Four Tips for Money Mindfulness

Try these tips to be more mindful about your finances.

The common buzzword today seems to be “mindfulness” – mindful eating, mindful exercise, mindful relationships, etc. The idea behind mindfulness is to be more aware. Mindfulness helps us develop attentiveness. Definitions include:

1. The state of being conscious or aware of something.
2. A mental state achieved by focusing awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.

If you have ever tried the mindfulness techniques used in yoga, eating or any other area, you know it is not about emptying your mind of all thought, or simply getting rid of all stress. Rather it is about intentionally paying attention to the present without emotion or judgement…which may involve being aware of uncomfortable feelings too. The main point of mindfulness is to help us spend less time worrying and allow us to step back to consider more choices and make decisions more clearly and intentionally, rather than reactively.

This reaction can especially be a problem in finances. Many of us react emotionally or impulsively rather than rationally. Statistics show that the average American household carries around $16,000 in credit card debt, approximately 34 percent of Americans admit to having no money in savings, 61 percent of adults do not keep track of their money and 60 percent have not checked their credit score in the last year. With these startling statistics, it's important to consider how to achieve money mindfulness and attentiveness.

Money mindfulness allows us to be more present and attentive to what unfolds in our lives…so when we have looming debt, a depleted bank account or an emergency that threatens our financial stability, we can be more mindful in dealing with it. Just like with mindful meditation, it takes focused self-analysis and thought to untangle our thinking and behavior related to money.

Mindfulness regarding money requires us to do four key things:

1) Focus. Focus on the money moves you make. Are they in line with your core values? Focus on the numbers, and determine

what they are telling you.

2) Avoid distractions. Avoid the “bling” and learn to live more frugally by cutting money-wasting habits. Learn to push pause on anything that distracts you.

3) Concentrate. Notice why you are spending, and think about what you could do differently and what effect it will have on things that may matter more. So often we spend money on things simply out of habit, emotion or desire.

4) Breathe new life into paying yourself first. Learn to save without feeling you are missing out. Instead, you are breathing new life into a spending plan, financial goals and a monthly budget.

Mindfulness is learning to train your mind to be more present in the moment and to be calmer in your approach and response, and that includes your money.

This article was written by Teresa Hunsaker, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences educator

References:

Claudia Hammond. Mind over Money: The Psychology of Money and How to Use It Better.

US News and World Report. How to Cultivate Mindfulness to Curb Spending. https://money.usnews.com/money/blogs/my-money/articles/2016-03-24/how-to-cultivate-mindfulness-to-curb-spending

Mindful Spending: The Happy Way to Financial Freedom. http://www.simplemindfulness.com/mindful-spending-the-happy-way-to-financial-freedom/

25 Holiday Money Wasters

LIVE WELL UTAH

25 HOLIDAY MONEY WASTERS *to avoid*

Make the most of your Christmas budget and avoid these 25 holiday money wasters.

It can't hurt to spend a little extra during the holidays because, "Tis the Season." Right? Wrong…it can and does hurt. No matter how caught up in the spirit of Christmas you may get, being wise and careful is the name of the game to keep your finances in good standing when January rolls around. Avoid these 25 holiday money wasters.

1. **Shopping without a budget.** Before you make any purchases, figure out how much you can afford to spend, stick to your budget and track your spending. Don't make purchases you haven't budgeted for.
2. **Not sharing the cost of entertaining.** While it is tempting to just cover all of the costs yourself, share your entertaining costs with guests by assigning them such things as food, paper products and game supplies.
3. **Putting purchases on a credit card.** Most of us tend to overspend when using a credit card. We are also less likely to do as much price comparison when we think we will just get it now and be done, then pay for it later. We rationalize that the few extra dollars aren't that big of a deal breaker.
4. **Using out-of-network ATMs when shopping.** Those fees can add up, so plan carefully.
5. **Shopping at the last minute.** This can be a tricky one. Sometimes in a rush, we buy too much and spend too much. With that said, sometimes there are still some "perfect" items at a great price later in the game. The trouble is, things are generally picked over, and the frustration may not be worth the savings.
6. **Buying "little" gifts for too many people.** In fact, consider an alternative to gift exchanges. Determine a set amount that you donate to a charity, then tell all those would- be-recipients of your gift what you have

done.

