

*Stephen's Healthy Housing Column****Dealing with Construction Emergencies****- Stephen Collette, BBEC, LEED AP*

Stephen Collette is a Certified Building Biology Environmental Consultant (BBEC). This lengthy certification analyses the built environment and how it impacts people's health. Stephen was a natural builder for 5 years specializing in straw bale construction. Stephen has an engineering background and training which enables him to understand the various processes occurring within the home and how they can interact. Applying these skills and knowledge to the standard home and small office enables Your Healthy House to find the reasons for poor indoor air quality and to create solutions to help create your healthy house.

Stephen Collette is a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design - Accredited Professional (LEED AP), which allows Stephen to use the Canada Green Building Council's guidelines and method to ensure a quantitative approach to building green.

We all make mistakes. Heaps of them. I've made enough mistakes to fill a book of stories, like the time I was running new phone cable through the house and ordered 25 feet of cable, only to realize that I actually needed about 28 feet. Mistakes can be made by all of us and for the most part with little consequence besides another trip to the hardware store. Making mistakes when working on homes happens all the time too, from short wire to dropping paint on a finished floor to any number of other things.

Making mistakes on a job when someone in the house has MCS is a whole different ball of wax however, and that's what I'd like to talk about.

### **Preparing for the Worst**

With all the work to hire contractors, sub-contractors and organize the work to be carried out in a renovation it's easy to over look some detail, such as the wood filler used to cover up the nail holes in the trim for example. Tiny little things that the contractor may not even give a second thought to, could send you into a tailspin. Something even more obscure could set you off and set you back, so you need to have a battle plan ready.

Isolating yourself from the work is the best solution. You may be planning on staying in the house during the renovation, but to prepare, have a

safe bag full of everything you need for a few days always at the front door or in the car. When someone with MCS is impacted by chemicals, trying to plan an escape, pack, consider all the details of where, etc, is too much. Have a note ready for the contractor with the contact information of where you are going to be staying, with friend, in the car, etc. This is obviously the worst case scenario, but if you are not prepared for it, when it hits you will be more impacted because of the time spent wandering around your house thinking of what you need to do and collect. Every minute in a house you are reacting to is a minute too long and may mean days of recovery. Getting out quickly is the priority and sorting out how to fix the problem is secondary. Please remember this.

Since the contractor has gone through all the checks and balances to begin working on your house, they should have a plan of action ready in case something causes you to react. This would be something like a full containment of the offending material, depressurizing the space with a large fan in the room, exhausting out, maybe your filter running, or whatever. This emergency plan is something that you both have discussed prior to the work starting and it's maybe even in writing. You may not be functional enough to have this conversation during the event, so don't. They have the emergency plan and carry it out while you carry yourself out of the house.

So you still may be staying inside the house for all the numerous reasons that don't allow you to stay anywhere else safely. You need an emergency plan for this as well. This means maybe one room in the house where you can bunker down with another layer of containment. Somewhere that has it's own filtration in it, and is as far away from the issue as possible. Remember that forced air systems move air, so that the other area should have already been sealed off from the ductwork but if not, it is during this situation. Make sure you have some food and water in the containment for at least the rest of the day, so that you can keep out of the other area (separated by your containment and it's containment). Come out to use the bathroom with your respirator on, and then right back in. Do not spend time to see how bad it is now, especially if the workers have gone home for the night. Because nothing can be done now, don't bother trying. It could overload you and if things are better in the morning you may be too sensitive from the prior exposure to not react.

Remember, they have worked hard to set things up for you safely, and you have to trust them. Mistakes happen. You too make mistakes, and going in for a sniff would fall under that category as well. Let them tell you where things are at and when they've dealt with the issue and made things better. When you are feeling strong/healthy enough, then and only then, consider checking again.

Your contractor will also understand that you may be out of commission for a few days, and if you are still in the house, this may mean a postponement of work. Do the best you can during these times, but ideally they come back and keep working the sooner the better, as they hopefully make things better for you.

### **Taking Matters Into Your Own Hands**

The frustration of MCS is overwhelming at times to everyone who lives with it. The desire to just get the job done yourself quickly to get it done is tangible. This is when we make mistakes. We all

make mistakes when we work this way. Once, I almost cut my

thumb completely off because I wanted to just finish this job and then I'd take a longer break. We all make mistakes in judgment. Maybe you've heard of a product that seems like it should hopefully work, or you are confident if you just take that old shelving unit out of the basement, things will be better right away. Unless you have the back up emergency plan in place and the proper safety precautions laid out, you'll possibly be in serious trouble if something goes wrong. I'm not even talking about the whole hospital trip by yourself, while impacted, and then that whole environment. That's another article. I'm talking about wandering around your home, feeling the effects of the MCS and trying to deal with the issue you created.

People with MCS have to analyze everything to the nth degree to stay safe and well. Mistakes happen, both on your part and on the part of others. By analyzing the safest way to execute an emergency plan during those times, you will ensure your health and safety during the unlikely event that something goes wrong. This will allow you and the workers to keep their heads, move quickly and effectively, and get things back on track in the shortest amount of time. Plan for the best, but prepare for the worst and potentially large events will hopefully turn into small bumps.

*Stephen Collette is a Building Biology Environmental Consultant and LEED accredited professional, who owns Your Healthy House, and is living with his family in Lakefield, Ontario. [www.yourhealthyhouse.ca](http://www.yourhealthyhouse.ca) 705-652-5159 [stephen@yourhealthyhouse.ca](mailto:stephen@yourhealthyhouse.ca)*

