

Smart home for people who do not care about smart homes

Who this is for: families, support coordinators, and self-managers

Reading time: about 5 minutes

In one line: three smart home things earn their keep for older people and people with disability. Most of the rest is hobby equipment.

Smart home technology is marketed almost entirely at enthusiasts. People who enjoy apps, like configuring things, and find it fun when the lights respond to their phone. If that is you, wonderful, enjoy yourself.

This guide is for everyone else. Specifically, it is for people supporting an older relative or a person with disability who could not care less about smart homes, but who cares a great deal about staying safe, independent, and in their own home. For that purpose, the smart home industry has produced exactly three categories of thing that reliably earn their keep, plus a long tail of complexity you should politely ignore.

The three things that actually help

1. Lights that turn themselves on.

Falls are the thing that ends independent living, and a disproportionate number happen on the way to the bathroom at night, in the dark, in a hurry. A motion-activated light in the hallway and bathroom removes the dark from that equation entirely. No switch to find, no phone, no remembering. The person gets up, the light comes on, dimly enough not to jolt anyone awake.

This is the single highest-value smart home intervention there is. It costs little, it requires zero learning from the person, and it works every night without being asked. If you do only one thing from this guide, do this.

Voice-controlled lights in the living areas are the natural companion, especially for anyone with mobility or dexterity limits. "Turn on the lamp" beats crossing a dark room. But the motion lights come first.

2. A doorbell you can answer from the couch.

A smart doorbell shows you who is at the door before you open it, on a tablet or by asking the smart speaker. For an older person, this solves two problems at once. The safety problem: no more opening the door to find out who it is. And the mobility problem: no more racing the knocker to the door, which is its own falls risk.

For families, many doorbells also offer an optional extra: the ability to see that Mum had a visitor, or that the meals delivery actually arrived. Used openly and with consent, that is reassurance. Used quietly, it is surveillance, so have the conversation first.

3. A voice assistant doing exactly three jobs.

A smart speaker trying to do everything is overwhelming. A smart speaker doing three jobs is brilliant. The three jobs we set up most:

- **Reminders.** Medication, appointments, putting the bins out. The speaker never forgets and never nags with a tone.
- **Calls.** "Call Sarah" is the simplest phone interface ever invented. No screen, no contacts list, no buttons.
- **Answers.** The time, the weather, the day of the week, the cricket score. Questions the person may not want to keep asking the people around them.

Radio and music make a fine fourth, and for many people they are the gateway that makes the speaker feel friendly rather than foreign.

The complexity trap

Here is how smart home projects fail in the homes we visit. Someone enthusiastic installs a system with genuine love: hubs, sensors, automation rules, an app for everything. It works impressively on day one. Then the enthusiast goes home.

Now the person is living inside someone else's hobby. The wifi hiccups and the lights stop responding. An app needs an update and asks questions nobody can answer. A routine fires at the wrong time and nobody knows why. Every glitch requires the enthusiast to come back, and slowly the household routes around the technology until the smartest thing in the house is the kettle.

The rule that prevents all of this: **every device must fail safely and work manually.** The light switch on the wall must still work. The door must still open with a key. The phone must still make calls. Smart features should layer on top of a normal home, never replace it. If a wifi outage can leave a person unable to turn their lights on, the system was designed for a demo, not a life.

And the corollary: **add one thing at a time**. Get the motion lights working for a fortnight before the doorbell arrives. Let each piece become boring and reliable before the next appears. Boring and reliable is the entire goal.

What to ignore (for now)

Smart locks, smart blinds, robot vacuums that need rescuing, security ecosystems with subscriptions, energy dashboards, smart fridges, and anything described as a "platform". None of these are bad products. They are simply solving problems further down the list than safety, light, and connection, and each one adds another thing that can break, beep, or demand an update. The list above is where the value lives. Start there, and let genuine need, not a catalogue, justify anything further.

Getting it funded

For NDIS participants, smart home setup and training can often be funded where it links to plan goals around independence and safety at home. For older Australians, the Support at Home program includes a dedicated Assistive Technology and Home Modifications pathway, and support services that build independence. Privately, none of the equipment above is expensive by the standards of what it prevents.

The short version

Motion lights for safety. A doorbell for the front door. A voice assistant doing three jobs. Everything failing safely, added one piece at a time, with the wall switches still working. That is the whole playbook, and it changes daily life more than any showroom full of gadgets.

Gray Matter Solutions designs and installs exactly this kind of modest, reliable setup, then trains the person and the family until it sticks. We sell nothing and take no commissions, so nothing extra ever gets recommended for our benefit.

Wondering what would actually help in one specific home? Ask us. Email phil@graymatter.team or visit graymatter.team.

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