

## COMPANION WORKBOOK

# The Stair Safety Workbook

A working guide for adult children and family caregivers deciding how to make a parent's stairs safer — and how to do it without taking away their independence.

You are probably here because something small worried you. A tighter grip on the railing. A pause before the first step. A near-miss nobody wanted to talk about afterward.

Stairs are one of the leading causes of falls for older adults, and a fall on the stairs can change someone's independence in a single afternoon. The good news is that most of what works is not expensive and not dramatic. It is a second handrail. It is better light. It is grip on every step.

This workbook is not a list of tips to read once. It is a place to write down what you actually see, decide what you can actually do, and plan how to bring it up with someone who may not want the help.

### TWO DOCUMENTS, TWO JOBS

Use this workbook alongside the companion Stair Safety Checklist. The checklist tells you what to do. This workbook helps you decide what fits your parent, your house, your budget, and your family.

## What is inside

| Part                          | What you will work through                                    |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. What is actually happening | Observing the stairs and the person on them, without guessing |
| 2. Where the risk is          | Personal risk factors and a hazard audit of each staircase    |
| 3. Choosing what to change    | Quick fixes, real upgrades, and long-term solutions compared  |
| 4. Scenario practice          | Eight realistic situations, with room to think them through   |
| 5. The conversation           | Planning what to say when the answer is "I'm fine"            |
| 6. Money                      | Budgeting, funding sources, and comparing contractor quotes   |
| 7. Bringing in a professional | Who does what, and what to ask them                           |
| 8. Your action plan           | Right now, this month, looking ahead — with names and dates   |
| 9. Resources and next steps   | Where to look for help, and when to re-check                  |

## PART 1 — WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING ON THE STAIRS

Before you change anything, watch. Most families act on a general worry (“the stairs scare me”) instead of a specific one (“she leads with the same foot and the bottom step is a half-inch shorter”). The specific version is the one you can fix.

### Staircase inventory

Fill in one row for every set of steps in the home — including the two steps out to the garage and the front stoop.

| Where the steps are | How many steps | Rails: one side / both / none | Used how often? |
|---------------------|----------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
|                     |                |                               |                 |
|                     |                |                               |                 |
|                     |                |                               |                 |
|                     |                |                               |                 |
|                     |                |                               |                 |

### Watch one full trip up and one full trip down

Do not coach, do not steady them, do not announce what you are doing. You want an ordinary trip, not a careful one.

**What did their hands do? (Which rail, how hard a grip, did they reach for the wall?)**

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**What did their feet do? (One step at a time, leading with the same foot, shuffling, hesitating?)**

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**Where did they pause — and for how long?**

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**Were they carrying anything? What, and how often does that happen?**

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**What did their breathing and balance look like at the top?**

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## The moment that worried you

There is usually one image you keep coming back to. Write it down in detail. It matters for two reasons: it tells you which hazard to fix first, and it is the honest thing to say when you finally have the conversation.

| What I saw, and when |
|----------------------|
|                      |
|                      |
|                      |
|                      |
|                      |

## What has already changed?

Check anything that is true now but was not true a year ago.

- ☐ Uses the stairs less often than before
- ☐ Avoids one floor of the house entirely
- ☐ Has had a fall, a slip, or a near-miss — on the stairs or anywhere
- ☐ Has new vision changes, cataracts, or trouble in dim light
- ☐ Has new arthritis, joint pain, weakness, or neuropathy
- ☐ Started a new medication that causes dizziness or drowsiness
- ☐ Has become noticeably more anxious about falling
- ☐ Has stopped doing something they enjoyed because of the stairs
- ☐ Was recently in the hospital or in rehab
- ☐ Now uses a cane, walker, or other mobility aid

## When the fear becomes its own hazard

### **MRS. J**

One of my clients, Mrs. J, had always taken the stairs easily. After one fall she became so anxious that she stopped using the second floor entirely, and felt trapped in her own home. The fall took her balance for an afternoon. The fear took a floor of her house for a year.

Fear of falling is a real, treatable problem, not just nerves. It also makes falls more likely: a frightened person moves stiffly, looks down instead of ahead, and stops the walking and activity that keeps their legs strong. This is why the emotional side of stair safety is not a soft extra — it is part of the safety plan.

And it cuts the other way too. Someone who trusts the stairs again will use the whole house again. That is usually the real goal, not the hardware.

