

- ▶ Increasing Energy Efficiency
- ▶ Dealing with Financial Stress
- ▶ Spring Clean Out

Focus on Energy Efficiency

Even though we've made it to March and spring is right around the corner, it's still important to consider how energy efficient our homes are and figure out ways to heat and cool our homes more efficiently.

Sometimes to better understand what changes should be made to make your home more energy efficient, a home energy audit should be conducted. During a home energy audit, a certified auditor will inspect your home, prioritize repairs or changes that are necessary to make your home more energy efficient and in some cases use infrared technology to demonstrate where your home is lacking in insulation. Most energy audit firms charge a fee for this service, but utility companies also offer audit programs for customers to help make their bills more affordable.

Another area we don't always consider when it comes to energy efficiency is the type of power strip we're using for electrical devices. According to the Department of Energy, televisions, computers, DVD players, game consoles, printers and monitors can make up 10% of our electric bill. Using an Advanced Power Strip can help reduce the electric waste that occurs when these devices are idle. This wasted electricity can add up to \$200 annually in energy costs in your home and could power 11 million homes (Department of Energy). Using an advanced power strip shuts off electricity to devices that are turned off, eliminating wasted electricity.

More energy efficiency tips can be found at www.energy.gov



Q: I'm preparing for retirement in 2015. What can I do to make this a smooth financial transition?

A: Congratulations on your impending retirement. After many years spent working, you deserve to relax and enjoy life at a slower pace. Assuming you have been setting aside the appropriate amount of funds to consider retirement, there are some things you can do to make a smooth financial transition.

First make sure you are vested in your company's pension fund, if it has one. Most employees have to be employed a certain number of years before becoming vested in the pension.

When preparing for retirement not only do you want to plan for living on a fixed income, but you need to consider some extra expenses, including health care. If you retire before age 65, you are not eligible for Medicare, which means you will have to purchase private health insurance.

As you consider the additional expenses, don't forget to consider ways you can save money each month. Transportation costs may be reduced. If your schedules permit, you and your spouse may be able to share a vehicle instead of maintaining two.

Attempt to estimate the monthly income you will receive from retirement plans and social security and see if you will be able to meet your financial obligations.

Retirement should be a time of relaxation, not financial strain. Plan ahead and develop a realistic budget plan for yourself now, while you're still working.

Tips

The weather is starting to break, a sure sign that it's time to start spring cleaning. Here are some tips on how to clean out and clean up...

- Use homemade cleaners like vinegar water instead of purchasing expensive cleaners with harsh chemicals. Vinegar water can be used to clean windows, floors, carpets, and showers.
- When cleaning out clutter and things you don't need or use any more, consider selling the items on Craig's list, at a garage sale or through an online yard sale forum.
- Spring cleaning can sometimes turn into a spruce up, so look for ways to refinish or repurpose household items you already have with a fresh coat of paint or a new look.
- When spring cleaning, start with your least favorite chores, making the rest of the items on your list easier to tackle.

Managing the Stress of Your Finances

We all know stress has a negative impact on our health and on those around us, like our family and friends. Financial stress can be difficult to manage and leave you with an out of control feeling. Financial stress has been linked to health problems, like ulcers, high blood pressure and depression. The best way to manage financial stress is to deal with financial problems and avoid ignoring the reality of your finances.

The first step in decreasing stress related to your finances is to assess your situation so you have a clear understanding of where things stand and how bad your financial situation is. It's easier to deal with your finances when you honestly assess where the financial stress is coming from and determine ways to fix it. Often, consumers are hesitant to make necessary life style adjustments and ignore money problems until they are out of control. When you're honest with yourself, you can better manage your finances and reduce your stress.

Contacting a certified, nonprofit credit counseling agency is an excellent way to assess your current financial situation. The counselor completes a thorough, in depth review of your income, expenses and debts and provides specific money management suggestions unique to your situation. A certified credit counselor can help you identify alternatives and options for dealing with your debt.

Also, attending a financial education session may help ease your stress and help you feel more in control of your finances. If you're in the Pittsburgh area, Advantage CCS hosts a monthly education class at our Southside office. Outside of the Pittsburgh area, check in with local banks or credit unions. Financial education courses may be available.

Sometimes the only way to deal

with financial stress is to make lifestyle changes that can ease the financial pressure. Reduce spending. Eat at home more often. Pack your lunch for work. Stop using credit cards. Once you get your spending under control, your financial stress will lessen.

While sometimes difficult to achieve, financial stress can be reduced with an increase in income. This may mean taking on a part time job to help pay off debt or to help lessen your monthly shortfall until something else about your financial situation changes. Consider part-time work in the evenings or weekends. Sometimes, adding an extra \$500 to your monthly cash flow can help you ease some financial stress.

In addition to seeking outside counseling, attending a financial education session and making lifestyle changes, it's also important to develop a crisis budget. While operating under a crisis budget, you prioritize your bills paying your basic living expenses first. This includes housing expenses (mortgage or rent), utilities, food (grocery costs) and transportation related cost (car loan, gas, public transit). Ensuring these bills are paid, especially mortgage or rent expenses, means your basic needs are covered.

It's important to learn how to manage and deal with your stress. Keep a stress journal. Sometimes writing it down can help you let go of the stress. Eat right and get enough sleep. Stress can affect sleeping habits. Start a bedtime routine where you relax and clear your mind before sleeping. Exercise regularly. Exercise is proven to help reduce stress levels. Even if it's only a walk, you'll find yourself more relaxed.

When dealing with financial stress, it's always better to confront the issue and make the necessary changes to improve your financial stability and prepare for a less stressed financial future.

Resources

www.advantageccs.org

www.onlinebudgetadvisor.com

www.energy.gov

www.annualcreditreport.com

The Advantage Challenge

Advantage CCS challenges you to ...make your home more energy efficient. Install Advanced Power strips and consider an energy audit of your home. Do your own assessment and see if there's any way to increase the energy efficiency of your home. Track utility bills to see if it's paying off. Let us know how you do. Email your results to hmurray@advantageccs.org

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