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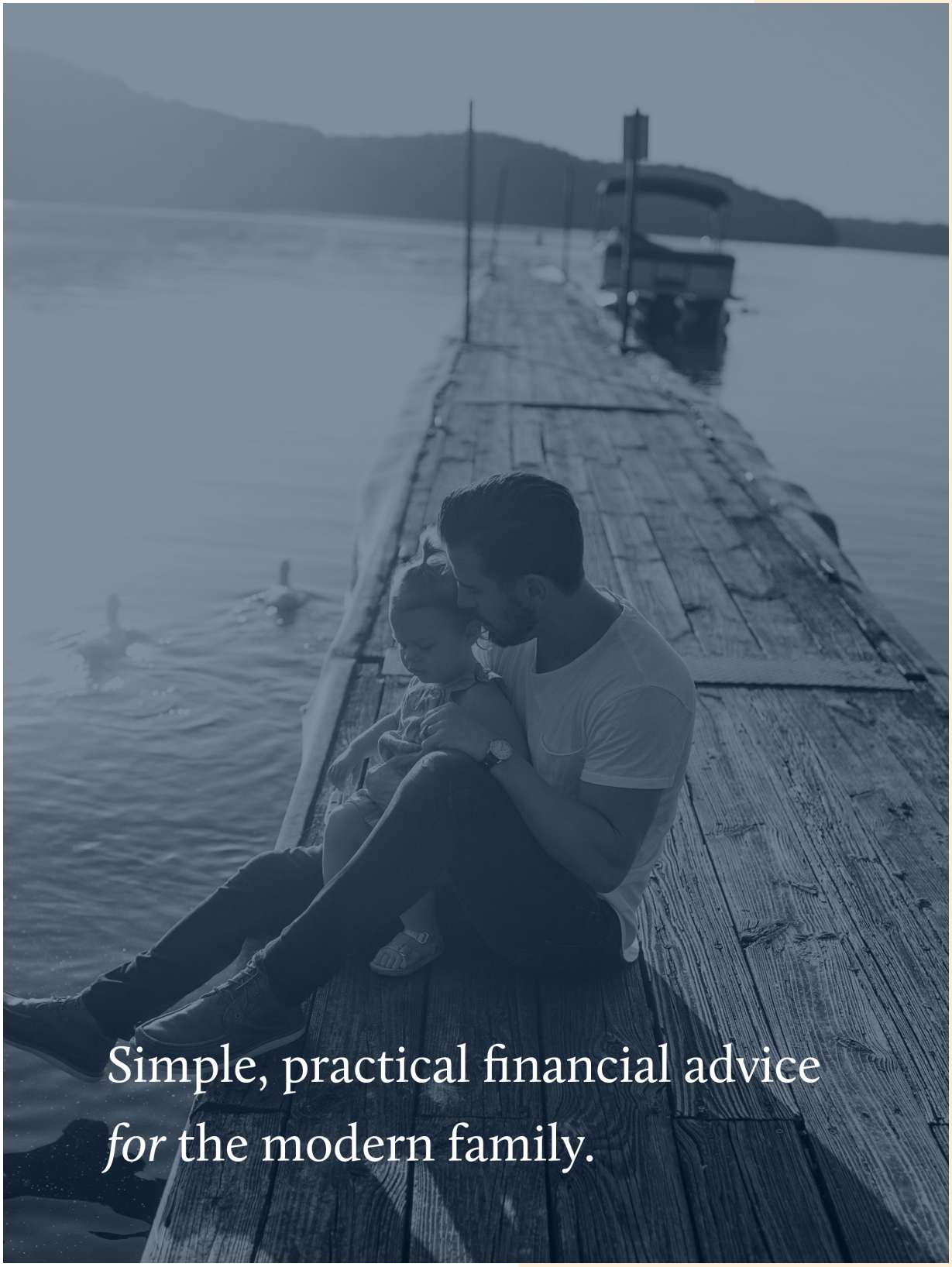
SIMPLEMoney



Simple, practical financial advice *for* the modern family.

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Life's a Circus

—By Larry Sayler

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus operated Clown College from 1969 to 1997. I attended in fall 1978 in Venice, Florida, home of Ringling's winter quarters. Clown College was a one-semester, tuition-free, rigorous training program in clowning.

After completing General Electric's two-year financial management program, I wanted to do something different. I applied to both the Wharton MBA program and Clown College. To my surprise, I was accepted by both. The decision was easy. I turned down Wharton to go to Clown College.

During the day, we had classes in pantomime, juggling, stilt walking, unicycling, slaps and falls, makeup, costuming, building props, developing routines and even elephant riding. We spent evenings watching comedy films, sewing our costumes, making props and practicing skits.

In the 1970s, Ringling employed 60 clowns in its two traveling shows. Since the average career of a Ringling clown was two years, they needed 30 new clowns each year. Clown College had 60 students. Upon graduation, half were offered contracts to join the show. If offered a contract, we were obligated to accept.

Life in the circus was rigorous. The show was three hours long and usually moved to a new city each week. There were two shows a day, Tuesday through Friday. Saturday and Sunday had three shows each day. On Sunday night, the show was torn down and

packed on the train. Monday was a travel day and Tuesday a new cycle began.

I was not offered a contract, so in January 1979 I started at Wharton. Truth be told, I didn't try hard to get a contract. I had been dating a young woman and was worried what it would mean for our relationship if I traveled across the U.S. for a year. By not joining the circus, I could continue the relationship. Happily, we were married within a year.

Clown College teaches nothing that helps with asset allocation or retirement withdrawal rates. But it did illustrate five important financial lessons.

1. We can be happy without many possessions.

Ringling shows traveled by train. One car was the clown car. It had a small communal kitchen and common toilets. A clown's room was three feet wide and six feet long. Two seats faced each other with a small table between them. At night, the table dropped down and turned into a bed. Above the window was a shelf that was 18 inches wide and six feet long. All your worldly possessions had to be stored on that shelf. It worked well and people were happy.

Today, I have a large home filled with a lifetime's accumulation of stuff. I would like to downsize but I struggle to get rid of things. I have to remind myself that my possessions are not the source of

my happiness. I would *not* be happy today living in a three-by-six-foot room, but I could be happy with far fewer possessions.

2. Supply and demand matter.

In the late 1970s, clowns were paid pitifully little, about $150 per week. Show girls were paid twice that. Even show girls admitted that clowns' work was more demanding. Why the discrepancy in pay?

For clowns, Ringling is the pinnacle. Clowns aspire to work with Ringling. We were told that Clown College had 3,000 applicants each year. There were 60 of us vying for just 30 spots. But no show girl aspires to work for Ringling. A show girl wants to work on Broadway or in Las Vegas. Show girls have to be paid better to get them to join.

We need to remember supply and demand. It explains a lot of what we see around us.

3. Be prepared.

One of my favorite quotes is, "I am a great believer in luck, and I find that the harder I work, the more I have of it."

Why was I one of the lucky few to be accepted into Clown College? I have no idea. But I believe at least some of it was because I had already taught myself juggling and stilt walking. I was prepared.

Others who showed up at the audition seemed to be there because they had seen the ad and had nothing better to do that day.

We can't expect our investments to do well if we know nothing about investing. We don't need a doctorate in finance, but we can't expect the best results unless we know something about investments and financial markets.

4. Unions are not always effective.

Clowns and other circus performers used to be represented by AGVA, the American Guild of Variety Artists. When I was in high school, I attended the circus when it was in town. I talked to some of the clowns after the show and they invited me backstage. That day, many of the clowns were complaining about the union. They hated to pay union dues and believed they received absolutely no benefit from the union. By the time I attended Clown College, clowns were no longer unionized. If unions want to represent employees, employees have to be convinced of the value of unions.

