

**- Lighting**

## Nine ways to make a dark home brighter

Homed Manawatu Standard · 16 Nov 2023 · 2 · JENNIFER BARGER

Unless you're trying to sleep or cure a migraine, chances are you'd rather be in a sun-filled room.



Natural light often makes us feel better; it makes spaces look prettier (when's the last time you heard a real estate agent brag about a listing's darkness?); and it can make everyday tasks such as cooking and reading safer and easier.

"Good lighting at home is also important for your mental health," says Erin Speck, an assistant professor of design at George Washington University. "You don't need to light it well enough to land a 747, but humans desire light so we can see everything and understand what the space and the shapes are telling us.

To let in more sunshine - or at least fake it convincingly - here's what experts recommend. If your home already lacks natural light, the last thing you'll want to do is unnecessarily block whatever windows you do have.

Keep treatments minimal - or skip them entirely if privacy isn't an issue. "I'd do Roman shades, not draperies, which can make spaces look heavier and block the sun," says Washington DC designer Tracy Morris. Sheer roller shades or filmy curtains are also good choices.

Dirt and grime can block a significant amount of light coming through your windows (many pros claim by up to 40%). You can wash them with clean water, a few drops of dishwashing liquid and a few drops of rubbing alcohol (to prevent streaks). Then wipe down the outside of the windows with a wet rag.

Follow that up by dipping a microfiber cloth into clean water, then wringing it out. Then clean the glass with the cloth and wipe the windows dry with a squeegee. Repeat on the other side of the glass.

For interior rooms or townhouses that share walls with neighbors, skylights and solar tubes both offer a route for sunlight to come in from above. Skylights, however, tend to be quite expensive to install (renovation listing service Angi estimates the average cost to be \$1,856) and they only work on the top floor of any building.

"More often, we use solar tubes, especially to bring light to a bathroom - it makes it seem like you're up on a roof deck," says Morris. The tubes tend to be cheaper and smaller than skylights. They consist of a clear dome on your roof; a long, reflective tube; and a round, interior lens that goes in your ceiling. Tubes come in sizes up to about 7m long, meaning they can sometimes be used in lower levels of two-storey buildings.

"In the lighting world, we talk a lot about using layers," says Joseph Rey-Barreau, a professor of lighting design at the University of Kentucky and a spokesperson for the American Lighting Association.

"Many people think one central light fixture is all you need in a room, and that's simply not enough."

Instead, to cast and bounce light around at different levels, aim for three types of lighting in most rooms: Ambient or general (such as a chandelier, overhead recessed lights or a central pendant); accent (a wall sconce or a floor lamp that projects light upward); and task (targeted recessed lights in a kitchen or a desk lamp).

The idea behind multiple types of lighting in one space is to fill all levels and corners of the room, giving a nuanced, all-over glow (as opposed to the overly bright, downward-cast task lighting you'd find in an office or hospital operating room).

"My first line of attack in a light-challenged room is portables, AKA things you can plug in," says Rey-Barreau.

Whether it's a single bulb or a crystal chandelier, a central light fixture works a bit like a spot-light - it's great at brightening the centre of a room or what's directly underneath it.

But to make a whole space sparkle, you'll want to bathe the walls in light. "It's the number one rule in retail lighting," says Rey-Barreau. "You light the walls, since your eyes look across the horizon first."

You can do this with recessed ceiling lights that are positioned a few inches from the wall, or with sconces mounted on the wall itself. "Sconces cast light both up and down, and bring so much warmth," says Morris.

Another wall-lighting trick that can be easy and inexpensive: Add LED strip lighting to the bottoms of your upper kitchen cabinets. "And there are even floating shelves sold now that have integrated lighting" and work the same way, says Kelly Emerson, an interior designer with Maryland-based Aidan Design.

Saturated paint colors - moody blues, deep greens - can bring a cozy, clubby vibe to a den or bedroom. But to make a room appear sunnier, go for paler, shinier paint, particularly on the ceiling.

"You can make amazing changes just by changing your paint's reflectivity," says Rey-Barreau. "That means both lighter, brighter colours and more reflective paint finishes."

Choose a pale colour (white, butter yellow) instead of a dark one and look for the Light Reflective Value (LRV) of whatever colour you choose. The LRV refers to the percentage of light a paint colour reflects; you can usually find it on the back of paint chips. If you want to bounce more light around a space, look for a paint color with an LRV of 50% or higher.

By now, many homeowners have replaced old, no-longer-made incandescent lightbulbs with LED or CFL ones. This means that, instead of the watts system, the quality of light emitted by these new bulbs is measured in Kelvins. In general, for too-dark rooms, "look for bulbs that are 5000 Kelvins, which mimic daylight and give a whiter light," says Speck. "It can make a room feel bigger and brighter."

Enlarging your existing windows or punching out new ones gets very expensive. A less pricey option might be to replace a solid exterior door or two with a model that has glass panels within it, suggests Speck.

Mirrors and other reflective surfaces (such as brass trays and Lucite tables) not only make small spaces feel larger, they will also help bounce around your interior lighting and whatever sunlight you do have coming into your dark room.

"You can hang a wall mirror opposite a window or put an accent light on a metal chest of drawers," says Morris. "It will double or even triple the illumination."