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Selling A Loved One's Home

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WHAT TO FIX OR LEAVE ALONE BEFORE SELLING A LOVED ONE'S HOME

How to avoid costly repairs, unnecessary delays, emotional overwhelm, and expensive mistakes before listing the home

SELLING A LOVED ONE'S HOME IS NOT LIKE SELLING A REGULAR HOUSE.

Most people think the process begins when the property is listed.

But that is almost never true.

By the time the home reaches the market, many of the biggest decisions have already been made:

- what repairs were done,
- what money was spent,
- how the family handled the process,
- whether legal authority was understood,
- whether buyers feel trust,
- and whether the situation was approached strategically or emotionally.

This is why some sales move relatively smoothly while others become:

- delayed,
- emotionally exhausting,
- financially draining,
- or filled with family conflict and second-guessing.

One of the first questions families ask is: "What should we fix before we sell?"

But before repair decisions are made, families usually need to understand something much bigger:

What is actually shaping the sale?

THE BIGGEST MISTAKE FAMILIES MAKE

One of the biggest mistakes families make is starting the process before understanding what order the decisions need to happen in.



Families often jump straight into:

- repairs,
- cleanout,
- contractor estimates,
- pricing conversations,
- or emotional family discussions.



But sometimes the first issue is not the house itself.

Sometimes the first issue is:

- legal authority,
- financial pressure,
- occupancy,
- family cooperation,
- disclosures,
- or emotional readiness.

When families begin making decisions before understanding the full situation, the process often becomes much more difficult later.

Repairs may begin before authority is clear.

Money may be spent before financial realities are understood.

Belongings may be removed before family agreement exists.

Projects may begin before the actual strategy is clear.

And once decisions begin out of order, they become much harder to untangle later.

That is when:

- delays grow,
- stress increases,
- conflict escalates,
- and people begin second-guessing everything.

WHY LEGAL AUTHORITY OFTEN COMES FIRST

One of the most important early questions is:

Who actually has authority to make decisions about the home?

Families sometimes assume everyone has equal authority simply because they are family.

But that is not always true.

There may be:

- a trustee,
- probate requirements,
- multiple beneficiaries,
- title complications,
- blended family issues,
- occupancy problems,
- or disagreements about whether the home should even be sold.

Until legal authority becomes reasonably clear, families may begin:

- spending money,
- hiring contractors,
- making promises,
- planning repairs,
- or trying to prepare the home

before they fully understand who can legally move the process forward.



That can create enormous problems later.



THE SALE NEVER FULLY “TURNS OFF”

One of the hardest parts of selling a loved one's home is that it often feels like something constantly simmering in the background.

Even when you step away from it mentally, it is still there.

The paperwork is still waiting.

The repairs still need decisions.

The family still needs answers.

The belongings still need attention.

The house still carries emotional weight.

That ongoing pressure affects decision-making.

When people become overwhelmed, they often rush decisions simply to reduce anxiety.

Unfortunately, rushed decisions can create even bigger problems later.

THE FOUR CATEGORIES THAT SIMPLIFY REPAIR DECISIONS

One of the most helpful ways to approach repairs is to separate every project into four categories:

1. What **MUST** be done
2. What **SHOULD** be done
3. What **COULD** be done



4. What should NOT be done

This simple framework helps families stop treating every issue as equally important.

Because everything is not equally important.

Some repairs protect the sale.

Some improvements help presentation.

Some projects are optional.

And some projects create unnecessary stress, delay, and expense without improving the outcome.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Must-do items usually involve:

- safety,
- active damage,
- access,
- functionality,
- or serious buyer concerns.

Examples may include:

- active leaks,
- mold,
- unsafe stairs,
- rotten wood,
- electrical hazards,
- drainage problems,
- strong odors,
- plumbing issues,
- or anything that could continue causing damage or interfere with inspections or financing.

Must-do items are not about making the home beautiful.

They are about protecting the sale.



WHAT SHOULD BE DONE

Should-do items help the home feel:

- cleaner,
- lighter,
- more accessible,
- and emotionally easier for buyers to walk through.

These may include:

- deep cleaning,
- decluttering,
- organizing storage areas,
- basic landscaping,
- removing debris,
- improving lighting,
- or simple minor repairs.



These improvements may not dramatically increase value, but they often improve buyer comfort and confidence.

WHAT COULD BE DONE

Could-do items are optional.

