back what’s available, what can be paid for, and rarely do we see home modifications being paid by a Medicaid situation and Medicare does not provide benefits for this. For us being in long-term care insurance awareness month, I think that people really should look at this. When you think about what quality of life you want in the future, a lot of people face this, and they haven’t prepared for it financially. One thing you may want to be talking to your insurance professional about that sent you this program is do you have long-term care insurance and if so will it pay for home modifications? Will it allow you to stay at home? Will it provide benefits because while this takes planning to have the right modifications done to make your house safe you also need to have the financial means to make sure you’re not taking shortcuts in that area.

Rob, any final thoughts?

21:20

ROB: I think that just trying to explore the different options, know what’s available, and try to prepare for the future. It’s important to know, again, that there are ways that you can keep your home more accessible and make it work better for you and be more beautiful and more easy to manage. Think about it as a quality of life improvement and as a financial investment. It’s a lot easier to do it on the front-end than it is after you’re dealing with an injury.

21:49

JIM: Well, Rob, I appreciate you being on. I know from your last visit I went with - I was expanding my patio in my back yard. My wife and I were going to do two tiers, and after talking to you we’re doing one tier, so you’ve made an impact personally as well as I know you’ve made a difference with a lot of other folks as well. Again, if people want more information it’s bildnow.com right?

22:15

ROB: Yeah, thank you. Thanks for having me, Jim.

22:18

JIM: Yeah, bildnow.com if you’d like to get more information, and again, Rob I look forward to having you on again soon.

22:26

ROB: Okay, thanks very much, Jim.

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