

Senior Advice: Tough times call for a personal budget audit

by *Doug_Mayberry*

Q: Like most seniors, we are trying to adjust to a recent stream of increases in the cost of basic necessities. Our cereal packages are larger, but the actual contents are less. Gasoline is moving up by pennies, and we are paying more for utilities because of newly tiered pricing based on usage. Are there simple ways to ease our pain?

A: Yes, there are ways. Start by cutting the fat from your current budget. Sharpen a pencil and write down your expenditures on a piece of paper to see if your income and spending match. If not, it's time to rebalance your budget.

Here are some suggestions:

Stick to your grocery list and ignore the goodies. Clip coupons only for necessities, not for impulse buying.

Ask about discounts. Most retailers are AARP members, have warehouse club cards, or have an auto club affiliation that includes discounts.

When shopping for an item, do so with a set price in mind. Do not exceed that price. If you need or want a single item selling for \$10 or less, ask yourself if it is worth the cost in time or gasoline to shop for it.

If you are not using all of your cable television channels, consider switching to basic cable for less. Free or low-rent movies and books are available at your library. If you really want to go to the movie theater, remember that matinees are cheaper.

Cell phone pricing is fiercely competitive. Buying prepackaged minutes could be less expensive, depending on your usage.

Discuss with your doctor the possibility of switching your prescriptions to generic drugs rather than name brands. Revisit your insurance policies, extended warranties, and bank and ATM fees.

Mortgage interest rates are continuing downward. Look into renegotiating your home loan to reduce your payments. Would renting out a room make sense?

An "estate sale" could help eliminate responsibilities you no longer need while at the same time putting a little padding in your pocketbook.

Always think about options. Focus on positives and do not wallow in gloom, doom and pain. Don't bog yourself down by remembering the good old days.

Shifting to a survival mode can be difficult. But having been there before, seniors at least know how it's done.

Q: My husband is not a worrier. But I am. With more frequent unanticipated weather, airline emergencies causing layovers, business closures, and other changes, I want to be prepared should we become involved in an unanticipated event or emergency. Obviously, we are partially prepared, but are you aware of other items we might have failed to consider?

A: There are many prepackaged emergency kits available on the market today for both homes and automobiles, but they can be expensive. It is less expensive to prepare one yourself. Ask your husband to help you prepare an emergency so he can learn the routine while also easing your mind.

I recommend you purchase two or three canvas tool bags, which are easily portable and can make items easier to find in a hurry.

The unknown is where you will be should a fire, storm, accident or earthquake occur. Keep your primary kits at home and readily available for a quick exit.

Remember to include food bars, lightweight rain ponchos, waterproof matches, duct tape, a folding port-a-potty, a 1-gallon bucket, a solar-, crank- or battery-operated radio, a pry bar, a whistle, shovel, work gloves, self-defense products, knives, water-purifying pellets, can and bottles openers, and a solar blanket.

Set dates about six months apart that you are unlikely to forget — like New Year's Day and the Fourth of July — to check the contents of your emergency kit. Replace expired canned goods, old batteries, packaged food, and check to see if water has evaporated.

We should all prepare for the likelihood of emergencies, and then keep our fingers crossed that we will not need them!

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