7. **Buying party supplies at grocery stores.** Try discount stores and dollar stores for the majority of your party supply needs.
8. **Not comparing prices.** There are a number of great ways to check prices on things, so use them – they are free. Some websites/apps include: www.fatwallet.com (they even have a Black Friday app); www.pricehistories.com; www.consumerworld.org; www.pricegrabber.com.
9. **Buying new decorations every year.** Cut back on the decorations this year, and use last year's decorations as much as possible. Get creative and put some time and effort into making decorations.
10. **Getting new holiday clothes.** We don't need new holiday attire for a family photo, gathering or night out. Learn how to dress up the basics…like a black dress that can be used many times with just a simple switch of less expensive accessories.
11. **Not taking advantage of free activities.**
12. **Buying too many specialty foods or drinks.** Carefully plan menus for simple and economical meals for the majority of your holiday dining. Also, carefully plan your special occasion meals watching for sales.
13. **Not shopping a year in advance**, when things are considerably reduced at the end of each season.
14. **Not using coupons.** This time of year there are some really good deals and promotions…so if there are discounts on items on your list, don't pass them up. Try www.retailmenot.com for online discount codes at checkout.
15. **Buying overpriced wrapping paper** just to make your gifts look "extra special."
16. **Splurging on meals away from home**, or tipping too much when you do go out.
17. **Paying for warranties on appliances and electronics.** Odds are that you won't need the extra coverage because most major appliances don't break down during the

extended-warranty period. Or you might already be covered. The four major credit card networks – Visa, MasterCard, Discover and American Express – provide up to a year of extended warranty protection for some cardholders, according to credit card comparison site www.cardhub.com.

18. **Not clearly planning your charitable contributions.** We all want to help out those in need during the holidays, but we usually either go overboard, don't plan a set amount or get carried away with everyone who approaches us for help. This can add up quickly.
19. **Paying full price for gift cards.** It is possible to find gift cards at a discount. Try these sites www.giftcardgranny.com or www.cardkangaroo.com for up to 50 percent savings sometimes.
20. **Buying "bad" gifts.** Be thoughtful well in advance regarding gifts you plan on giving.
21. **Going overboard on your kids.** It is an easy thing to do, out of desire to make the season magical and a desire to grant their every wish, but be careful. Stay the course on your predetermined amount of money available for gifts, and live within the reality of your budget.
22. **Running too many errands through poor planning**.
23. **Paying too much for shipping.** Try www.freeshipping.org for shipping coupons and the date for free shipping for online purchases this holiday season.
24. **Spending too much on greeting cards.** There are many places to access e-cards. Or better yet, design your own letter/card in a simple program, and send it electronically. You will save on postage and cards.
25. **Buying for yourself.** While you may be worth it, no matter how good the deal, pass it up. On average we spend about $130 on ourselves during the holidays, according to the National Retail Federation. So be careful…that is a lot of money. Imagine what an impact that extra money will make on your gift list. Only a couple more weeks of abstaining from unnecessary

personal purchases and you can get back into the swing of spending on yourself at the first of the year – if you have the money.

This article was written by Teresa Hunsaker, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences educator, teresa.hunsaker@usu.edu, (801) 399-8200

---

6 Tips for Holiday Spending Plus GIVEAWAY

ASK AN EXPERT: SIX TIPS FOR HOLIDAY SPENDING

LIVE WELL UTAH

Do you have a Christmas budget or spending plan? Here are some tips to help you keep your holiday spending in check. ***Don't forget to check out the giveaway link at the end of the post!***

Consumers spent $658.3 billion dollars on the holidays last year. Determining how much to spend on Christmas can be a tricky decision. Financial planners advise us to spend no more than 1.5 percent of our income on holiday expenses. So if you made $50K, you'd want to stay under $750 for total holiday spending. If you love the holiday, as I do, but do not want to be paying for it in May, here are a few things to consider now:

1. **Stick to it:** Focusing on your gift-giving budget is one of the easiest ways to control holiday spending on your terms. Set a total spending limit on gifts. You will want to thoroughly think through the gifts you buy. If it helps you stay within your spending budget, suggest a gift exchange with family members, coworkers, neighbors, etc. Draw names instead of buying gifts for each person.