5. Sometimes, it makes sense to quit while you're ahead.

Karl Wallenda was the patriarch of the Flying Wallendas. The Wallendas walked the tightrope and never used a safety net. Karl died at age 73, while walking a wire stretched between two

buildings. The wire slipped because of improper rigging and he fell to his death.

I attended a talk by Tino Wallenda, Karl's grandson and an accomplished wire walker in his own right. During the question-and-answer session, someone asked Tino what lessons he had learned from his grandfather's accident. Tino thought for a moment, then smiled and said, "Quit wire walking before you reach 73."

This lesson applies to both our financial portfolio and our career. Sometimes, things don't turn out well when we continue to invest aggressively after having enough. Sometimes, we continue to work when our faculties have diminished.

I always encouraged my college students to lead lives of reflection. If I can find financial lessons or life lessons in something as outlandish as Clown College, we can all find lessons in our own experiences.

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Larry Sayler is the only person with a Wharton MBA who also graduated from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey's Clown College. Earlier in his career, he served as CFO for three manufacturing and service organizations. For 16 years before his

retirement, Larry taught accounting at a small Christian college in the Midwest. You can find more of his writing at HumbleDollar.

The Most Cringeworthy Financial Advice On The Internet

—By Thomas Kopelman

Whether it's videos on TikTok of 14 year olds sharing how you can make 100% daily returns in crypto or blog posts telling you to never use your 401(k) because it's a scam, it is safe to say the internet is full of terrible financial advice. Here are the 8 most cringeworthy pieces of advice I have seen that I hope none of you have listened to.

1. Buy as much house as you can get approved for since houses always go up in price

Your primary residence is typically not that great of an investment. In the long run, it's definitely better than renting, but it is not this amazing investment with large returns (even though in the last few years some people have seen great returns, that is not the normal). Sure, your house may have grown from $300,000 to $600,000 over the past 30 years, but that does not mean you doubled your investment. You have realtor fees, cost of the mortgage, insurance, property taxes, yearly maintenance, etc. When you factor all of those costs in, your return ends up being relatively low. The only reason there is much of a return is because of the leverage you take on when buying a house.

Now that you know it's not typically that great of an investment, let's also chat about why you should never try and get 'the most house you can afford.' The mortgage companies want you to take on as much debt as possible so they can make more money off of you. Grabbing the largest mortgage will end up resulting in a

monthly payment well above 40% of your income which is not in your best interest. It's hard to enjoy your life when so much of your income goes straight to your house. A good rule of thumb is to try and keep your housing expenses below 35% of your income when you can.

2. Always carry a balance on your credit card since it helps your credit score

I've seen more people do this than I can count, and they always tell me that their parents or a friend encouraged them to keep a balance on their card. This is terrible advice. Your credit score does not go up because you hold a balance. The balance that gets reported to the credit agencies is the statement balance, not what is left over after you pay your bill. Use your credit card, but pay it off every month. Holding a balance is a terrible idea that will most likely end up hurting your credit score quite a bit.

3. Higher risk means higher returns, so you should invest in the riskiest investments

This quote gets thrown around all the time and taken out of context. Sure, small companies should have higher expected returns than larger companies as they are newer and have more room for growth. But people use this quote as a reason to YOLO into some brand new cryptocurrency that is worth $.000001. Just because something is riskier does not mean you will get higher

returns. In reality, many of these investments go to 0 which is why people expect higher returns since so many fail in the long run.

4. You are better off investing your own money in a taxable account than inside your 401(k), since you can't touch it until you are 59.5

Your 401(K) is a great tool for retirement. It has both ROTH and traditional options so you can manage taxes in a way that is best for your situation. It has tax deferred growth. And, in most cases, it comes with a match. For example, if you earn $100,000 and your 401(k) has a 6% match, you would receive $6,000 per year from your employer as long as you contribute. That's $500 a month in free money you wouldn't get if you didn't do your 401(k). Use this tool! Do not leave free money on the table.

Additionally, if you ever needed the money you could get it out by taking a 10% penalty and paying taxes on it. You also could take a loan against your 401(k) as well. This is definitely not recommended, but it is an option.

5. Everyone should have permanent life insurance

I can't tell you how many times I've heard insurance salesmen say this. Any blanket advice that everyone should have something is always a red flag, but this is one of the worst. Permanent life

insurance has its benefits and can be useful for a small segment of people, but it is definitely not for everyone.

If you are young and healthy and have no insurance need, do not let yourself get sold on getting permanent life insurance. You have no need for it now. And if you do have a life insurance need, the best option for most people is to get term life insurance as it is a cheaper way to get the proper amount you need.

6. Invest your emergency fund, you don't want to lose the value of it over time

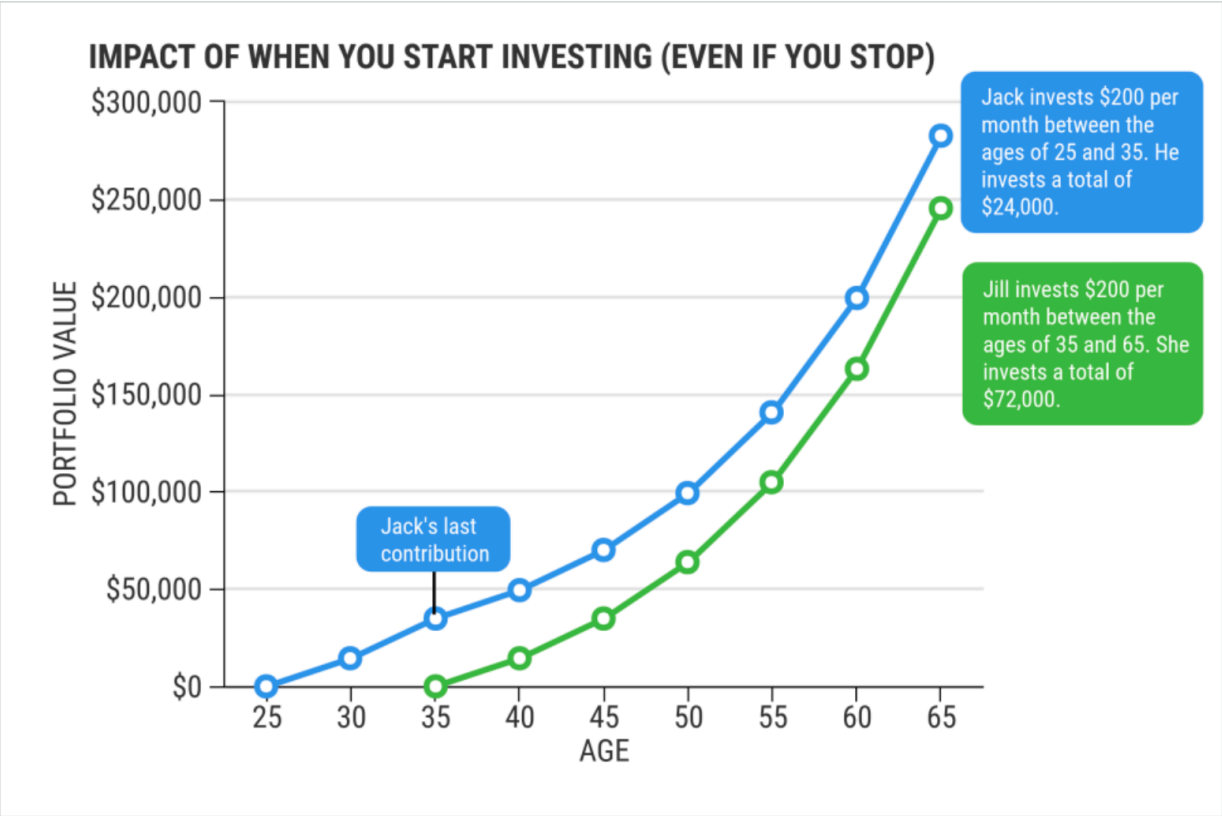
I am all for investing, but I don't think you should be investing your emergency fund. The goal of your emergency fund is safety, not purchasing power. It's to be there for you when you lose your job or when your car engine goes out on your way home from work. Because of the quick nature of these events, you want these funds readily available and stable when that time comes. If you invest it and the market drops 30% for any reason, you will be very unhappy to have to sell at a loss and potentially not have enough to protect yourself.

