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Resource Guide

Financial Resilience

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Tips for Weathering a Financial Emergency

Sometimes, despite the best-laid plans, a financial crisis can happen. Here are some steps to help you get through and recover from a financial emergency.

Creditors

A first step to take is getting in touch with your creditors to see if alternate payment arrangements are possible. It may be possible to skip a month's payment and add the payment to the back of the loan (such as with a car or mortgage payment).

It may also be possible that the creditor will accept partial payments until you can get caught up on the debt.

Depending on the economic climate, creditors may be more willing to field such requests and it cannot hurt to try.

Maintain a Budget

Budgeting is an important habit to maintain regardless of your current financial status. By budgeting available funds, you can make the best use of your resources.

Prioritize your most important financial obligations such as food, shelter and transportation first, and items such as credit card payments last.

You may also want to suspend any automatic bill payments so you can control the timing of payments until you are on better financial footing.

401(k) Options

An often overlooked resource is your 401(k) account. While borrowing or withdrawing from this type of account is not optimal, it may provide an important lifeline in case of an emergency.

A 401(k) loan is paid back through deductions from your paycheck. A withdrawal, however, will incur taxes and a 10 percent early withdrawal penalty. Even if you have an existing 401(k) loan, your plan may still allow for you to take a withdrawal in cases of extreme hardship.

Additional Help

Local charities may be of assistance and listings can easily be found online.

If you belong to a church, you may be able to receive assistance directly from them. If your church is unable to help directly, they may also be a helpful resource in referring you to other active charities in your area.

Veterans should check with their branch of service. Ask about applying for emergency financial relief.

Finally, your county's human services department may also be an emergency financial resource to explore and can help you with understanding which types of federal and state aid you may be eligible to receive.

Resources

- Financial Literacy Education Commission: http://mymoney.gov
- Free annual crexdit report: www.annualcreditreport.com
- Benefits.gov: www.benefits.gov
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: www.hhs.gov
- The American Red Cross: www.redcross.org
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: www.hud.gov
- Administration for Children & Families: www.acf.hhs.go

Stress and Money Matters

The stress many of us feel about our finances is not just in our heads. Even in families with two incomes, few of us feel financially secure. So, if one or both of those incomes is lost, it's easy to understand how stressful a situation that can be.

The problem is, any financial friction that existed within a couple before financial constraints occurred will not simply go away because there is less money coming in. The following information can help you understand what is at the root of that friction and how you can work together to come out of a financial emergency even stronger as a couple.

Finances and Fighting: Arguing Over Money

Impulse purchases, shared banking accounts, differing views of what constitutes a sound budget: There is little doubt that money can create problems and arguments in relationships. In fact, money and how it is spent is one of the main reasons couples argue, and an estimated 90 percent of divorces are due, in part, to money issues.

What's the cure? Effective communication, flexibility and finding an agreeable budget can help to reduce arguments related to finances.

Money means different things to different people: Power, security, love and comfort are just a few. From these meanings come conflicting viewpoints. If someone sees money as power, their nature may be to spend it in an attempt to impress others, while someone who views money as security may tend to be more frugal.

It is these differences in opinion that can lead to arguments. Some may feel judged if their spending or saving habits are different from their partners' habits. Understanding and accepting the differences is the first step to resolving money-related arguments.

If you and your partner are having arguments over money issues and want to resolve those issues, keep the following in mind:

- If you are in financial trouble, either due to debt or limited income, both of you will need to drastically change your current financial habits. Consult a financial professional to discuss the best way to remedy the situation and get back on your feet.
- Communicate about finances on a regular basis. Discuss money matters when neither person is upset; a calm conversation offers a better chance of resolving any issues.
- Keep a list of your financial priorities and what is valuable to you. Have your partner do the same.
- Listen to your partner's viewpoints, even if you do not agree with them.
- Consult a professional. This could be a financial consultant or a therapist who specializes in couples therapy. Outside input can be valuable.
- Keep your faith in your relationship. Money issues do not make you incompatible as a couple, you simply need to find the flexibility necessary for agreement.