2. **Divvy it up:** Once you've determined how much to spend on Christmas based on the recommended 1.5 percent, divide up the total among the people you need to buy gifts for, the holiday food extras you need, etc. Finish the spending plan before you start shopping, and keep track of the spending as you go along. There are plenty of Christmas gift budgeting apps on iOS and Android to help. Pick one with high customer ratings and use it to keep your spending plan updated as you go.

3. **Set it aside:** If you are spending $8 to $10 each day for lunch, pack your lunch and save that money in a separate account for Christmas expenses. Over the next four weeks, that could add up to $200.

4. **Shop it smart:** We are all familiar with Black Friday and Cyber Monday (the Monday following Black Friday, is referred to as Cyber Monday, when online retailers offer great deals often including free shipping). These major shopping events are designed to make you spend more! Take advantage of the sales but be ready to go with your gift list and buy only what you know you need. Stick to the list so you do not overspend.

5. **Power Shop it:** Find someone to watch the kids during the day (to avoid the nighttime shopping crowd) and plan a power shopping day where you tackle your entire gift shopping list in one day. Make sure you do not shop on an empty stomach! Take your list and stick to it! Then enjoy time with your family making holiday memories while everyone else is stressing about last-minute gifts.

6. **Get Creative:** You do not have to sacrifice that personal touch because you are spending cautiously. There are many ways to reduce expenditures and still give appreciated gifts. Non-monetary gifts are a fabulous way to keep costs down. Homemade gifts are often more meaningful. Coupons or certificates for service or quality time are a great way to share talents and make memories.

Stick to these 6 tips and you'll be a lot less flustered as you check off your holiday gift-buying list. Between now and December 8th **I'm giving away three Amazon Echo 2nd Generation Smart devices** to help you check off your gift list! If you'd like a chance to win one, click the link below for the details.

ENTER GIVEAWAY

This article was written by Amanda Christensen, Extension Assistant Professor for Utah State University. Follow her on Twitter: @FamFinPro, Facebook: Fam Fin Pro, Instagram: @FamFinPro.