Hold your emergency fund in a high yield savings account so it is there when you need it. You cannot put a price on safety! And you can always contribute some per year to keep up with purchasing power.

7. Pay off all your debt before you start investing

I will say that I think this advice is well intentioned, but it is not good advice. Let's think of a medical school graduate who just now is starting their first real job at 32 and they have $300,000 of student loans. If they chose to pay off this debt entirely before they invest, they probably wouldn't start investing until they are are almost 40. Starting at 40 puts you really, really far behind (due to compound interest and how it works). Plus with interest rates being low, attacking the debt before investing may not make sense.

A better goal is to find a balance and start paying off debt and investing at the same time. Look at the difference in how much you need to save by starting later. I hope this helps reinforce why you should start right away!



8. Don't make more money because then you will have to pay more in taxes

This one is laughable since this is not even how taxes work. If you make more money, not all of your money gets taxed at a higher bracket. Taxes are marginal. Just those additional dollars that fall into the next bracket will get taxed at a higher rate!

Hope none of you have been negatively impacted by following any of these bad pieces of advice.

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Thomas Kopelman is a financial planner and CoFounder of AllStreet Wealth, a financial planning firm for people in their late 20's to early 40's. He also is a blogger, podcaster, content creator, and a top 23 millennial financial planner by Business Insider. Read more from Thomas at The Long Game.

When & How to Teach Your Kids About Money

—By Dr. Mary Bell Carlson

Many parents ask, “when and how do I start to teach my kids about money”? With the lingering COVID-19 pandemic, higher interest rates, and rising inflation costs, money seems to be the center of conversations today. As a parent and financial behavior expert, my advice is don’t shield your kids from these conversations but instead use these moments as teaching opportunities. I’ve outlined three easy steps to talking with your kids about money: 1) start early, 2) talk often, and 3) use technology.

Start Early

It’s never too early to start talking about money. Even when your kids are toddlers, you can teach them the basics of wants and needs. You can also talk about how money is used to purchase the things they use and like (i.e., groceries, clothes, toys, etc.). The earlier you start talking about money, the more fluid and open the more difficult money conversations can be as time goes on.

But where do I start? **Start simple.** Start with a piggy bank and coins. You can choose a fancy option such as the piggy banks that offer various slots to include savings, investing, spending, giving, etc., or you can make it simple and create a piggy bank with things you have around the house, like a simple jar with a lid and a slit on top. For young children, even small amounts of money can be fun for little kids to learn with. As they grow older, you can make more of a family economy.

Start small – especially when your kids are little. Yes, a dime won't buy that much anymore, but it can be a simple (and inexpensive way) to teach them. They don't care about the amount, but they love the actual coin. You can start with small rewards. If you have young kids, a small reward, such as a prize from the dollar store, can be a fun and engaging experience. My young kids love earning their money and then carrying it in their little purses to buy "presents" at the dollar store. I also let them count out the coins and give them to the cashier (even though those behind us in line may not love it). It gives the child ownership of the experience and item.

Talk Often

Now more than ever, **kids are exposed to money through various channels like social media and videos.** Some schools are starting to teach kids about money, but one study shows that **many kids still fear their financial futures.** There is a lot of uncertainty, especially given the last decade and a half – we've gone through a massive worldwide recession, and housing crisis followed by a pandemic and are currently experiencing the highest inflation we've seen in 50 years. These last 15 years are really the only measure of monetary value that our kids have had during their short lifetimes, and therefore given the economic circumstances, it's understandable why kids are fearful about the future.

This is why it's even more important to start talking about money than ever before. Even if you haven't talked with your older kids about money, now is the time to start the conversation. It is never too **late to set up older kids for financial success.** Recent research concludes that when parents talk about money and how to use it properly, it has a significant positive impact on the financial literacy, financial behavior, and financial well-being of the child. Talk about how you learned about money; teach about the lessons you've learned over your lifetime. Discuss what's on your kid's mind when it comes to money, and talk about concepts they are interested in.

Use Technology

The third step is to use technology to your advantage. Many parents worry that they haven't saved money for their children's future. The key behind saving for your kids – no matter their age – is small amounts, over time, invested correctly. Even small amounts of money saved into a 529 Plan or Roth IRA for kids can really add up over time and be a good nest egg for kids as they set off on their own. The best way to do this is to make it automatic. Set up a weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly automatic transfer - even in small amounts - to move into your kids' accounts. That way saving for their future is automated and doesn't require extra time or effort from you.

Another great way to use technology to your advantage is by teaching in a way they are already using through technology. A great virtual and kid-friendly banking option is through Qube Money's family accounts. This digital cash envelope system allows kids to get their own debit card, set up their own qubes (or digital cash envelopes), and independently spend within the parameters set by the parent. You can share the family budget as well so they can run a quick errand for you without having to trade cards or give cash. It's a great way to include your children in your family's economy. [Try Qube Family Account for 8 weeks free by using the Code: Simple].

By starting early, talking often, and using technology, you'll find that talking about money doesn't have to be difficult. The best time to start is now. Make sure your kids have a solid foundation of financial principles before they have to learn it on their own the hard way. Even though your discussions may be hard or awkward at first, keep going; you are your child's best teacher.