**Has your loved one changed what they do because of the stairs? What have they given up?**

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**What would they need in order to feel confident on those stairs again — in their words, not yours?**

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**Who could help with the fear itself? (A doctor, an occupational therapist, a balance or strength program, a friend who would walk it with them.)**

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## PART 2 — WHERE THE RISK ACTUALLY IS

Risk on a staircase comes from two directions at once: what has changed in the person, and what was always wrong with the stairs. Fixing one without looking at the other is how families end up spending money on the wrong thing.

### A. The person

| What changes with age                          | Is this a factor here? | What it means on stairs                                           |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Muscle strength in the legs and hips           |                        | Going up gets hard; the last few steps are where people give out  |
| Balance and reaction time                      |                        | A small stumble is no longer recoverable                          |
| Vision, depth perception, and dim-light vision |                        | The edge of each step becomes hard to find, especially going down |
| Arthritis in hands, knees, or hips             |                        | Gripping the rail hurts; bending the knee fully is harder         |
| Medication side effects                        |                        | Dizziness on standing, drowsiness, slower reactions               |
| Fear of falling                                |                        | Stiff, cautious movement that actually raises fall risk           |

## B. The staircase itself

Score one staircase per copy of this page. Anything marked “poor” belongs in your Right Now list.

Which staircase am I scoring? \_\_\_\_\_

| Hazard area     | What good looks like                                  | Good | OK | Poor |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------|------|----|------|
| Handrails       | Sturdy rails on both sides, full length, easy to grip |      |    |      |
| Traction        | Non-slip surface on every single step                 |      |    |      |
| Lighting        | Bright, no shadows, switches at both ends             |      |    |      |
| Step edges      | High contrast, easy to see where each step ends       |      |    |      |
| Step uniformity | Every step the same height and depth                  |      |    |      |
| Landings        | Clear, level, room to turn without rushing            |      |    |      |
| Clutter         | Nothing stored, dropped, or waiting on the steps      |      |    |      |
| Floor covering  | Secure carpet or runner; no loose rugs at either end  |      |    |      |
| Outdoor steps   | Traction, drainage, visibility in rain and dark       |      |    |      |

**Looking at the rows marked poor: which single one would you fix first, and why that one?**

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## PART 3 — CHOOSING WHAT TO CHANGE

Work in three waves. The first wave is cheap, fast, and prevents the most falls. Do not skip it while you research the expensive things.

### Wave 1: Right now

Pick the three that matter most in this house, and put a name and a date next to each one. A task with no name on it does not happen.

| What needs doing | Who will do it | By when | Rough cost |
|------------------|----------------|---------|------------|
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |

### Wave 2: This month

| What needs doing | Who will do it | By when | Rough cost |
|------------------|----------------|---------|------------|
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |
|                  |                |         |            |

#### IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE

If you can only do two things this week, make them a second handrail and non-slip treads on every step. Together they address the two failures that cause most stair falls: nothing to catch yourself on, and nothing to stop your foot sliding.

## Wave 3: The long-term options, compared

These are the decisions families put off, and then have to make in a hurry after a hospital discharge. Working through this page early is worth more than getting it perfect.

| Option           | Best suited for                                               | Things families underestimate                                                              | Fit here? Notes |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Stairlift        | Serious mobility limits; person can transfer to a seat safely | Curved staircases cost far more than straight ones; you still need a plan for the landings |                 |
| Home elevator    | Long staircases, wheelchair users, multi-floor homes          | Space taken from rooms, ongoing service needs, resale considerations                       |                 |
| Threshold ramp   | One or two steps, especially outdoors                         | Needs a run long enough to be gentle; surface must not get slick when wet                  |                 |
| Permanent ramp   | Entry steps that will not work long-term                      | Permits, slope requirements, and how it looks from the street                              |                 |
| One-level living | Stairs are no longer realistic at all                         | Whether there is a full bathroom downstairs; where laundry lives                           |                 |

### Stairlift or stair climber?

These get confused constantly. A **stairlift** is a motorized chair permanently attached to the staircase; the person uses it themselves, which supports independence. A **stair climber** is a portable device, usually operated by a caregiver, used to move someone up or down — better for short-term or assisted situations.

**Which one fits, and why? (Consider: can they safely sit and stand from a chair? Will someone always be there to help?)**

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## Special situations

### If they rent, or live in an apartment

Many stair safety updates go in without damaging anything: non-slip treads, removable or battery lighting, and tension-mounted handrails. Ask the landlord or building management first, and stay with changes that are temporary or reversible.