Beware Holiday Budget Busters

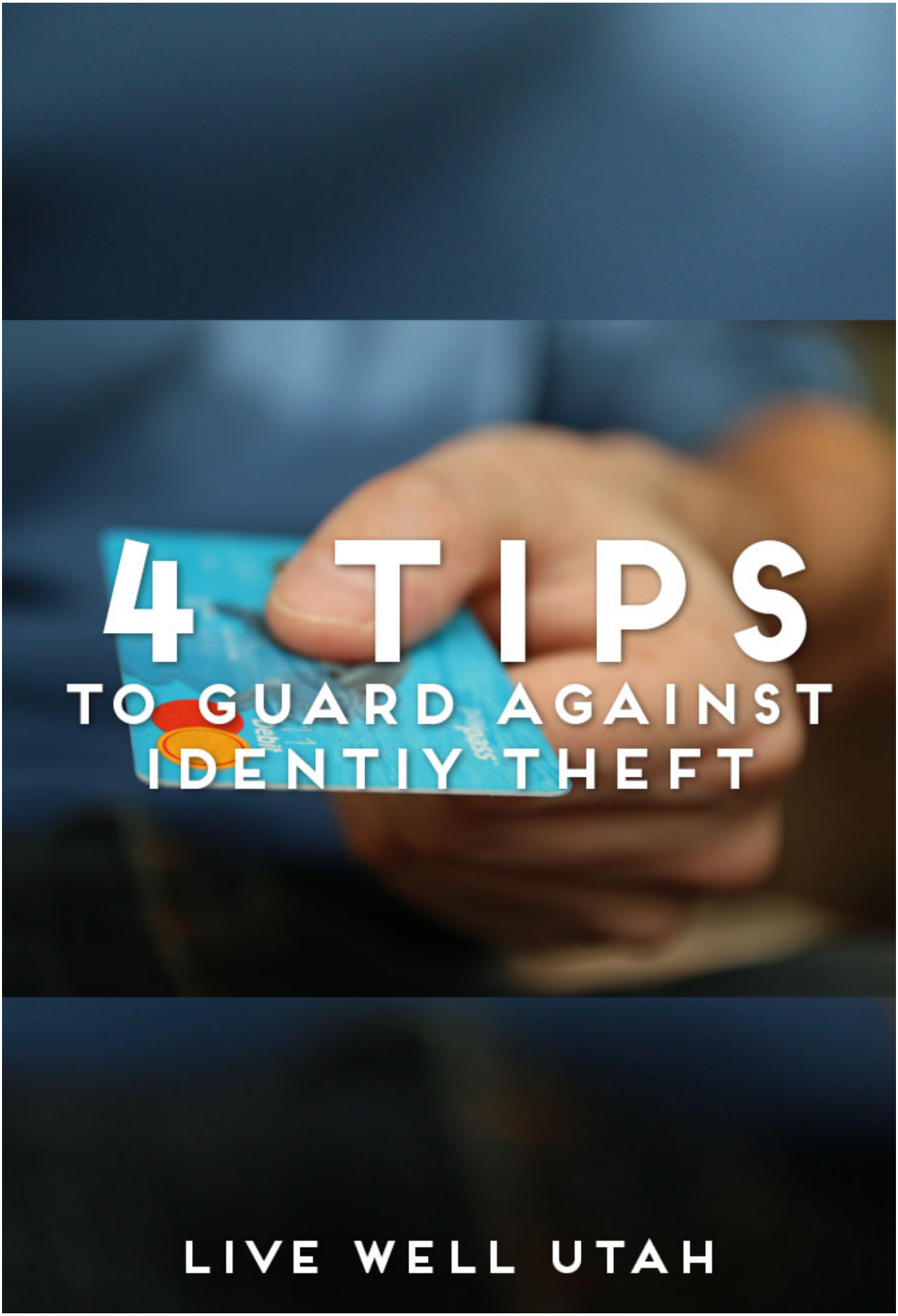
LIVE WELL UTAH

BEWARE HOLIDAY BUDGET BUSTERS

Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year's… holidays bring family, food, and irregular but expected costs. Find out how to protect your budget against these holiday costs in this video from @famfinpro Amanda Christensen.

---

4 Tips to Guard Against Identity Theft


4 TIPS
TO GUARD AGAINST
IDENTIY THEFT
LIVE WELL UTAH

Worried about protecting your identity and keeping your personal information secure? Try these four tips from Amanda Christensen.

Sadly, it’s not a matter of “if” anymore, it’s more likely a matter of “when” your personal information is compromised, and in light of the recent Equifax breach there’s been much buzz about what to do to protect personal information that may have been stolen. Whether your info was taken or not, this won’t be the last time hackers access personal information from a “secure” site. Here are four tips to protect personal information and try to prevent the headache and heartache that identity theft brings.

Tip 1: Place a Fraud Alert on Your Credit File.

Putting a fraud alert on your credit file means businesses must try to verify your identity before extending any new credit. For example, they may call you to verify that you’re the one soliciting credit from a particular business. This can make it harder for an identity thief to open an account in your name. There are a few different types:

- An “initial fraud alert” lasts 90 days and must be renewed or it will expire.
- An “extended fraud alert” lasts 7 years and is recommended for those who are victims of fraud/ID theft.
- An “active duty military alert” lasts 1 year and is intended for those in the military who want to minimize their risks while they are deployed.