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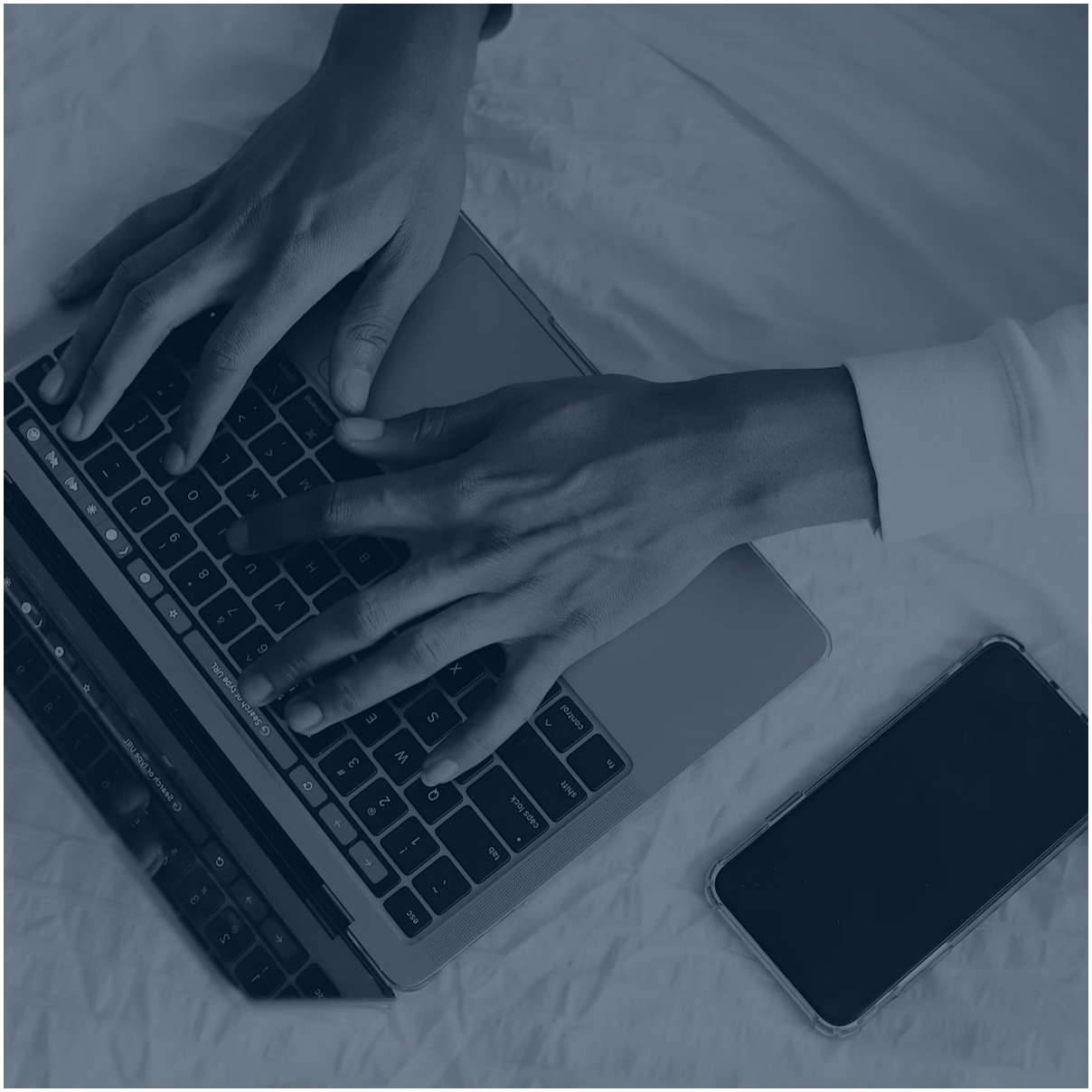
Dr. Mary Bell Carlson, CFP®, AFC® is a financial behavior expert and a well-known speaker and author. Mary has worked in both the military and government sectors for over a decade. Mary founded Chief Financial Mom.com, a personal finance education blog to help other busy moms; she also owns Carlson Consulting, a firm dedicated to helping other leaders improve their business

efficiency and relationships. Mary is the co-host of the Real Money, Real Experts podcast and an adjunct faculty member for the financial planning programs at the University of Georgia and Texas Tech University. She lives in Virginia with her husband and her three daughters.

Making Work From Home Permanent

—By FIRECracker



Before the pandemic, hustling was seen as a badge of honour. People went to cubical farms, put in long hours, swore, and got stuck in traffic during their commutes, rushed through family dinners, woke groggily to a 6am alarm, only to repeat the entire cycle again.

But then the pandemic happened, putting the pause button on everybody's crazy hectic lives. Working from home was suddenly mainstream, not just for weirdo digital nomad types. Employees finally had more autonomy and time to themselves without their dreaded commute.

Priorities shifted, and employees started picking their family, health, or free time over a big pay-check, so much so, that 4 million employees quit their jobs in the last 6 months in what the financial media has dubbed as "The Great Resignation".

Now, with businesses re-opening and employees being asked to go back to the office, being forced back into traffic jams just so you can sit in a cubicle prison sounds about as fun as sliding down a banister made up of razor blades butt-naked.

Unless you are financially independent and no longer need to work, you'll have to suck it up and take it because that's just the unfairness of life, right?

WRONG.

With the US unemployment rate back at pre-pandemic levels and 11.3 million unfilled jobs in the U.S, the challenge is in finding workers to fill positions, not the other way around. That means the pendulum of power has swung away from the employers and towards the employees.

Take advantage! Now's the time to use your negotiation skills to make "work from home" permanent.

Negotiating with your boss is always a tricky endeavour, but having done this successfully myself when I was still working and helping coach many of my friends in doing this with their jobs, I have a few tips and tricks to help make this work for you:

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Never underestimate the power of timing. If unemployment was at an all-time high, like during 2008, pushing your employer to let you work from home permanently would be a bad idea. But, if your boss is freaking out because several of your co-workers just quit, there's an avalanche of work coming down the pipe, and they can't possibly figure out how to meet the deadlines with the skeletal staff that's left, their desperation is your salvation.

In a hot job market, bosses are more afraid of you leaving than you are afraid of them firing you.

Back in the before-times when I was still a corporate drone, I was able to negotiate a raise at my job by picking the perfect time to do it. It was right after my boss had just taken over the team and my colleague had just unexpectedly quit. He was trying to prove that he could handle being a manager and worried about how his employee's resignation would make him look to his superiors, and I knew it. So I scheduled a meeting with him in which I put the subject line as "To discuss my future with the company".

I can still remember the beads of sweat collecting on my boss's forehead and the look of sheer terror in his eyes in that meeting room. The team had dwindled down to half its size after a continuous streak of losing employees to better paid jobs for the past year.

The conversation went something like this:

Him: heavily sighs, muttering under his breath "oh here we go"

Me: "Ok, so I know this is bad time, but I wanted this chance to talk to you about..."

Him: winces heavily, waiting for the hammer to drop

Me: "...my promotion."

Him: Huge sigh of relief "Oh thank GOD! I thought you were quitting!"

We both walked out that day with a big smile on our faces and I had landed a promotion on the spot. And it was all thanks to timing.

PROVE YOU CAN BENEFIT THE COMPANY BY WORKING FROM HOME

One of my favourite laws from the book *The 48 Laws of Power* is: "Appeal to People's Self-Interest, Never to Their Mercy or Gratitude."

In this case, trying to get your boss to let you work from home by telling them how loyal, hardworking, or a team player you are doesn't work. Or trying to get them to feel empathy for you by telling them how stressed or mentally overworked you are won't work either. Never ever used the word "unfair" or other equally emotional appeals.

Appeal to their self-interest instead. Make your bosses' life easier by making them look good in front of their superiors.

One way you can do that is to show how much money you'd save the company by working from home. Instead of having them pay for Wifi, electricity, office space, you'd be taking on the burden by paying for it yourself at home. That results in tens of thousands of dollars in savings for the company.

You can also prove you'd be more productive and increase their revenue by eliminating that wasteful commute, which can now be used for working. Assuage your bosses' fears of you slacking off by giving them weekly updates. Prove that working from home is a no brainer by showing how this situation benefits the company.

LEVERAGE, LEVERAGE, LEVERAGE

When I first started working, I didn't understand office politics so I wasted a lot of time trying to prove I was right and arguing over stupid things that didn't matter.

Then I discovered the book *Secrets to Winning at Office Politics*.

This book opened my eyes to realizing that office politics is not about justice or fairness. It's about playing a game. Acknowledging that office politics are rarely fair and it's not about just putting your head down and working, changed my whole perspective.

The number one lesson I learned in this book is about how to "leverage." Instead of waiting for your boss to see how hard you're working, and then getting irritated that they won't even let you work from home, you use leverage against them by getting multiple job offers and use it to extract concessions.

Sometimes you don't even have to have the offers in hand for this leverage tactic to work. In fact, when I worked as a contractor straight out of university, my boss kept dragging his feet in turning

it into a full-time position. Every time I would bring it up, he would reply with “We’ll discuss this some other time.” After my 3rd request went ignored, I had enough and started taking my fate into my own hands.

I started applying for jobs and I made sure he knew it. I would leave my resume in clear view on my desk, I’d have Monster.com open on my browser when he stopped by. And when I started getting interviews, I would deliberately schedule it during work hours so I could block them off in my public calendar.

Then the interviews started rolling in. A few here and there turned into an avalanche until I was spending more time away from my desk than behind it. All of a sudden, my boss panicked and put together a full-time offer for me. Ironically, by that time it was too late. The jobs I was interviewing for were way better than the one he was offering me, so I leveraged my existing salary to get the new company to entice me by beating my existing salary, and I turned my old boss’ full-time offer down. I now had a better job, less work, and I was making more money. Leverage for the win!

