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It's never too late to learn these 10 personal finance skills



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Being intentional about your spending puts you in charge of your money rather than letting it control you. (Photo: Christopher Edwin Nuzzaco/Shutterstock)

No matter how practiced we are at managing our money, it's never too late to learn new hacks to control it a little better. Try these 10 tips to revamp some of your financial habits.

1. Use a budget. Being intentional about your spending puts you in charge of your money rather than letting it control you, but it's hard to be in charge if you don't know where it's going. Try tracking your expenses for two or three months to decide what's realistic to spend on things like food, insurance, kids' activities, transportation, clothing, utilities, pets and mortgage/rent. Some months you might have a less regular payment like, say, a car insurance payment or water bill, so be sure to budget for that too. Figuring out where your money is going helps you decide what can be cut — or not — to free up cash for other priorities.

2. Pay down debt. Credit card debt is a bear, and many Americans carry balances with high interest rates. That's a waste of your money. The key is to stop paying interest so you can make a dent in the principal. Find a 0 percent balance credit card that doesn't accrue interest for a specified period of time (12 months or 18 months) and transfer your credit card balance. Then make a plan to pitch money at your debt to pay it down.

3. Boost your credit score. [Good credit](#) puts you in good stead and gives you options you might not have with bad credit. Just recently, I had to buy new rear brakes for our car unexpectedly, and because our credit is sparkling, we were able to negotiate a three-month payment plan. Always pay your bills early or on time — good bill-paying habits are the meat of a good credit score. Educate yourself about "debt-usage" and don't spend more than 20 to 30 percent of your credit limit. That means on a card with a \$1,000 limit, you shouldn't charge more than \$300. Eliminate multiple card payments and use one card instead.

4. Distinguish needs from wants. For every person, needs will look a little different, but we can surely agree you don't need new shoes every month. Nor that Starbucks latte every day. I make coffee at home, and I employ the strategy of walking away. Nine times out of 10, when I get home I forget all about the item I thought about purchasing. Clearly, I didn't need it. Where things can get a bit murky is when we're [faced with buying for our kids](#), because often we don't want to deprive them. But teaching them to save their money (I'm a fan of allowance) gives them the experience of delayed gratification and the opportunity to decide how important those American Girl doll accessories are. Best of all, you're off the hook.



If you don't do it already, shop for whole ingredients: fruits, vegetables, bulk-bin grains, beans, nuts, dried fruit, meats. (Photo: Jasminko Ibrakovic/Shutterstock)

5. Grocery shop for less. It's easy to [spend too much money on food](#) that isn't even very healthy, especially snacks for kids. If you don't do it already, shop for whole ingredients: fruits, vegetables, bulk-bin grains, beans, nuts, dried fruit, meats. Stop with the soft drinks — your house doesn't need them anyway. Make macaroni and cheese from scratch (I've taken to doing this for my hollow-leg teen) rather than buying bags of chips that disappear in one sitting. Yes, scratch cooking is more time-consuming than buying packaged food and snacks, but it saves money and it's healthier.

6. Analyze your bills. Do you really use that enhanced cable plan, or could you be happy with a Hulu subscription? Do you recycle enough that you could switch to once-a-month garbage pickup? Our town offers recycling and composting, and our garbage can is only half full now at the monthly pickup time. What about that cell phone bill? Can you limit the data plan or hop to another carrier to slash the bill? Keep an eye on those monthly charges that seem like necessities and consider picking up the phone to [haggle](#) for an introductory rate.

7. Create an emergency fund. With the money you're not spending, start adding to your savings account to beef up (or start) an emergency fund. According to a [2016 survey](#) by the Federal Reserve Board, 46 percent of Americans would struggle to come up with \$400 for an emergency expense. But if you can rope in excessive spending in other areas, you can take steps toward creating a cushion for your family.

8. Go hiking. This is my metaphor for choosing free entertainment. Instead of going out for \$12 cocktails with your friends, why not head to the hills for a hike? You'll feel better too. Or hit a free art gallery walk, a free outdoor concert, or a live book reading at your local book store. No matter where we live, our communities offer no and low-cost activities. Make it a habit.



Rather than buy, you can borrow what you need, whether it's a book at the library or a tool from a neighbor. (Photo: mattomedia Werbeagentur/Shutterstock)

9. Use the library. Another metaphor for borrowing what you need rather than buying (I almost never buy books even though I'm a voracious reader). Consider tapping friends or neighbors for equipment you don't need often, such as a shop-vac, ladder or power saw. If your neighborhood uses a website like [Next Door](#), that's a great place to get to know your neighbors and promote the concept of sharing.

10. Reframe your thinking about spending. It's all too easy to think you can't afford things, but for many people, it's really about choices. When my kids were younger, we prioritized spending on travel — mostly car trips, mind you — over new cars or big-screen TVs, and we framed it that way for them. Rather than say "We can't afford [fill in the blank]," we said, "We're choosing not to spend money on that because this other thing is more important to us." These days we're prioritizing college so we're not traveling much. Most people can't prioritize everything, but if you stop frittering away money on little things that don't enhance your life, you'll have money for bigger things that do.

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