It’s free, and all you have to do is contact one of the three major credit reporting bureaus by phone or online. That bureau

is required to notify the other two credit reporting bureaus for you! The best part—you don't have to be a victim of ID theft to use a fraud alert.

Tip 2: Place a Credit Freeze on Your Credit File.

Unlike a fraud alert, a credit freeze prevents anyone—*including you*—from accessing your credit report information to open new accounts. Once a credit freeze is set up, you'll get a PIN number to use each time you want to freeze and unfreeze your account to apply for new credit. A credit freeze does not affect your credit score. You'll still need to monitor all bank, credit card and insurance statements for fraudulent transactions. A credit freeze lasts until you temporarily or permanently remove it. Costs range from $5-10 each time you freeze/unfreeze your credit. Finally, you must contact each of the three credit reporting bureaus individually to set up a credit freeze.

Consider this: Credit freezes can be a strong tool to protect your credit but they many not be right for everyone. Consider the cost and hassle and whether or not you plan to apply for a car loan, mortgage, student loan, etc., in the near future. If you won't need new credit anytime soon or if you've already been a victim of fraud or ID theft, then a credit freeze may be a great safeguard.

Tip 3: Set up Your Online Social Security Account.

Everyone is talking about protecting credit information, but

we can’t forget fraud committed with Social Security Numbers such as health insurance fraud and tax ID theft. One way to protect your social security number and account is to log on to ssa.gov and create a “my Social Security” account. This account documents your Social Security earnings and taxes, allows you to request a replacement card, set up direct deposit, get a replacement Medicare card (if applicable), etc. Open your personal “my Social Security” account to take away the risk of someone else trying to create one in your name. When you set the account up, you’ll be asked to verify your identity by answering multiple questions about your personal info (addresses, accounts, loans, etc.). Each time you log in, you’ll be asked for a user name, password and then you’ll be sent a verification code to your phone or email.

Consider this: You may choose the “upgrade my security” option and put even more checks in place each time you log in. If you already have an account but haven’t signed in lately, take a moment to log in and increase the security protocols by adding a second identification method, such as address, email or cell phone.

If you know your Social Security information has been compromised, you can block electronic and telephone access to your records. This means no one—INCLUDING YOU—will be able to see or change your personal info. If you decide to unblock, you will need to contact the SSA and prove your identity.

Tip 4: Be Vigilant.

Protecting personal identifiable information is not a one-and-done type situation. After you’ve taken steps like those mentioned above, you must continue to be vigilant:

- Check credit reports regularly for suspicious activity.
- File your tax return as early as possible. Don’t give an

identity thief all that time to file in your name and claim your return.
- Read EOB's from health insurance to make sure all treatments are yours.

Remember: It's probably not "if" it's "when," so be ahead of the game when protecting your personal information.

Find further information at the Consumer Protection Bureau website: consumer.ftc.gov

---

This article was written by Amanda Christensen, Extension Assistant Professor for Utah State University. Follow her on Twitter: @FamFinPro, Facebook: Fam Fin Pro, Instagram: @FamFinPro.

---

7 Tips for Choosing a Financial Advisor

LIVE WELL UTAH

7 TIPS FOR CHOOSING A FINANCIAL ADVISOR

Looking for some professional help with your finances? Try these tips to help you choose a financial advisor.

There are many financial professionals willing to answer money-related questions: Where should I invest? What should my portfolio look like? How much do I actually need to save for retirement? These are all great questions, but not every financial advisor will provide the same advice. So, who should you trust to give you answers to these crucial questions?

First, determine what you need. Are you trying to prepare for retirement, get out of debt, accumulate wealth or just get some tax breaks? Further, are you looking for one-time advice or do you want ongoing assistance?

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) website includes "Seven Steps to Take When Choosing a Financial Advisor." Below is a summary. Additional information is available at aarp.org/money/.