Questions to Consider

Whether you are the frugal one or the spender, differing viewpoints of how money should be saved and spent can cause friction. The best way to address this issue is to discuss it. There may be valid reasons behind the save-or-spend actions: Perhaps your loved one grew up in a home without a steady income, and saving offers a sense of security. Or maybe your parents were the type to buy what they wanted, when they wanted; you grew up living that lifestyle and may not know of other ways to handle money.

By having an open and honest discussion about the way each of you views money, you can get a better idea of how to create an area of mutual comfort. Try answering the following questions:

- What makes being frugal a priority? Does it offer security, are you saving for something in particular or is there some other reason? Why do you agree or disagree with this type of spending?
- What makes impulse purchases so attractive? Is it instant gratification, wanting to keep up with the neighbors or actual needs? Why do you agree or disagree with this type of spending?
- Is there a way each person can have an allowance? How much would it be and where would the funds come from? Consider two separate checking accounts created solely for fun money for each person.
- Can you compromise on how each person uses money? For instance, have the spender complete a waiting period before making big-ticket purchases and make the saver come up with ideas of fun things to do that may or may not cost money.
- Are there set rules you can both agree on? Maybe the spender is not allowed to sneak in products he or she bought, and the saver can not always make the family do cheap or free activities instead of ones that may be more gratifying yet cost a bit more.

Finding Financial Balance

When a couple has differing viewpoints on financial matters, developing financial habits that are acceptable to both parties is crucial. The goals of these habits will depend on the individuals. Keep the following in mind when developing financial habits you both can agree on:

- Create a budget. List your debts and assets, track your daily spending for a month and consider any upcoming expenses you may have to allot for.
- Together, decide what your financial goals and constraints are and write them down.
- Determine what your savings plan will be.
- Determine areas each of you have trouble controlling. Maybe you both enjoy eating out and will find any excuse to do so. Or, one person may have a weakness for buying items from television infomercials while the other enjoys buying high-end electronic gadgets. Work together to put these on hold until your income improves.
- Agree to disagree some of the time. It is the rare couple who sees eye-to-eye on every purchase.
- Do not spend what you do not have. Consider what your finances will look like down the road and aim to weather this emergency while taking on as little debt as possible.
- Know where your important financial documents are, and keep each other up to date on any transactions. Communication is key when it comes to avoiding overdrawing a checking account.

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Compulsive Spending

Research shows that one in seven people are hooked on spending and buying merchandise they probably will never use. We all have a tendency to occasionally spend more than we should on things we do not need, but if you have a habit of regularly buying beyond your means, you may have a compulsive-behavior problem that can be treated. Do not be afraid to seek help before you jeopardize your relationships and findyourself in serious debt.

Understanding the Problem

We tend to call people who continually overspend “shopaholics” or “credit card addicts.” However, compulsive shopping is not the same as alcoholism or drug addiction; it does not involve any degree of physical dependence or stem from a biological chemical disorder. Instead, it is considered a behavioral problem.

Signs that you may have a compulsive spending problem include:

- Commonly buying items you do not need
- Routinely spending beyond what you can afford
- Routinely using one or more credit cards to pay for purchases and accumulating debt by continuing to not pay off the balance
- Regularly buying things to make you feel better about yourself

Ask yourself these questions to determine whether you may have a compulsive spending problem:

- Are your debts making your home life unhappy?
- Does the pressure of your debts distract you from your work and daily routine?
- Are your debts affecting your reputation?
- Do your debts cause you to think less of yourself?
- Have you ever given false information in order to obtain credit?
- Have you ever made unrealistic promises to your creditors?
- Does the pressure of your debts make you careless with the welfare of your family?
- Do you ever fear that your employer, family or friends will learn the extent of your total indebtedness?
- When faced with a difficult financial situation, do you feel inordinate relief over the prospect of borrowing?
- Does the pressure of your debts cause you to have difficulty sleeping?
- Has the pressure of your debts ever caused you to use alcohol or drugs?
- Have you ever borrowed money without giving adequate consideration to the rate of interest you are required to pay?
- Do you usually expect a negative response when you are subject to a credit investigation?
- Have you ever developed a strict regimen for paying off your debts only to break it under pressure?
- Do you justify your debts by telling yourself that you are superior to other people, and when you get your break you will be out of debt overnight?