Leverage was also used successfully in publishing and renting as well. I got one of the most sought-after New York literary agents because I had multiple offers from other literary agents to represent me. And during the pandemic I was able to lower my rent by 15% by leveraging other rental offers I had to my landlord.

Leverage is one of the most powerful tools you can use to make your work more flexible.

Even if you don't have a job where you can work from home, you can still use most of the tactics above to challenge your employer and improve your work situation. Start applying for jobs that allow working from home. Start scheduling interviews at your desk so your boss notices. The more signs that you're thinking of leaving for a job that allows working from home you drop, the more you'll scare your boss into giving you what you want.

Or failing that, consider retraining for a career with more flexibility that lets you become location independent. Like this bartender turned coder, or nurse turned developer. The more location independent your job is, the more you can enlarge the gap between your earnings and spending, and the faster you can become financially independent.

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Kristy and Bryce are world-traveling early retirees. They lived in one of the most expensive cities in Canada, but instead of drowning in debt, they rejected home ownership. What resulted was a 7-figure portfolio, which has allowed them to retire in their 30s and travel the world. Their story has been featured in media outlets all over the world, including the New York Times, The Guardian, CBC, Business Insider, Women's Health Magazine

Australia, Germany’s Handelsblatt, and GQ Russia. They now spend time helping people with their finances and realizing their travel dreams on Millennial Revolution, where this article was originally published. Their bestselling book "Quit Like a Millionaire" from Penguin Random House is a step-by-step guide on how to invest safely to retire early and travel the world.

I Match Your Home Haircuts, and I Raise You the Sofa We Found on the Sidewalk

—By Dr. Margaret Curtis

I recently read with interest the Physician on Fire's column on his family's thrifty habits, in which he shows how they live on approximately $80,000 per year by, for example, cutting his wife's hair and buying jeans at Goodwill. Naturally, I took this as a personal challenge. I can't match his spending level—we have spent more on custom hockey helmets than his entire daily budget—but I have a few tricks up my sleeve.

My mother was thrifty her whole life (and an original subscriber to the Tightwad Gazette), and she taught me well. I saw her: leave her first career (teaching), enter a second career (IT, before it was even called IT), save carefully, and establish herself financially so she could retire comfortably. I got the message. I haven't always gotten it right, but thanks to her, I entered adulthood with a careful spender's mindset. So, here are some of the ways our family saves money—and each comes with an added non-monetary bonus.

We Save on Goods and Services

I am no longer allowed to cut my husband's hair (there was an incident, the details aren't important), but I was our kids' barber for years. I also patch their clothes. When they were under the age of 5, they wore almost 100% hand-me-downs, and now we shop for them at outlets. They are teenagers now and are particular about what they wear, but they still bring me anything that needs mending.

Added bonus: keeping our clothes and gear out of the landfill.

Like Physician on Fire, we happily buy used items. I get all my office clothes used. Online consignment stores like Thred Up have every brand and every size of clothing. Rental services would work if fashion is important to you. I just want to look professional, so I don't go that route. If you are worried that the clothing you buy online won't fit or flatter, you can send your purchases back for a full refund and it will still be less hassle than shopping in person.

Added bonus: you won't care when you spill coffee on your $5 shirt.

Our favorite sofa is the one we found for free on the sidewalk. My youngest spotted it in front of the house of a neighbor who we know to be meticulously tidy (former neurosurgeon) so we weren't worried about bedbugs or cigarette smoke.

As we were hot-footing it over to bring the sofa home, a man stopped and asked what we were doing. Apparently, where he comes from, people don't just give away stuff in front of their houses. I was almost too shocked to explain how this local "freecycling" works: clean usable items go on the sidewalk, sometimes with a "free" sign. The front lawn is off limits, but anything on the sidewalk or edge of the road is fair game (be careful where you leave your lawnmower).

Maybe this is just a New England thing but everyone does this where I live, regardless of the neighborhood. We have given away items ranging from ski boots to an upright piano this way. Other things we have gotten for free: a nice rug (spent $100 cleaning it), a free-standing basketball hoop, and a foosball table.

Added bonus: each item comes with a story.

Our dogs' favorite treat is a raw carrot, and their favorite toys are the used tennis balls we get for free from a local court.

Added bonus: the vet says they have great teeth (from all those carrots) and they have never needed dental cleaning under anesthesia (at least $2,000).

We barter. This doesn't really even go under money-saving activities; this is just how communities have always worked. My neighbor fixed the brakes on my bike, and I watched his kids for two hours. Another neighbor is a professional baker and brings us treats, and we shovel her driveway. I couldn't tell you how much money we all save because we don't keep track.

Added bonus: helping your neighbors.

Speaking of helping your neighbors, here's a fun story: we used to live in a small town in Vermont where everyone looked out for each other. The town was hit hard by Hurricane Irene (all the roads washed out) and people were practically racing to pump out each

other's basements. A Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) helicopter landed on the town green to distribute food. No one needed the food, but someone left some zucchini bread on the pilot's seat. In case they needed a snack.

We Save on Activities

We have cheap hobbies. My absolute favorite sport is Nordic skiing, and my favorite place to do it is either the golf course (free) or the snowmobile trails (also free).

Added bonus: finding new, beautiful places.

We garden. We used to grow almost all our own vegetables in the summer. Where we live now, we have room for just a small plot, but it’s enough to keep us in tomatoes and basil all summer. Gardening can be expensive if you buy seedlings and fancy planters. We start most of our plants from seed in empty yogurt containers and grow them in the compost we buy in bulk from our municipal composting service (one free bag per week, or $15 for a cubic yard).

Added bonus: we eat really well.

A few years ago, pre-COVID, we rented a camper van and spent two weeks in Utah and Arizona. We stayed at a few private campgrounds, but our favorite places by far were on National Forest Service lands. The staff at the local Forest Service centers

were incredibly helpful (and less harried than their National Park colleagues) and gave us great advice on off-the-beaten-track places to see and stay. We paid $5 per night to camp in some truly magical places.

Added bonus: amazingly, we had each one entirely to ourselves.

When we are home, we hardly ever go out. With streaming services, we can see the best entertainment the world has to offer from the comfort of our (free) sofa. One hundred years ago, royal courts didn't have this kind of luxury.

Added bonus: the kids know where to find us on a Saturday night. Teenagers need parents who are stable and predictable. Mine frequently tell us we are boring, to which I reply, "You're welcome."

We Save on Home Expenses

We share a bathroom with our kids. We live on the edge of an expensive neighborhood: our house cost about $400,000, and houses a few streets over are $1 million and up. One of the reasons our house was affordable was that it only had one bathroom. I knew we had done well at brainwashing our kids when one of them asked me to explain a phrase he had read in a book: "What does it mean when it says HER bathroom? That doesn't make any sense." We have since added a half-bath, because one

toilet for five people was . . . untenable. My problem now is getting to the shower first in the morning before the teenagers.

Added bonus: my kids are prepared for college life and sharing a bathroom with everyone on their floor.

We paint and do minor repairs ourselves. Our neighbors probably wish we paid someone to do our landscaping. My husband used his spring 2020 work hiatus to build a retaining wall and patio in our backyard.

He also puts in a skating rink every winter. This is not especially frugal when you add up the cost of the boards and his time maintaining it, compared to $5 open skate at the rink down the street. But it keeps my husband happy and out of harm's way.

Added bonus: we know where to find our kids on a Saturday night. They are playing hockey in the backyard.

There you have it: some of our family's best tricks for saving money and keeping ourselves entertained.