They may help if there is enough:



- time,
- money,
- emotional energy,
- and realistic return.

Examples may include:

- fresh paint,
- cosmetic updates,
- carpet replacement,
- fixture changes,
- or small presentation improvements.

But these projects should be considered carefully.

Just because something could be done does not mean it should be done.

WHAT SHOULD NOT BE DONE

This is where many families make expensive mistakes.

Examples may include:

- full remodels,
- replacing functional older bathrooms,
- luxury upgrades,
- expensive flooring replacements,
- trendy design projects,
- or trying to make the home look brand new.

Buyers often want their own choices.

A seller may spend enormous amounts of money on upgrades the buyer plans to remove anyway.





QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU DECIDE

When you are not sure whether something belongs in the must, should, could, or should-not category, ask these questions.

MUST-DO Questions

- Is this a safety issue?
- Could someone get hurt?
- Could this interfere with inspections, financing, or closing?
- Is active damage continuing?
- Will this get worse if ignored?

SHOULD-DO QUESTIONS

- Will this help buyers feel more comfortable?
- Will this help buyers clearly see the home?
- Does this improve visibility, cleanliness, or emotional comfort?
- Does this help the home feel honestly cared for?

COULD-DO QUESTIONS

- Is this optional rather than necessary?
- Would the home still sell if this were not done?
- Is there enough time and money to do this wisely?

- Would this improvement likely create meaningful value?

SHOULD-NOT-DO QUESTIONS

- Will this delay the sale?
- Is this primarily emotional instead of strategic?
- Are we trying to make the home perfect?
- Will buyers likely change this anyway?
- Are we spending money because of guilt or fear?

BUYER PSYCHOLOGY: WHAT BUYERS NEED TO FEEL

Most buyers do not expect an older home to be perfect.

Older fixtures, dated bathrooms, worn flooring, or older kitchens usually do not destroy trust by themselves.

What affects buyers much more deeply is uncertainty.

Buyers are often unconsciously asking themselves:

- Can I clearly see what I am buying?
- Does the home feel honestly represented?
- Is anything being hidden?
- Do I feel emotionally safe moving forward?
- Can I trust the sellers?

This is why:

- clutter,
- overcrowding,
- blocked rooms,
- inaccessible garages,
- strong odors,
- or heavy personal belongings,

can create more concern than older cosmetic features.

When buyers cannot clearly see the home, they begin wondering:

“What else can't I see?”



That uncertainty creates emotional hesitation.

And hesitation affects offers.



WHY VISIBILITY AND DISCLOSURES MATTER

One of the ways sellers build buyer trust is through:

- visibility,
- accessibility,
- transparency,
- and disclosures.

When buyers feel that sellers are open and honest, they often feel safer moving forward, even when the home has flaws.

This does not mean the home must be perfect.

It means the process should feel honest.

In many situations, an older but clean, visible, honestly disclosed home creates more trust than a heavily remodeled home that feels emotionally guarded or difficult to evaluate.

A REAL EXAMPLE: THE HILLSIDE HOME

I once worked on a large hillside property with years of deferred maintenance.

At first glance, the property looked overwhelming.

There were:

- water problems,



- mold,
- damaged wood,
- clutter,
- landscaping issues,
- and outdated features throughout the home.

The family could easily have spent enormous amounts of money remodeling everything before putting the home on the market.

Instead, we slowed down and separated the work into categories.

What MUST be done?

There was mold caused by water intrusion near the elevator area.

There were rotten stairs creating safety concerns.

There was drainage redirecting rainwater back toward the house.

There was a kitchen leak causing additional deterioration.

Those issues mattered.

What SHOULD be done?

We cleaned extensively.

We cleared clutter.

We improved landscaping.

We repaired visible wood damage.

We cleaned patios, garages, and outdoor areas.

We focused on helping buyers feel more comfortable walking through the property.

What COULD be done?

The home had older flooring and outdated blue bathroom fixtures.

Could those things have been replaced?

Yes.

Did they need to be?

No.

What Should NOT Be Done?

We did not remodel the bathrooms.



We did not replace all the flooring.

We did not try to make the house look brand new.

That would have created enormous expense, delay, and stress without significantly improving the outcome of the sale.



WHEN PREPARATION BECOMES A WAY TO DELAY

Sometimes the issue is not really the house.

Sometimes the issue is letting go.

I once worked with a woman I'll call Sofie.