If you answered yes to eight or more of these questions, you may have a compulsive-spending problem.

Getting Help

Like a problem gambler, a compulsive spender must accept that they have a problem and be willing to make a change for treatment to be successful. Most important, they must try to abstain from overspending at any time in the future. However, sometimes willpower is not enough to overcome a compulsive spending problem. If you cannot seem to break the habit yourself, seek professional help. You may be referred to a therapist who can tailor a treatment program to suit your needs.

Treatment may include:

- Individual and group therapy
- Family counseling
- Support groups
- Financial counseling (debt-management and budget-planning services)

Controlling Your Spending Behavior

- Create a budget.
- Put restraints on your money. Avoid carrying your checkbook and credit, debit and ATM cards with you when you go out. Carry only enough money for routine expenses and emergency purposes.
- Stay away from tempting environments. Try to avoid stores and areas where you have a tendency to buy things compulsively. If you are vulnerable to home-shopping television channels, mail order catalogs and Internet shopping, avoid them.
- Ask yourself questions before you buy an item. Do you need it? Why now? Can you find the product for less? How much use will you realistically get out of the product?
- Sleep on it. Try to resist the urge to buy the impulse items. Shop around for prices, and, if you can, wait a day before buying to give yourself adequate time to think about the practicality of the purchase.
- Do not let a compulsive-spending problem ruin your life. Take control by seeking professional help and avoiding situations and environments where you may have a desire to overspend.

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Taking a Loan or Distribution From a Qualified Retirement Plan

A retirement plan is considered to be a qualified plan if it meets certain requirements set by the Internal Revenue Service and the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA). Qualified plans are subject to favorable tax rules, such as pre-tax contributions.

Examples of qualified plans include 401(k) plans, 403(b) plans, 457 plans and pensions. Most qualified plans, other than pensions, allow loans for any reason, and many also offer early distributions.

If you have run into a tight spot, you may have considered borrowing or withdrawing money from your qualified plan to help you past the trouble. Read more to help you decide if this is the right option for you.

Borrowing From a Qualified Plan

The Internal Revenue Code governing qualified plans allows participants to request loans, but individual plan sponsors can be more restrictive with loan options and are not required to offer them at all. Most employers limit plan participants to one or two loans at a time. Loans are available for a maximum term of five years, or in the case of a first-time homebuyer, for a maximum of 10 years.

Vesting refers to how much of the funds in the qualified plan belong to the participant. Participants are fully and immediately vested in all contributions they make to the plan, while employer-matching contributions generally require a period of years to become fully vested. For instance, if John starts a new job and contributes $3,000 to his 401(k) plan, and his employer matches with a $1,500 contribution during his first year and offers a graded vesting schedule option, John will "own" the $3,000 he contributed. However, if John were to leave the company after one year, he would forfeit the employer match.

In year two, John would keep 20 percent of the employer contribution; in year three, he would keep 40 percent, and so on until he is fully vested in year six.

Loans can be taken for the entire vested account balance for balances of $10,000 or less. For vested account balances between $10,000 and $20,000, the maximum loan amount is $10,000. For vested account balances greater than $20,000, the maximum loan is half of the vested balance up to $50,000, minus any outstanding loan amounts. For example, if the vested account balance is $100,000 and there is a current loan with a $20,000 outstanding balance, the maximum that may be borrowed with a new loan is $30,000.

Loans must be repaid at a "reasonable" rate of interest. Repayment is handled by payroll deduction over the term of the loan and is made directly to the plan participant's account. Loans may also be paid early with a single lump sum payment. In these cases, a cashier's check is sent to the plan administrator to cover the remaining balance, and payroll deductions are stopped.

If a borrower fails to repay the debt, the outstanding loan balance will then be treated as a distribution for tax purposes.

Taking a Distribution

Distributions are withdrawals from qualified plans that do not have to be repaid. All distributions are subject to tax as ordinary income at the participant's highest marginal tax rate. Some distributions are also subject to a 10 percent penalty on the amount distributed.

