



On a Whim and a Prayer

when the budget is tight, beggars can't be choosers

Sticking to the budget when on a fixed or low income isn't easy. It is one of those necessary practices that generally works to start with; but because the real benefit won't be seen perhaps for months; after a short while, penny-pinching tends to promote resentment. Some of the less fortunate will be thinking: "Why should we go without when everyone else can buy whatever they want?" The answer is simple – unlike the more affluent, you can't afford to.

I've always advocated teaching financial control from an early age, encouraging children to manage the little money they get wisely. Being young they will accept what they are told even though they don't like it, mainly because they have no choice. When they begin to socialise they usually make comparisons of their wealth against that of their peers. In a bid to redress this seemingly unfair imbalance it's off to Mum and Dad for an increase in their allowance. Whatever comes out of the request will set the standard for their understanding of budgeting in the future.

Irrespective of how they have been brought up, people have their own ideas of independent living; and once the parental control is no longer an issue, what they spend their money on is surely up to them and no-one else? To begin with they probably have a ball, buying whatever takes their fancy; and when the cash runs out there's the magic credit card – whoop-tee-doo! In the blink of an eye, the mighty are fallen; and the not-so-mighty are in deeper strife. The rent slips seriously into arrears along with other living costs that should have been budgeted for, but weren't. Next stop: eviction, maybe; repossessions, possible law suits; in fact all of those adult concerns that never enter into a kid's mind until they come back to bite. Oh woe is them! What can be done?

My message to those who find themselves struggling is: go back to basics; and pay particular heed to that hard to swallow, but extremely important word – NO! If you really, truly need new shoes, buy only what you can afford. Definitely take no notice of the friend trying to talk you into designer labels. The same applies to everything. Remember that 2 minus 3 will drive you deeper into debt. Draw up a budget that doesn't exceed your income and caters only for the daily and weekly essentials. Anything over and above is a NO! For your own sake, and for the sake of your creditors, make a plan that will eventually clear your outstanding debts without adding to them. To assist with this, cut up the killer credit card; then pay it off ASAP. And maintain a tight rein on yourself while out shopping.

When there is a choice, pass on the expensive products in favour of the cheaper ones; and if a cereal or whatever is, in your opinion, considered absolutely inedible – go without. Many of you know about that from when you were kids. You are adults now, having to

accept the consequences of your own extravagance; and that you, not your parents, are the cause of your current misery. So, summon the courage and determination to do something positive to put your house back in order.

Forget stopping for a coffee and cake in the cafe near the supermarket. Take-outs might seem relatively cheap, and they are certainly convenient; but they are rarely less expensive than home-cooked from fresh ingredients; and they are nowhere near as healthy. Say NO to the pack of frozen berries – for what they cost, they are never worth it. Take fillet steak off the menu and do your best with minced beef. Those chocolate biscuits you notice in passing may look yummy; and they had better be a worthwhile reward; because, although just a little extra, they could blow your budget. Anything likely to do that is a NO – it's not for you. Buy within your means; eat within your means. Sorry, but there it is.

This may sound ridiculous and unpalatable, I know; but too many times I have seen what naive irresponsibility can do. Thinking that a little treat once in a while does no harm, and that it is a necessary reward for being frugal; well, most of the time; that's pie in the sky – if you believe that, carry on waiting for the tooth fairy like the child that you still clearly are.

Harsh words; very true, though. Your future is in your hands. There's no-one left to blame for your sorry situation. Forget personal pride and keeping up appearances – it's the only way. And for those who are trying, really trying, keep up the good work. It won't happen overnight; but you will reap the benefits one day; and when you do, ensure the celebrations are well within the budget – then you won't find yourself having to start all over again.

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