1. Do a credential check. Make sure a prospective financial advisor has current credentials and hasn't been disciplined by a regulatory authority. The Commodity Futures Trading Commission lists the major regulators online at smartcheck.cftc.gov. However, brokers can get negative marks removed from their records, so just checking the site may not be enough. To learn about advisors who sell insurance products such as annuities, contact your state's division of insurance.
2. Ask about fees. Is the advisor being compensated on an hourly basis, by commission or as a percentage of assets under management? If it's a percentage, fees should be under 1 percent annually. (That's on top of fees the mutual funds charge.)
3. Beware of performance promises. Many advisors use the success of their past returns as a selling point, but

past performance is no guarantee of future gains. Make certain they discuss current practices and steps they take to avoid financial ruin for clients.

4. Ask for recommendations.If the advisor refuses or can’t provide them, consider walking away. Local advisors typically have local customers. Also, talk to people you respect and ask who they use.
5. Get it in writing.Ask your advisor to put in writing why an investment is best for you. Many advisors also provide an investment policy statement, which outlines how he or she will meet your investing objectives.
6. Know what you’re buying.Don’t be afraid to ask questions. If your advisor can’t explain an investment to you in terms you understand, don’t buy it.
7. Remember – there’s no free lunch.If an advisor promises returns that are much better than the market average, walk away. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

In addition to these tips, University of Illinois Extension provides a list of questions to ask a financial advisor, and suggests you interview at least two people. Visit web.extension.illinois.edu/financialpro/interview.cfm for information.

This article was written by Kathleen Riggs, Utah State University Extension family and consumer sciences professor, 435-586-8132, kathleen.riggs@usu.edu

---

Paying for College without Breaking the Bank

LIVE WELL UTAH

PAYING FOR COLLEGE WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK

It’s never too early to start thinking about how you’ll pay for your child’s education.

According to a study conducted by Nerdwallet, an astonishing $29 billion in free college money was left unclaimed for the 2016-2017 school year. Among those statistics, Utah ranks highest in students who were eligible to receive free money, but missed out on the opportunity simply by neglecting to complete their FAFSA forms. If you or someone you know is preparing to attend college, make sure they know the numerous ways they can receive FREE money to help pay for their educational costs.

FAFSA: First and foremost, it is important to know about the website www.fafsa.gov. It is worth your while to check out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and all the financial resources they offer to help students pay for college. You can begin applying for FAFSA as early as October 1st for the upcoming year using your tax information from the previous year. Make sure you fill it out as early as possible as supply is limited, and be sure you update and reapply for FAFSA each year you are attending school. Send your FAFSA to all the schools you are interested in attending so they can send you their financial aid offers. Students must also include parent’s information on their FAFSA until they are 24 years of age; exceptions can be found at https://fafsa.ed.gov/fotw1718/help/fftoc02k.htm.

Employee Tuition Reimbursement: If you or your children are preparing to attend college, ask your employer if they offer any education benefits to students through tuition reimbursement or scholarships.

529 Savings Plan: These are tax advantaged savings plans that allow funds to grow tax free if used for educational purposes. There are 14 different investment choices that range from age-

based options to static options, or customized options. These accounts can be opened by anyone for as little as $1 and anyone can contribute to the account at any point before the student withdraws the funds. For more information about this program, visit www.uesp.org.

Individual Development Account: This 3-1 matched savings program allows an individual to save up to $1,500 and receive $4,500 over the course of a 1-to 3-year period. Funds also grow tax free as long as they are withdrawn for use of assistive technology or educational purposes. There are income limitations and eligibility requirements. For more information, visit www.uidan.org.

Grants: Usually offered through FAFSA, grants are often based on an individual's financial need. Grants are free money you don't have to pay back, and the most an individual can receive in Federal Pell Grants for the upcoming year is $5,920. Be sure you apply early and often, as supplies for grant money is often limited and is distributed on a first come, first served basis.