There are three types of distributions that are available from qualified plans:

- Qualified distributions: These are distributions that meet the requirements of section 72(t) of the Internal Revenue Code. There is no penalty attached to these distributions.
- Hardship distributions: These are available to cover medical expenses, to keep from being evicted, to stop a foreclosure, to cover tuition expenses and to pay the distribution. In most cases, the participant is unable to make contributions to the account for a period of one year after a hardship distribution. Plan sponsors are required to withhold 20 percent of any requested distribution to cover the participant's tax liability. An additional 10 percent penalty also applies to hardship distributions, although the employer is not required to withhold this amount. Employees taking a hardship distribution often find themselves owing additional taxes at the end of the year due to the penalty.
- Deemed distributions: These are distributions arising from the failure to repay a qualified plan loan. This can happen for a number of reasons, but most often, this occurs when an employee has an outstanding loan and is either laid off or leaves the employer for another company. If the loan is not repaid before the termination date, the outstanding balance is deemed a distribution and is subject to both ordinary tax and the 10 percent penalty.

Payday Loans

Payday loans can be a quick fix in a time of financial need, but can turn into a large debt if they are not fully understood. Use the following information to learn about what a payday loan is, who uses them and how you can use one without racking up debt.

How Payday Loans Work

Payday loans are small loans, typically $200 to $500, offered for very short periods of time, usually two weeks. They come in many forms and several names. "Payday Loan," "Cash Advance" and "Post-dated Check Loans" are all monikers these loans carry.

A payday loan typically works something like this: An individual fills out an application, provides the lender a copy of his or her most recent pay stub, a copy of a bank statement, proof of residency, and a signed check for $25 per $100 more than the amount borrowed. For example, someone taking a $200 payday loan would give the lender a $250 check.

The loans generally last two weeks. After this period, the check is cashed and the loan is paid in full. Most loans also allow the borrower to extend the term of the loan for two weeks for an additional $25 per $100 borrowed. Most lenders allow an unlimited number of extensions so long as the borrower can cover the fees.

Payday Loan Customers

The typical payday loan customer is someone who has little in the way of financial resources or is desperate for funds. Often people who use payday loans are suffering the effects of losing a job, have extensive credit-card debt, a sudden or prolonged illness, or are just unable to meet their income requirements under their current spending plan. Payday loans are almost always the choice of last resort.

The Cost

Payday loans are probably the most expensive way to legally borrow money. Though lenders are required to inform borrowers of both the amount to be repaid and the annual percentage rate (APR) on the loan, few ensure that borrowers understand the rates they will be charged. Most borrowers concentrate on the weekly finance charge and lenders often gloss over the APR as an "administrative" figure.

In the example above, a $200 loan with no extension, the finance charge for the two-week loan is $50. The APR, the annualized cost of borrowing, is much higher. It comes in at an unbelievable 650 percent. For a $200 loan that is extended for one year, this translates into a total cost of $1,300.

What to Do if You Have a Payday Loan

For someone already using a payday loan, there are often few choices to get out from under the crushing debt. The borrower usually cannot spare an extra $200 to close out the loan and still meet his or her other financial obligations and so is often stuck.

Maintaining the status quo is not an option, due to the high fees. So, what can be done to stop using payday loans? Tightening the budget is always the first step. For instance, if a person has a $200 payday loan and can cut spending by $50 a month, he or she should be able to retire the obligation in about four months.

Loans from family, friends or qualified retirement plans such as a 401(k) or 403(b), if properly structured, can be used to retire payday loans. If these are options, the borrower should ensure that the repayment schedule is workable. The worst thing that could happen is that one takes out a 401(k) loan and sets up payments that are too high, causing the borrower to need another payday loan to meet expenses.

Hardship withdrawals from qualified retirement plans or taxable withdrawals from IRAs may be used to retire the debt. In both cases taxes and penalties may apply, requiring careful analysis of the tax consequences versus the cost of carrying the debt.

A taxable distribution is often less expensive than continuing to extend the payday loan.

For homeowners with credit that is not too badly damaged, a home-equity loan or line of credit may provide funds to pay off a payday loan. The borrower must be very careful since he or she is putting his or her home on the line if he or she defaults on the loan.