**What reversible changes are possible here, and who do you need permission from?**

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### If it is only one or two steps

One step is enough to cause a serious fall, and the single step is the one everyone stops seeing. Outdoor steps get worse in rain, ice, and early darkness.

**List every single-step or two-step spot in and around the home, and what each one needs.**

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### If there are both mobility and vision problems

Layer the fixes. Combine tactile safety — rubber treads, textured runners, a rail that feels different at the top and bottom — with visual aids like high-contrast step edges and motion-sensor lighting. If the stairs are still risky with both in place, a stairlift or elevator is usually the safer answer.

**Which tactile cues and which visual cues will you add?**

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## PART 4 — SCENARIO PRACTICE

These are the situations that actually derail stair safety plans. Work through them before you are in them. There is no answer key — the point is to have thought about it once already.

### SCENARIO 1 — “I’VE LIVED HERE FORTY YEARS. I’M FINE.”

#### THE SITUATION

You bring up adding a second handrail. Your mother says she has managed these stairs since before you were born, that the house will look like a hospital, and that you are treating her like she is helpless. She changes the subject.

**What is she actually protecting? Write what you think the real fear is.**

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**What is the smallest change she might say yes to today?**

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**Write the exact sentence you would open with next time.**

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## SCENARIO 2 — THE FLOOR SHE STOPPED USING

### THE SITUATION

After a minor fall six months ago, your father stopped going upstairs. His bedroom is up there. He now sleeps in the recliner and says he prefers it. Nothing about the staircase has been changed.

**What has he lost besides the second floor? List everything you can think of.**

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**Which fixes would rebuild confidence, and which would just make the stairs safer on paper?**

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**Who could help with the fear itself — not just the stairs?**

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## SCENARIO 3 — THE BASEMENT LAUNDRY

### THE SITUATION

The washer and dryer are in the basement, down a narrow flight with a single rail, no landing light, and painted concrete steps. Your mother carries the laundry basket down twice a week with both arms full.

**List every separate hazard in that trip — there are at least five.**

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**What would you fix first, and what would you change about the routine itself?**

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**If the basement trip could be eliminated entirely, how?**

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## SCENARIO 4 — YOUR SISTER THINKS YOU ARE OVERREACTING

### THE SITUATION

You want to spend money on a stairlift. Your brother says Dad is fine and it is a waste. Your sister says she would rather put the money toward moving him somewhere with no stairs at all. Dad has not been asked what he wants.

**What does each person in this family actually want? Write one line for each.**

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**What information would settle the disagreement — and who can provide it?**

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**How and when will you bring your father into the decision?**

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## SCENARIO 5 — DISCHARGED HOME ON FRIDAY

### THE SITUATION

Your mother is coming home from the hospital in three days after a hip fracture. She cannot manage stairs at all right now, and her bedroom and only full bathroom are upstairs.

**What has to be true by Friday? List the non-negotiables.**

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**What is the temporary plan for the first two weeks, and who is doing what?**

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**Which of these temporary fixes should become permanent?**

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## SCENARIO 6 — THE TWO STEPS TO THE GARAGE

### THE SITUATION

There are two steps from the kitchen down into the garage. No rail, no light beyond the ceiling bulb, and the top step is a half-inch taller than the bottom one. Everyone in the family uses these steps daily and nobody has ever mentioned them.

**Why do familiar steps get more dangerous, not less, over time?**

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**What would you do about these two steps this week?**

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**Where else in the home has a hazard become invisible from habit?**

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## SCENARIO 7 — THE MONEY IS NOT THERE

### THE SITUATION

The stairs need real work — rails on both sides, better lighting, and eventually a stairlift. There is no savings for it, and your parent will not accept money from you.

**What can be done for under \$100 that would help most?**

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**Which funding sources will you look into first, and who is making those calls?**

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**If your parent refuses to accept help paying, how would you frame it differently?**

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## SCENARIO 8 — THE CHANGE THAT GOT UNDONE

### THE SITUATION

Three months ago you added a rail, cleared the steps, and put in a motion light. Today there is a laundry basket on the third step, the light's batteries are dead, and the rail has come loose at one bracket.

**Why did each of those three things drift back? Be specific.**

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**What routine or reminder would have caught it sooner?**

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**Whose job is the re-check, and when is the next one?**

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## PART 5 — THE CONVERSATION

Making changes at home brings up strong feelings, especially for older adults who are afraid of losing control. That is not stubbornness. Every modification is a visible reminder of something being lost, and the person living with it did not ask for the reminder.

The goal is not just safety. It is dignity. Start with empathy, involve them in the decision, and offer real choices.