Scholarships: Probably the most well-known form of free money, scholarship eligibility can be based on such things as interests, talents, program of study, grades and community involvement. They are usually offered through schools and universities, departments and cultural and religious organizations. Scholarships are also free money that you don't have to pay back, and you will never have to pay to apply for one. A few helpful and fun scholarship databases include: www.fastweb.com, www.unigo.com, www.chegg.com, www.cappex.com and https://stepuputah.com.

Work Study: This payment option is received by employment through the student's college or university. Work study provides students with flexible jobs that allow them to complete school work during their work hours, or provide more hands-on training related to the student's field of study.

Paychecks can be used to pay tuition, fees, student loans, etc. Income received through work study must be claimed on the follow year's taxes, but does not count against the student on FAFSA the following year. To apply for work study, mark "yes" on question 31 of FAFSA.

Federal Loans: Only borrow what you need for tuition if you choose to take out student loans to fund your education. Federal loans are offered through the government and there are four main types:

- Subsidized loans – These do not begin building interest until the student has graduated from the college or university. They are typically offered to undergraduate students, and repayment plans can be deferred 6 months after graduation.
- Unsubsidized loans – These allow interest to begin accruing from the moment the loan is signed. This means students will essentially be paying interest on interest once they graduate from school. These loans are typically only offered to graduate and professional students.
- Direct Plus loans – These are loans taken out for a student by a parent.
- Direct Perkins loans – These loans are offered through specific colleges and universities. They are usually based on financial need, and supply is often limited.

Private Loans: Again, only borrow what you need for tuition if you choose to take out student loans to fund your education. Private loans are offered through banks and other financial institutions. They are typically less flexible with repayment options, but offer all the same options as federal loans and do not require the completion of FAFSA.

This article was written by Kirstin Kvam USU Extension Finance Program Coordinator, Salt Lake County

Resources:

https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/loans/student-loans/fafsa-college-money-left-on-table/

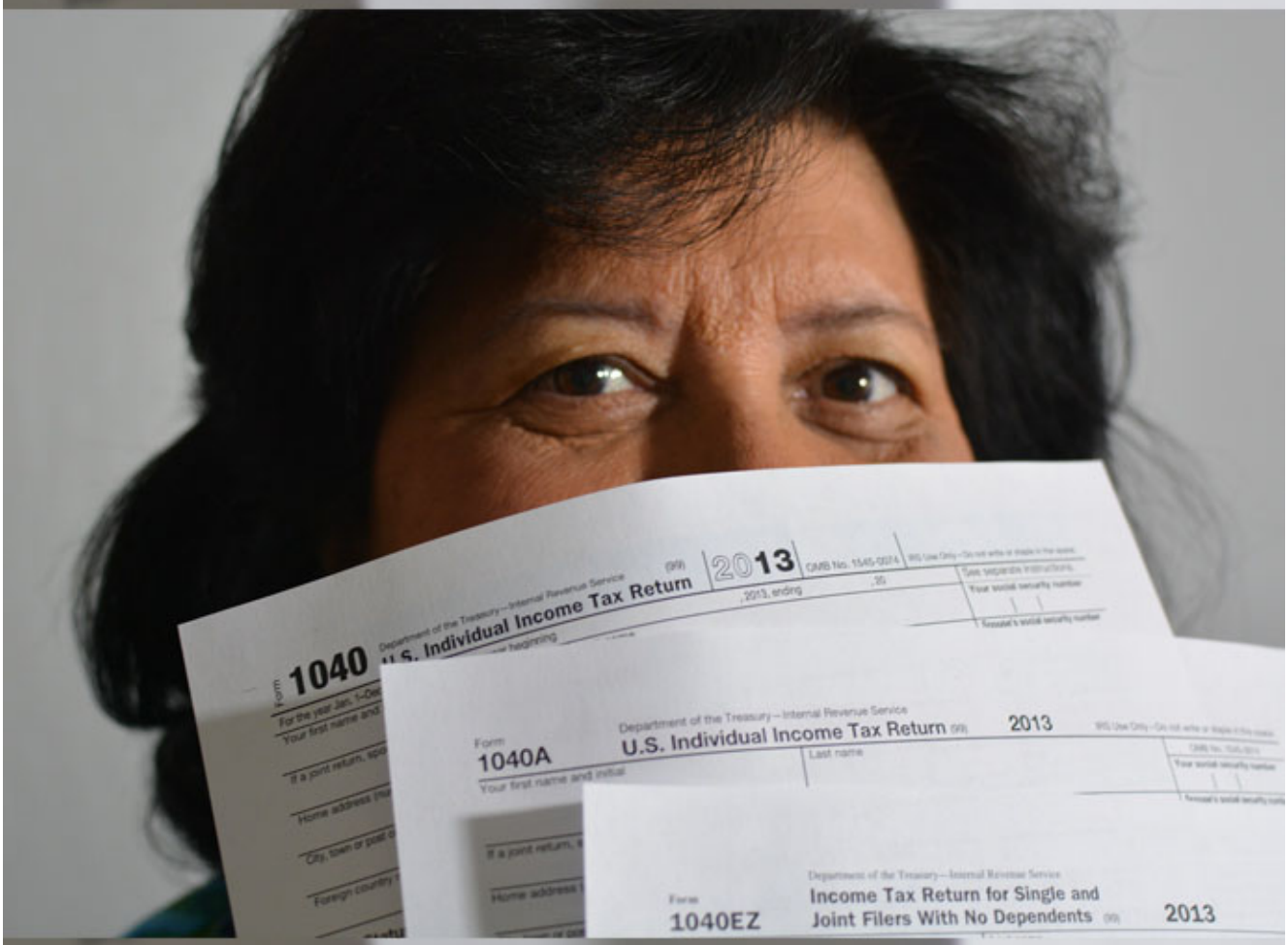
https://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/loans/student-loans-federal-vs-private-loans/