Finally, if the debt is just too much to be retired, bankruptcy may be the only option. Because bankruptcy will adversely affect an individual's ability to obtain loans or credit for a number of years, it also should be considered only as a last resort.

Getting Out of Debt

Getting out of debt can be a long, difficult task. The first step is to get your finances organized.

Make a Plan

Start by developing a budget. This means creating a solid plan that allows you to cover expenses, pay down your debt and save for your future.

To start, evaluate how much money you are earning and how much you are spending. Identify your monthly income and make a list of your fixed expenses, such as your mortgage or rent and car payments. Then write down your variable expenses, such as groceries and entertainment.

The next step is to prioritize your expenses. The goal is to make sure you are living within your means.

Identify essential expenses, which need to be taken care of first. They include housing, utilities, groceries and transportation. Then allocate funds for savings and debt payments. After that is done, you can see how much money is left over for discretionary spending, such as on cable, cellphone plans, entertainment, restaurants, personal care, hobbies and gym memberships.

Compare your recent spending with your new budget plan to identify areas of overspending and adjust that spending accordingly.

Start an Emergency Fund

Saving money might sound counterintuitive when you have outstanding debt, but having emergency funds is essential and will make paying down your debt easier. Such funds are an insurance policy for the unexpected, such as car repairs or medical issues, and allow you to focus on getting back on track instead of panicking over the unpredictable. Financial experts recommend that you keep three to six months' worth of expenses in your emergency account.

Contact Creditors

Communicate with your creditors before you fall behind on payments. Creditors are easier to work with when you warn them about your situation before a problem arises. Do not ignore phone calls or correspondence from them. Instead, attempt to work out a modified payment plan or similar options.

The last thing you want is for your account to be turned over to a debt-collection agency. That can lower your credit score and inhibit your ability to borrow in the future. It also can result in legal action against you. The better the relationship you build with your lenders, the more likely they are to work with you if you fall into financial hardship.

Know Your Credit Score

Your credit score represents your reputation as a borrower. A good score is considered 730 or above. Lenders use this score to determine the risk of lending you money or allowing you to make purchases on credit. Generally speaking, a strong credit score equates to more financing options and lower interest rates. The ability to consolidate debt, transfer balances and refinance, as well as your borrowing power, is based on your creditworthiness. If you have good credit, you will have more options to attempt to get out of debt. If you have bad credit, your options may be much more limited.

What to Pay Off First

A lot of variables are involved in figuring out which debt to tackle first. Generally, you want to pay off the debt that is costing you the most first. Consider the following information to help you determine this:

- **Payday loans/high interest loans:** Typically, these loans are short term and carry extremely high interest rates and severe penalties for missed payments. On average, the annual percentage rate starts at 391%. If you have any of these loans, pay them off first.
- **Credit cards or title loans:** These debts also can carry high interest rates, and depending on the balances, can take a hefty chunk out of your monthly budget. Make paying off your credit card balances and other high-interest loans a priority. This way, you can dedicate more money toward tackling longer-term debt.
- **Car loans:** If you are unable to afford your car, you might need to sell it or to trade it in for something fully paid off. Car loans are collateralized, so the car can be repossessed if you do not make payments. This damages your credit score, and even though the car is no longer in your possession, you remain liable for the money you borrowed.
- **Student loans:** Pay at least the minimum on your student loans each month. If you are unable to, reach out to your lender and try to negotiate a payment arrangement, such as forbearance or deferment. When you are ready to make additional payments on your student loans, start with the highest interest rate first. Keep in mind that paid interest on student loans is tax deductible up to $2,500 per year.
- **Mortgage/equity loans:** These loans should be paid off last, provided you are making your monthly payments. They typically have the largest balances and tend to carry a lower fixed rate. You can make consistent payments toward these large debts as a long-term strategy and use additional disposable income for debts, savings or other financial goals. Interest on your mortgage also may be tax deductible.

Getting out of debt takes dedication and discipline. It is important to figure out your financial priorities and to start on a plan to being debt free. If you are struggling to create a plan, reach out to a professional credit counseling service.