Sofie knew she needed to sell her home, but emotionally she was not ready to leave the lifestyle connected to it.

On the surface, it looked like she was carefully preparing the home.

She kept:

- cleaning,
- organizing,
- adjusting,
- and perfecting little things.

But underneath all that activity was something deeper.

Every new project became one more reason to delay putting the home on the market.

This happens more often than people realize.

Sometimes preparation is helpful.



But sometimes preparation becomes a way to avoid the emotional reality of the sale.

At some point, the question becomes:

“Are we preparing the home for sale... or are we using preparation to avoid the sale?”

WHY A CALM GUIDE MATTERS

A strong listing process does not begin with paperwork.

It begins with understanding the situation.

Before a home is listed, someone needs to understand:

- the property,
- the people involved,
- the legal authority,
- the disclosures,
- the emotional concerns,
- the financial realities,
- and the decisions that may need to happen before the property goes on the market.

That is why I do not believe every listing appointment should be rushed into signatures.

Sometimes the first meeting is about:

- walking through the home,
- listening carefully,
- asking questions,
- discussing timing,
- identifying concerns,
- and helping the family understand what needs to happen next.

That first conversation often reveals the real order of decisions.

And in complicated family situations, the order matters.

THERE IS MORE HAPPENING BENEATH THE SURFACE OF A HOME SALE

Most people assume selling a loved one's home is mainly about repairs, cleaning, pricing, and paperwork.



But long before the home reaches the market, deeper forces are already shaping how easy, delayed, stressful, or complicated the sale may become.

These forces often include the condition of the home, financial realities, legal authority, family cooperation, and the pressure surrounding the situation.

Understanding those forces helps explain why the order of decisions matters so much.

Then later, near the end, add your full numbered link section:

FINAL THOUGHTS

Selling a loved one's home is not just about preparing a property for sale.

It is about navigating:

- responsibility,
- grief,
- timing,
- legal realities,
- financial pressure,
- family dynamics,
- and difficult decisions that affect everyone involved.

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is making wise decisions that:

- protect the sale,
- reduce unnecessary stress,
- avoid costly mistakes,
- and help the family move forward with clarity and confidence.

Sometimes the smartest decision is to repair.

Sometimes the smartest decision is to simplify.

Sometimes the smartest decision is to stop spending money and move forward.

And very often, the order of those decisions matters more than families realize.



CONTINUE READING: THE WHAT TO FIX OR LEAVE ALONE SERIES

Part 1: What to Fix or Leave Alone Before Selling a Loved One's Home: Mistakes Most Families Don't Know About

Why families often lose time, money, and momentum when they begin making decisions before understanding what is truly shaping the sale.

Part 2: What to Fix or Leave Alone: How to Decide What Actually Matters Before Selling a Loved One's Home

Learn the four repair categories:

- what must be done,
- what should be done,
- what could be done,
- and what should not be done.

Part 3: What to Fix or Leave Alone: What MUST Be Done Before Selling a Loved One's Home

The repairs and preparation issues that truly matter before listing, including safety, active damage, access, visibility, and buyer confidence.

Part 4: What to Fix or Leave Alone: What Should NOT Be Fixed Before Selling a Loved One's Home

Why some upgrades create unnecessary delay, stress, and expense without significantly improving the outcome of the sale.

Part 5: What to Fix or Leave Alone: Why the Order of Decisions Matters More Than Most Families Realize

Why legal authority, family cooperation, disclosures, finances, and buyer psychology often need to be understood before repairs, pricing, or listing decisions begin.

FOUNDATIONAL READING

Secret #1: The Five Conditions That Shape the Sale of a Loved One's Home

Understand the deeper factors that influence whether a home sale becomes smoother, delayed, emotionally exhausting, or financially complicated before the property ever reaches the market.



ABOUT DR. DEENA STACER

Dr. Deena Stacer helps families sell homes during major life transitions, including the death of a loved one, downsizing, divorce, and emotionally difficult family situations.

Her work combines practical real estate guidance with deep understanding of:

- family conflict,
- grief,
- decision-making pressure,
- buyer psychology,
- disclosures,
- and the emotional realities surrounding a home sale.

If you are preparing to sell a loved one's home in San Diego County, especially during a major life transition involving death, trust administration, downsizing, or family conflict, you do not have to figure out every decision alone.

CONNECT WITH ME

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This Doctor Makes *House* Calls!

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