### What they may be hearing

| When you say                                | They may hear                                 | Try instead                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "Those stairs aren't safe for you anymore." | You have decided I can't manage my own house. | "I want you to stay in this home safely. I'm not trying to take away your freedom — I want to protect it." |
| "We need to put in a stairlift."            | This is happening whether I agree or not.     | "Would you rather look at a stairlift, or start with the rail and lighting and see how that goes?"         |
| "You almost fell last week."                | You are keeping score of my failures.         | "That moment on the stairs scared me. Can we talk about it?"                                               |
| "I've already ordered the treads."          | My opinion was not needed.                    | "There are a few kinds. Which of these would you actually want on your stairs?"                            |

## Plan the conversation

What is the one change you most want agreement on right now?

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What does your parent value most about this house and their routine in it? Name it out loud when you talk.

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What are two real choices you can offer them — where they pick, not you?

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What will you say if the answer is no? (Hint: not a counter-argument.)

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Who else should be in the room, and who definitely should not?

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When and where will you have this conversation?

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### A NOTE FOR YOU

*If you are the caregiver: this is hard, and doing it well takes more out of you than doing it fast. You are not failing because it took three conversations instead of one. Your effort matters more than you know.*

## After the conversation

Fill this in the same day, while you still remember the tone.

Date of conversation: \_\_\_\_\_

### What they agreed to

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### What they refused, and the reason they gave

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### What I would say differently next time

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When I will revisit the refused items: \_\_\_\_\_

## PART 6 — PAYING FOR IT

Cost is the reason most stair modifications get postponed, and postponement is expensive in its own way. Work out the real number first — it is often smaller than the one in your head.

### What you expect to spend

| Item                                         | Estimated cost | Actual cost | Paid by |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|---------|
| Non-slip treads or anti-slip tape            |                |             |         |
| Second handrail (parts + installation)       |                |             |         |
| Lighting (motion sensor, LED strip, sconces) |                |             |         |
| Step-edge contrast tape or paint             |                |             |         |
| Grab bars at landings                        |                |             |         |
| Carpet runner or rubber treads               |                |             |         |
| Correcting uneven steps                      |                |             |         |
| Threshold or permanent ramp                  |                |             |         |
| Stairlift or elevator                        |                |             |         |
| Home safety assessment                       |                |             |         |
|                                              |                |             |         |
| Total                                        |                |             |         |

### Funding sources to check

Ask your local Area Agency on Aging or county housing office what exists in your area — programs vary a great deal by state and county.

| Source                            | Who I contacted | Date | What they said |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|------|----------------|
| Local housing assistance programs |                 |      |                |



| Source                                             | Who I contacted | Date | What they said |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------|----------------|
| Grants for accessibility improvements              |                 |      |                |
| Low-interest home modification loans               |                 |      |                |
| Veterans' benefits (service-connected need)        |                 |      |                |
| Nonprofits helping low-income seniors with repairs |                 |      |                |
| Area Agency on Aging                               |                 |      |                |
| County or city housing office                      |                 |      |                |

## PART 7 — BRINGING IN A PROFESSIONAL

If you are not sure what this staircase needs, someone can walk through the home and point out hazards you have stopped seeing. That is worth doing before you spend money, not after.

| Who                                                 | What they are good at                                                      | Best time to call them                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS)          | Assessing the whole home and planning modifications that work together     | Before you commit to any large change             |
| Occupational therapist trained in senior mobility   | Assessing how the person actually moves, and what would restore confidence | After a fall, a hospital stay, or a new diagnosis |
| Home modification contractor specializing in stairs | Building it correctly — rails, step corrections, ramps, lift installs      | Once you know what you want done                  |

### Questions to ask before you hire anyone

- ☐ What is your experience specifically with stairs and older adults?
- ☐ Are you licensed and insured, and can I see proof?
- ☐ Will you give me a written, itemized estimate?
- ☐ What exactly is included, and what would be extra?
- ☐ How long will the work take, and will the stairs be unusable during it?
- ☐ Do you handle permits if any are needed?
- ☐ What is the warranty on parts and on labor?
- ☐ Can you give me two references from jobs like this one?
- ☐ Do you work with any assistance programs or offer payment plans?
- ☐ What would you do if this were your own parent's house?