Tips

- Spend less than you earn. This will allow you to save money, avoid debt and achieve your financial goals.
- Do not use credit cards unless you can pay off the balance each month. Using them to get you to the next paycheck only puts you further into debt.
- Use cash. It is more difficult psychologically to make purchases in cash than with a credit or debit card.
- Get your family involved in budgeting decisions and make sure everyone is on the same page. Support from your loved ones can really make a difference.
- Stay positive and praise your accomplishments.
- Find tools and assistance that work for you. Each individual has a unique connection to finances and not every option works for everyone.
- Be patient. Getting out of debt is a slow, difficult process.
- Leave yourself some room. You do not want to take drastic measures unless absolutely necessary. Completely changing your lifestyle is difficult, so reducing expenses might be more effective than eliminating them all together.

- Consider your long-term goals and financial future. Think about where you want to be five or 10 years from now and focus on that.
- Educate yourself about finances. If you know more, you can make better decisions for yourself and your family.
- Try to pay more than the minimum on loans. This way, you are chipping away at the principle.

Think about every purchase you make, whether it is a cup of coffee or a television. Be aware of where your money is going.

Resources

- Federal Trade Commission: www.consumer.ftc.gov
- MyMoney.gov: www.mymoney.gov
- How Stuff Works–Money: www.money.howstuffworks.com
- Financial Mentor—Budget Calculator: www.financialmentor.com/calculator/budget-calculator
- Spending Guidelines Worksheet: www.rightathomeanswers.org/files/rah/1/file/ExpenseGuidelines.pdf

Managing Credit Card Debt

Millions of consumers are plagued with credit card debt. Unfortunately, there are no quick solutions, and certain steps must be taken to pay off the debt. Because of the variety of credit cards, including traditional, premium, retail, gas and secured, each type has a unique set of terms and conditions associated with it that you need to understand.

Bad habits can hurt you when dealing with credit card debt. These habits include:

- Carrying balances from month to month
- Paying only the minimum payment
- Paying late
- Exceeding the credit line
- Taking cash advances on credit cards.

All of these habits are very costly and can quickly grow your debt instead of reducing it.

Getting Out of Debt as a Priority

Make getting out of debt a priority. Generally, this means paying on time and making more than the minimum payments on all your credit cars. Sometimes, however, paying the minimum on some credit cards can work to your advantage if you are paying significantly higher interest rates on other cards. Keep in mind that paying only minimums, even on small balances, can extend the repayment period to years and cost a great deal in interest.

Consider the following simplified example of credit card interest:

You have a $1,000 balance on your credit card at an 18 percent interest rate. Your minimum payment is 3 percent of that balance, which is $30 per month. Over the course of the year, you will pay $30 per month for 12 months, which equals $360 toward your outstanding debt. However, over the year you will pay 18 percent interest, which on $1,000 amounts to $180. So, in reality, you only paid off $180 ($360 minus $180) from your outstanding debt, leaving your outstanding balance at $820 at the end of the year. At this rate, it will take you approximately 92 months, or just over 7.6 years, to pay off the original balance. In that time, you will pay around $700 in interest.*

**This simplified calculation does not include compound interest for the 18% interest rate.*

Negotiate a Lower Interest Rate

Reducing your interest rate is the quickest way to save on your credit card bills. Even a 1 percent reduction could save you hundreds of dollars and significantly reduce the amount of time it takes you to pay down your debt.

Call your creditors and make a request to lower the rate. It is not guaranteed, but it does not hurt to try.

Stop Using Your Credit Cards

You do not have to close out the credit line, but stop using the available credit. You will not be successful in paying down your debt if you continue to spend on your credit cards while trying to pay them off. Store your credit cards in a place where you cannot easily access them. Plan to use cash or debit cards whenever possible. Only consider using credit cards in a dire emergency.

Create and Stick to a Budget

Be realistic about what you can afford. Cutting back on certain expenses and potentially eliminating others can go a long way in helping you pay off your debt quicker. Give yourself some breathing room: It is hard to change your lifestyle dramatically and stick to a debt-repayment plan, but making little adjustments over time can add up to large savings that can keep you on track.

Pick a Payoff Strategy

There are some proven and practical debt-reduction techniques that can assist you in paying down debt. You should choose the method that is right for you based on how you connect with your finances and your debt.