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Dr. Margaret Curtis is a pediatrician married to a urologist. She is also a columnist for The White Coat Investor where you can find this article and more on personal finance and investing.

3 Ways I'm Teaching My Toddler About Money

—By Maria of Handful of Thoughts

There is a comment lament in personal finance spaces that financial literacy and “money” are not taught in schools. As a teacher, I can say that that’s untrue, there is financial education curriculum. Yes, there are issues with financial literacy instruction in schools, but that’s a topic for another time.

Why I bring this up is that like most foundational skills (think reading and writing), I believe learning starts at home. So as a money nerd, trained teacher, and mom, it’s time to put my money where my mouth is.

My toddler is now of the age where she can recognize letters and numbers and can spell her own name. So for me, it goes without saying that it’s time to start teaching her about money too. Or at least exposing her to financial concepts in an “age-appropriate” way.

With that in mind, here are 3 ways I’m teaching my toddler about money. Keep in mind that I believe parenting is a series of experiments. These 3 ways I’m teaching my toddler about money are not the be all end all, they are just what I’m currently experimenting with.

If you have a toddler at home feel free to try some of these experiments yourself.

Toddler Money Lesson #1 – Money Jars

I've read a few books and blog posts on teaching your kids about money and the topic of allowances always comes up.

We've decided to start an allowance with our toddler, but not to tie it to chores. For now, our daughter gets a weekly allowance of $3 because she is 3. We will increase this amount as she gets older.

Every Tuesday she gets 3 loonies (Canadian one-dollar coins), one for each of her Money Jars. One jar is for spending, one for saving, and one for sharing. She doesn't quite have a grasp of what this all means yet, but she likes putting loonies into the jars.

And to further give her some ownership of her Money Jars we decorated them together.

One cold morning while her brother was sleeping we got out the craft supplies and decorated 3 canning jars I had in the basement. My dad cut slits in the tops of the jars and they became instant piggy banks.

The jars sit on a shelf in my daughter's room and she is so proud of them. Sometimes she wants to take them down off the shelf "just to look at them."

She has yet to “spend” any of the money in her jars, but each week we have a conversation about money and the jars when she adds more loonies.

Eventually, if we are at a store and she wants something then we can have a conversation around cost and the money in her spend jar.

Toddler Money Lesson #2 – The Cash Register

The second money experiment was my favourite gift that we gave my daughter last Christmas. I found a cash register at our local second-hand store and just “had” to purchase it.

The keys function as a calculator and the drawer makes a little ding sound when it opens. And the best part, the money inside looks very realistic.

It doesn’t look like play money, it looks like the money we keep in our wallets which makes it more real for her. Yes, we keep cash in our wallets from time to time.

I also bought her little price tag stickers so that we could play store. But we have yet to experiment with those. For now, she likes to take out the cash register, give me all the money inside and then type in prices for her toys so that I can purchase them.

She doesn't quite understand the value of money yet, some of her toys end up being ridiculously expensive. But she's learning about transactions and that different bills have different values. We are also practicing the names of the coins and what they are worth.

Because we've made this into a little game, I'm sure she doesn't even realize that she's learning. Gamification is a great teaching and learning strategy at any age, but can be especially effective with toddlers.

Toddler Money Lesson #3 – Role Modeling

And finally, probably one of the most important ways I'm teaching my toddler about money is by role modeling positive financial habits. Money is something that is frequently talked about in our home and our children often hear these conversations.

We want them to see and hear mom and dad interacting with money. We talk about saving and investing and have even started to calculate the net worth of our little ones.

My daughter sits beside me as I deposit rent once a month and she loves working beside mom. She has visited our rental properties with us before. And although she doesn't fully understand things at this age we think it's important to just have her exposed to our financial habits.

When money is not taboo in the household, there are teachable moments that will constantly present themselves. Here are some of the other money teachable moments that have come up:

- Reading books about money
- Taking our little ones grocery shopping with us
- Sorting coins from a piggy bank
- Answering any money questions that come up
- Having conversations about hand me downs and toy sharing
- Talking about why mom and dad have to work

Final Thoughts

I am by no means a perfect parent. And it's very possible that these experiments with teaching my toddler about money do not provide the results that I'm seeking. But that's what parenting is all about, trying and pivoting.

At the toddler age, my daughter doesn't really have a vast understanding of money. But I believe it's important that she's exposed to it. This doesn't mean I'm doing hardcore money lessons with her every day. Right now it's more of an explore through play strategy. I don't want her to ever feel stressed by money.

As our children get older our experiments will pivot and shift. The ultimate end goal is for them to be financially literate, responsible with their money, and to not have to rely on a partner to financially thrive. Only time will tell how well these experiments pan out.

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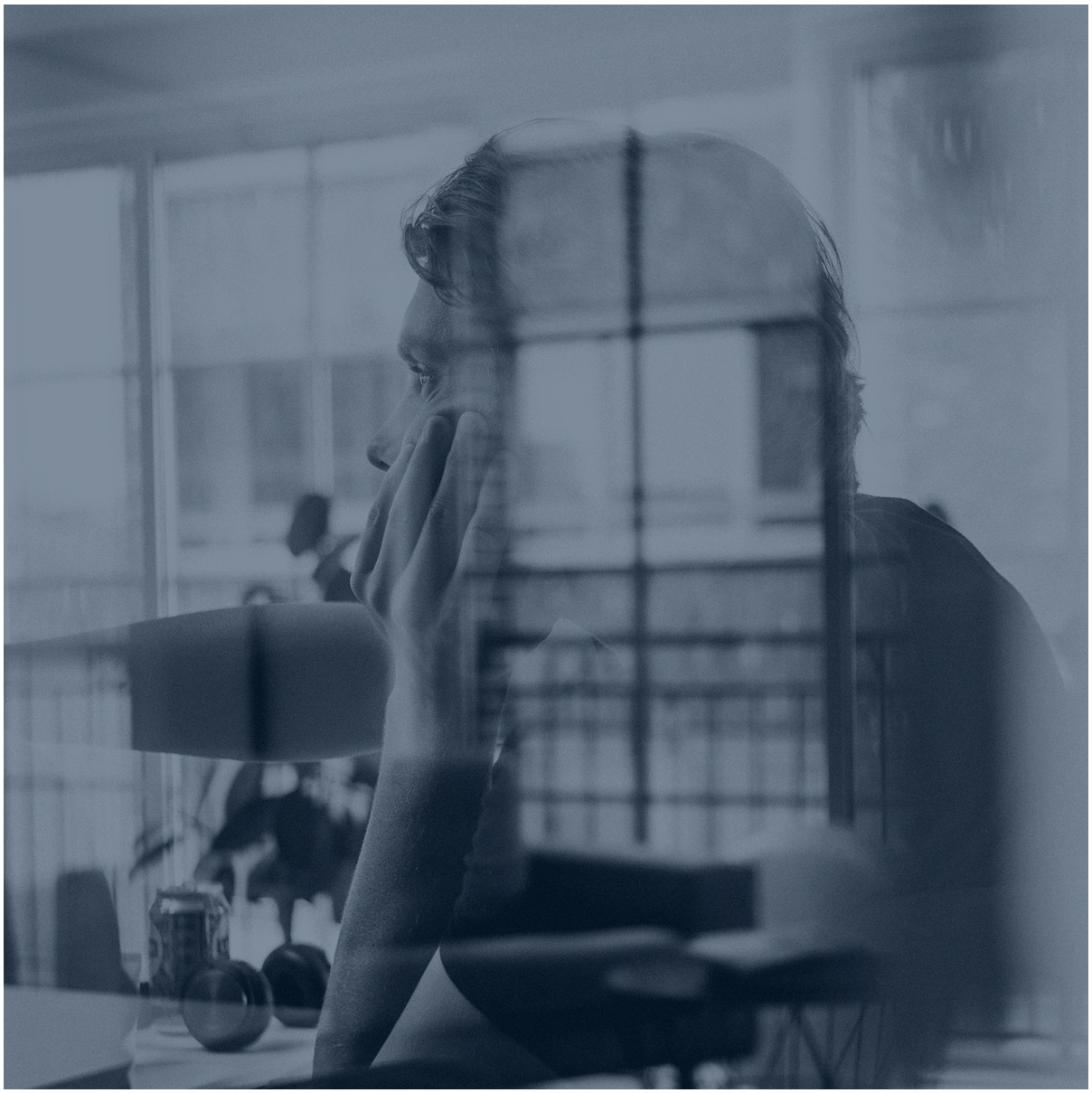
Maria is a millennial momma and teacher who blogs at Handful of Thoughts, where you can find this article and more on personal finance, money, and parenting. Maria and her husband paid off their $342,000 mortgage debt in less than 5 years. She shares her story and journey as a new momma taking control of her finances as a way to inspire others to do the same.