## Quote comparison

Get at least two written estimates before committing to anything large. Prices for the same stair work vary more than most families expect.

| Company / name | Phone | Quote | Timeline | Impression |
|----------------|-------|-------|----------|------------|
|                |       |       |          |            |
|                |       |       |          |            |
|                |       |       |          |            |
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**Who did you choose, and what decided it?**

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**What did you agree on in writing — scope, price, timeline, warranty?**

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**What still worries you about this job, and how will you check it when the work is finished?**

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## PART 8 — YOUR STAIR SAFETY ACTION PLAN

Pull it all together. Every line gets a name and a date, or it stays an intention.

### Right now

| Action                                              | Owner | Target date | Done |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------|-------------|------|
| Install non-slip treads on every step               |       |             |      |
| Add reflective tape or contrast paint to step edges |       |             |      |
| Improve lighting, including a switch at both ends   |       |             |      |
| Clear all clutter from steps and landings           |       |             |      |
|                                                     |       |             |      |

### This month

| Action                            | Owner | Target date | Done |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------------|------|
| Add a second handrail             |       |             |      |
| Book a home safety evaluation     |       |             |      |
| Check step heights and uniformity |       |             |      |
| Add grab bars or adaptive tools   |       |             |      |
|                                   |       |             |      |

## Looking ahead

| Action                                 | Owner | Target date | Done |
|----------------------------------------|-------|-------------|------|
| Explore stairlifts or ramps            |       |             |      |
| Consider one-level living options      |       |             |      |
| Research financial assistance programs |       |             |      |
|                                        |       |             |      |

## Know your triggers

Decide now what would tell you it is time to move to the next wave. Writing it down in advance saves you from making the call in a crisis, or from arguing about it with a sibling later.

**What would tell us the quick fixes are not enough anymore?**

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**What would tell us it is time to seriously price a stairlift or elevator?**

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**What would tell us the stairs are no longer realistic at all?**

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## Re-check schedule

Stairs do not stay safe on their own. Treads wear, bulbs die, clutter creeps back, and abilities change. Set the dates now, and re-walk the checklist after any fall or hospital stay even if a review is not due.

☐

In 3 months

☐

In 6 months

☐

In 1 year

☐

After any fall

☐

After a hospital stay

Next re-check date, and who is doing it: \_\_\_\_\_

Each review takes ten minutes and catches the things that quietly undo good work — the dead motion-light battery, the basket that reappeared on the third step, the bracket that worked loose.

### Three-month review

Date reviewed / by whom: \_\_\_\_\_

**What is working, and what has drifted back**

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### Six-month review

Date reviewed / by whom: \_\_\_\_\_

**What is working, and what has drifted back**

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## PART 9 — RESOURCES AND NEXT STEPS

Programs and providers vary enormously by state and county, so the useful move is knowing what kind of help exists and who to ask for it locally.

### Where to look

| What you need                                           | Who to ask                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A whole-home assessment and modification plan           | A Certified Aging-in-Place Specialist (CAPS)                                          |
| An assessment of how your parent actually moves         | An occupational therapist trained in senior mobility; ask their doctor for a referral |
| Local programs, funding, and what exists in your county | Your local Area Agency on Aging                                                       |
| Housing assistance and home repair programs             | Your county or city housing office                                                    |
| Help for a low-income homeowner with repairs            | Nonprofit home repair organizations serving your area                                 |
| Benefits tied to service-connected need                 | Veterans' benefits offices or a VA social worker                                      |
| The work itself                                         | A home modification contractor who specializes in stair safety                        |



# Your contact log

Keep every call in one place. When a program says “call back in sixty days,” this page is what saves you from starting over.

| Organization or person | Phone / email | Date | Next step |
|------------------------|---------------|------|-----------|
|                        |               |      |           |
|                        |               |      |           |
|                        |               |      |           |
|                        |               |      |           |
|                        |               |      |           |
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|                        |               |      |           |
|                        |               |      |           |

What is still unanswered, and who is going to chase it?

## Before you close this workbook

You are not just making a house safer. You are giving someone the chance to stay independent, comfortable, and confident in the home they know.

Answer these three, and then go do the first one.

**The one thing I will do in the next seven days:**

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**The one conversation I have been putting off:**

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**The one thing I need help with — and who I will ask:**

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*If no one has told you this today: you are doing a good job. Every step you take to protect someone's safety is a step toward peace of mind — theirs and yours.*

## Notes

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*This workbook is a companion to the article [Still Climbing: How to Modify Stairs for Elderly Loved Ones Without Sacrificing Their Independence](#) at SeniorSafetyAdvice.com, and to the companion **Stair Safety Checklist**. It is educational and is not a substitute for advice from a licensed professional.*