For mathematical and analytical individuals who are looking for the most effective way to approach their debt, the avalanche method might work best. Individuals who are not as financially savvy and prefer psychological victories should consider the snowball method.

The Avalanche Method

The avalanche method refers to paying off debt with the highest interest rate first. This method requires a lot of will and discipline, but it is the most financially efficient way to pay down your debt. Using this method, you will save the most on interest and will pay off your debt the quickest.

To begin, you should list all of your credit cards in order of the highest to lowest interest rates. Focus on paying as much as you can on the card with the highest interest rate, regardless of the balance. Pay minimum payments on all the other cards. The key here is to pay more than the minimum payment on the debt you are working to pay off first.

When you are completely done with the first card, you will use the debt payment that you paid for it toward the card with the next highest interest rate. This is in addition to the minimum payments you were already making. As you pay off more debt, you add more money to your monthly payments. Continue this method until all debt is paid off.

Credit Card	Balance	Interest Rate	Minimum Payment (2%)	Payments
Store Card	$3,000.00	21%	$60.00	$200.00
Card C	$2,000.00	16%	$40.00	$40.00
Card A	$4,000.00	12%	$80.00	$80.00
Card B	$5,000.00	8%	$100.00	$100.00

Once the first card has been paid off, carry over the monthly payment to the next card:

Credit Card	Balance	Interest Rate	Minimum Payment (2%)	Payments
~~Store Card~~	~~$3,000.00~~	~~21%~~	~~$60.00~~	~~$200.00~~
Card C	$2,000.00	16%	$40.00	$240.00
Card A	$4,000.00	12%	$80.00	$80.00
Card B	$5,000.00	8%	$100.00	$100.00

The Snowball Method

The snowball method refers to paying the smallest balance first. This method helps build confidence with small victories. List all of your credit card debt in order of balance: smallest to largest. You will start by paying off the smallest balance first while paying the minimum payments on all other credit card debts.

Once you pay off the smallest balance debt, move on to the next one. However, roll the payment you would spend paying the first debt and apply it to the second debt's payment. This creates the snowball. As you pay off more debt, you add more money to your monthly payment of the next debt.

Paying off a debt is a great psychological relief and helps you build confidence. These accomplishments make it easier to approach and attack your debt-reduction plan.

Consider the following example:

Credit Card	Balance	Interest Rate	Minimum Payment (2%)	Payments
Card C	$2,000.00	16%	$40.00	$140.00
Store Card	$3,000.00	21%	$60.00	$60.00
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Card A	$4,000.00	12%	$80.00	$80.00
Card B	$5,000.00	8%	$100.00	$100.00

As you continue to pay off the cards, the monthly payment will continue to grow:

Credit Card	Balance	Interest Rate	Minimum Payment (2%)	Payments
~~Card C~~	~~$2,000.00~~	~~16%~~	~~$40.00~~	~~$140.00~~
~~Store Card~~	~~$3,000.00~~	~~21%~~	~~$60.00~~	~~$200.00~~
Card A	$4,000.00	12%	$80.00	$280.00
Card B	$5,000.00	8%	$100.00	$100.00

Tips for Reducing Debt

- Stop using your credit cards, but do not close them. Closing the credit cards will reduce your credit limit and can negatively affect your credit score.
- Track all of your expenses. Make sure you know where your money is going and identify any cash leakages.
- Think about every dollar you spend. Getting out of debt requires a lot of discipline. Make sure your priorities are set. Try a cash budget. Psychologically, it is much harder to part with cash versus swiping a card to make a purchase.
- Eliminate unnecessary expenses. Remind yourself that this will not be forever, but just until your debt is under control. Cable, restaurants and gym memberships are examples of expenses that can strain your budget. These can be cut for a certain period of time until the debt is paid off.
- Consider getting rid of assets that require payments every month, like a car, luxury items and other items that can be forgone until your financial situation improves.

Resources

- Consumer Financial Protection Bureau: www.consumerfinance.gov/credit-cards/
- Federal Trade Commission: www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0150-coping-debt
- USA.gov: www.usa.gov/debt
- MyMoney.gov: www.mymoney.gov