Don’t Worry

—By Karen Trefzger



I've always been a worrier. Perhaps it's part of being an introvert, or maybe it's because as the oldest child, I was never able to follow in anyone's footsteps. I always felt like I was heading into "unknown territory" alone, with no one to rely on or ask questions of. Maybe I was being fanciful, but I wound up feeling that I had to anticipate and figure out everything ahead of time so I wouldn't mess up. It made me pay attention to details and become a problem-solver, but it also made me a nervous perfectionist.

Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom said that worry doesn't solve tomorrow's problems, it simply deprives us of energy for today. A University of Cincinnati study showed that what we worry about happens less than 15% of the time, which means we're letting our positive energy be drained for very little purpose.

When we give up worrying, not only do we remove a great part of the tension that fills our days, but we also preserve our strength for dealing with the issues that actually do arise, making it more likely that we will handle them successfully. In this era of COVID, unrest, inflation, and more, we need all the strength we can muster.

10 Tips to Help Conquer the Habit of Worry

1. Make space.

I give myself plenty of time to get where I need to go and do what I need to do – not by rushing, but by leaving white space on my calendar. Try dropping one commitment and see if your time feels more expansive and your mind less anxious.

2. Reduce decision-making.

I've decided not to get bogged down with quite so many details. I wear a capsule wardrobe. I've established some fixed routines such as waking and sleeping times, weekly meals (Monday meatloaf, Tuesday tacos, etc.), certain days for laundry and cleaning, and the like. This frees my mind to focus on tasks that require more energy and innovation.

3. Reduce clutter.

When my environment feels like a constant to-do list (clean that up, put those away, find a spot for that, sort through the other), it's hard to avoid feeling burdened. It's true that home maintenance is never-ending, but trying to care for a home that is chaotic and over-full is even harder. An uncluttered space is more peaceful, with fewer tasks and a lot less hassle. There's magic in owning less.

4. Look after key relationships.

My husband, children, and grandchildren are my support system. Cherish your partner, your children, parents, grandparents,

siblings, and closest friends. You need them, and they need you. Prioritize those relationships.

5. Watch your diet.

For me, anxiety leads to overeating. For others, it's the opposite. Neither situation is great for your physical well-being. Be sure to eat regularly, and avoid processed foods and large amounts of sugar. Pay attention to your alcohol consumption as well.

6. Sleep.

I need to remember that sleep is not the enemy of productivity; it is not what you do when there's nothing good on TV. It's essential. It repairs your body, improves your memory, and just makes every day better.

7. Don't be a news junkie.

News outlets increase viewership by making every situation a crisis that demands attention. And I've learned that constant scrolling through social media isn't healthy either. I read books – fiction or nonfiction – that let me focus on something else. It's a wonderful release.

8. Add music.

I listen to my favorite music regularly. It's especially rejuvenating when it gets me moving or singing along. And it's even better to make music. Go ahead and play that instrument you haven't touched in so long, just for the fun of it.

9. Enjoy nature.

A growing body of scientific research indicates that time spent in nature relieves anxiety and depression, boosts the immune system, and inspires creativity. In an increasingly mechanized world, we all need doses of nature more than ever.

10. Do something kind for someone else.

Worry is self-centered. It keeps me inside my own head and places my problems front and center. Anything that jogs me out of that insulated mindset is good, so I've made kindness a daily practice. Being helpful and generous gives me a purpose beyond worry.

Bad things do happen, but living each day expecting the worst does nothing except weaken me and make my life a burden. Worry is a habit, and I can replace that bad habit with better ones.

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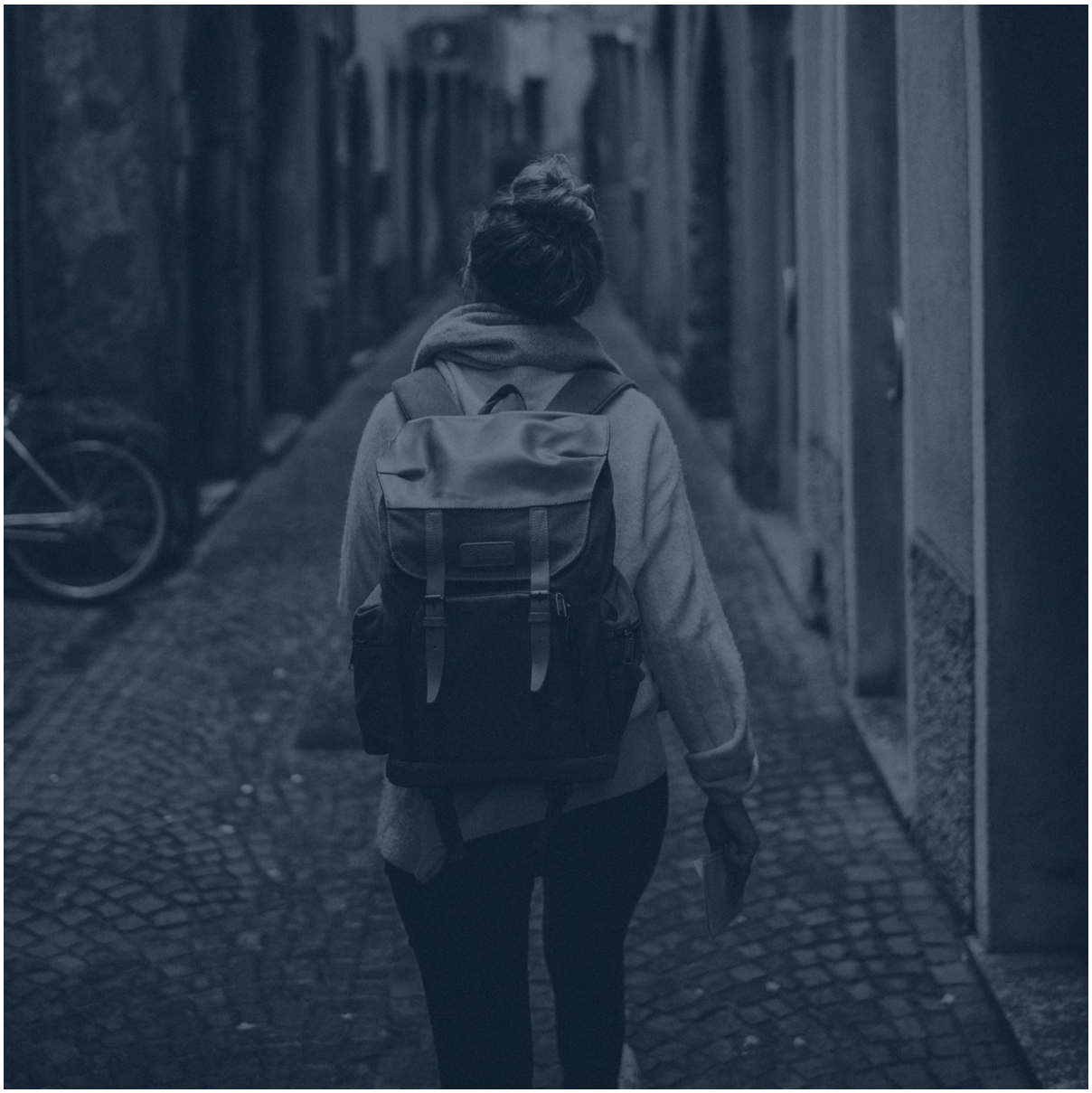
Karen Trefzger is a writer, singer, teacher, wife, mother, and grandmother who has been choosing a simpler life for over 20 years. She is the author of Minimalism A to Z, and blogs at MaximumGratitudeMinimalStuff.

Make Your Obsession With Money Temporary

—By Steven of Trip of a Lifestyle



Expense tracking, budget making, checkbook balancing, bill paying, stock trading — all of this stuff requires an endless input of time and brain power. That's why, for the last eight years or so, Lauren and I haven't done any of those things.

Being good with money requires planning and consideration, but it shouldn't take constant effort. The whole point of financial responsibility is to make your life better. If you're not experiencing that effect, something is wrong.

Imagine going a whole day, week, or month without needing to look at the balance in your bank account. How would that feel? And what would it do for your mental health? You don't have to be a millionaire to experience this, and experiencing it won't preclude you from becoming a millionaire, either.

Right now, if you're lucky enough to have at least a few thousand bucks to your name and a steady income source, it's time to stress less about money.

Zero In, Then Zoom Out

The best financial move you can possibly make is to slash your household expenses and save a huge percentage of your income. To make cuts to spending, you first have to identify where your money is going. That means some sort of expense tracking. But how long are you expected to track your expenses? Forever?

Example: Grocery Mania

Suppose you've identified that food is something you overspend on. So, you decide to obsessively track everything you eat, add up the total price, and calculate your average per-meal cost (including dining out) across a whole month. Let's say it comes out to $5.50 a plate.

Over the next couple of months, you intentionally stop eating out as much and center more of your at-home cooking around healthy, low-cost options (like in-season vegetables, or beans). You also decide to do a little more of your grocery shopping at stores like Walmart, ALDI, and Costco.

Eventually, you discover that you can feed yourself very happily for about $2.75 per meal, reducing your *entire* monthly food bill by 50% — amazing! Zeroing in on your food spending was totally worthwhile.

To keep getting this awesome financial result, you could babysit yourself perpetually, tracking the cost of every meal for the rest of your life, and it would work — but that would be a pretty miserable existence. Luckily though, you don't need to do that at all.

Now that you have a feeling for which meals are cheap, which are expensive, and where to get every ingredient at the best price, you've laid the groundwork for better grocery shopping *habits*.

Your *temporary* budget obsession has taught you to make good choices in the future *automatically* — no tracking necessary.

Think Bigger

Most people who are trying to get their finances in order don't just focus on the grocery bill. It's a great idea to pore over your bank account and credit card statements, sorting *every* little expense into categories and seeing what your broader spending trends look like.

For most people, the dominating line items are housing and transportation. The rest of the budget is usually made up of small or medium-sized costs like insurance, TV, and convenience foods, which add up to a surprisingly significant amount.

Doing this detailed analysis once or twice is totally worthwhile, but doing it every month for the rest of your life makes no sense. When you figure out what things are draining your bank account, you can find permanent fixes for them.

Once you've identified the fat in your budget and trimmed it, you don't need to meticulously track your expenses ever again. The new habits you've formed will automatically make you richer with each passing month. So step out from under the microscope and just enjoy the new, more efficient life you've created.

Avoiding budget obsession has spilled over into other areas of our life too, like travel planning. We used to think a lot about what our trips would cost. Over time, we developed big-impact strategies like cutting hotel spending to zero by sleeping in a camper van, and setting up remote work opportunities to offset travel expenses. Those things took a lot of effort to figure out at first, but now they're second nature to us, so most of our travels cost next-to-nothing without much thought at all.

It can be worthwhile to zero in on specific money habits and work on them diligently. Just make sure you *learn* something from the process and form long-term habits as a result. Then, you can ease up on yourself after a while. Eventually, you won't need to track *anything*.

Forget When Your Bills Are Due

Another thing you might spend a lot of time thinking about is whether certain accounts have enough money in them for certain things on certain days — like bills that need to be paid. It's a recurring calendar that's always in the back of your head, triggering a back-and-forth dance of money from one account to another.

One of our personal financial secrets is that neither of us actually has any idea when our bills are due. They're all set to autopay, and our joint checking account is always loaded up with a few

thousand bucks to cover whatever debits may be lurking around the corner. Sure, we're missing out on a few dollars in interest each month by keeping extra money in checking instead of savings, but it's well worth it to avoid ever thinking about bills.

Whenever I happen to be logged into our online banking system, I'll take a second to look at the transactions for the last 30 days. If all of our bills only show up once each, and the amounts all look reasonable, I know everything is going according to plan. No worries.

Admittedly, to achieve this stress-free bill pay setup, you need at least a small surplus of money at all times in the first place. If that's not true for you right now, it might be worth putting yourself through a little (temporary) stress to get there.

Aggressively slash your expenses or work extra hours for a few months, and watch your balance climb. Once you've established that multi-thousand-dollar buffer, you'll never have to worry about when your bills are due ever again!

Keep that budget surplus going for a while, and you can fill up a high-yield savings account to use as an emergency fund. Before you know it, money will be overflowing into things like investments, too.

Look At Your Investments Once Every Never

If you're anything like I was, you'll experience a whole new level of obsession when you first get involved in the world of investing, because there's so much to learn. It's a deeply complex topic, connecting economics, politics, history, current events, and statistics — a nerd's dream.

There's nothing wrong with diving head-first into this sea of information about investing. It's both interesting and important, and if you don't learn enough about it, you'll probably never feel confident enough to shovel your hard-earned savings into things like stocks and bonds consistently over your lifetime.

But that obsession should also be temporary, because for most people who truly take the time to learn about financial markets, one conclusion usually prevails: A simple, passive investing approach is the best option in the long run. That means you *do not* need to look at what the market is doing every day — it's a total waste of time.

In fact, Fidelity did a study and found that some of their best-performing accounts belonged to *dead people*, because they didn't touch their investments at all for many years. So if you only bother to think about your portfolio once every six months or so, you're probably doing yourself a favor.

Let Your Net Worth Be Your Guide

The bottom line here is that you can automate and forget about a solid 90% of your finances by just forming good money habits one at a time and riding them out for the rest of your life. Once you've got something mastered, give yourself permission to stop thinking so much about it. This can take a huge weight off your shoulders and allow you to kick back and just enjoy life.

But if you want *one* metric to look at continuously forever, it should be your overall net worth. You can calculate your net worth manually in 20 minutes or less, or use free software to do it even faster. We check ours once a month, still to this day.

Your net worth is a one-number snapshot of your total wealth. Making sure it has an overall upward trend over the course of your lifetime is the single biggest indicator of financial success you can pay attention to. So consider making it the one financial obsession you *don't* make temporary — and let the rest go, one by one.

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Steven studied physics and philosophy at the University of Florida and later received a master's degree in science education from the University of Central Florida. He's worked as a high school teacher, tutor, professional photographer, and even as a server at Steak 'n Shake. Now he's making his parents proud by fulfilling his

millennial destiny of starting a blog, Trip of a Lifestyle, where you can find this article and more of his thoughts on personal finance.