www.fafsa.gov

Did You Know? Free Tax Assistance Programs

DID YOU KNOW?

FREE TAX ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS



LIVE WELL UTAH

Have you filed your taxes yet this year? There's a reason so many people opt to hire someone else to do their taxes for them– it can be a daunting task! Doing them yourself is a good way to save a little money. Today we're featuring some free programs to help you get them done.

Spring is here, and you know what that means: tax season. If you haven't filed yet, there are some great programs through Utah Tax Help that can guide you through the process of filing online or even file your taxes for you, depending on your household income.

Earn it. Keep it. Save it. is a coalition of Utah statewide partners from the public, private, and non-profit sectors and provides free tax preparation and filing assistance for people who make $64,000 or less and want to prepare their own federal and state tax return, FOR FREE, with limited assistance. To get started taxpayers need basic computer skills, internet access, an email address, a valid Social Security Number or Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN), and tax documentation. CAP Utah leads this coalition. T

To file your federal and state tax return for FREE visit,www.UtahTaxHelp.org (tax filing software is provided by unitedway.org/myfreetaxes).

If your household income is less than $54,000, you can qualify to have your taxes prepared for free at a VITA site located in many of your local communities. Call 211 or 1-888-826-9790 and they can set up appointments in your area. This Volunteer Income Tax Assistance service is provided by Earn it. Keep it. Save it Coalition.

1: Visit a Volunteer Income Tax

Assistance (VITA) Site

You can file your taxes utilizing the skills and expertise of one of our IRS certified volunteers by visiting a designated Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) site. There you will be matched with a volunteer trained to assist you. **If your household income is $54,000 or less you qualify to have your taxes prepared for free at a VITA site.**

Call 2-1-1 or 1-888-826-9790 to schedule an appointment.

Find a VITA Site.

2: File Online Now for FREE

You can also file your taxes for free from the comfort of your own home. All you need is a computer, internet access, an email account, and all of your tax documentation. The process takes about 60 minutes. **If your household income is $64,000 or less, you qualify to file online for free.**

File online for free now.

If you are going to file online for free make sure to download and print these instructions to help you through the process.

Download the instructions.

If you have questions or are experiencing difficulties (including if you are accidentally charged by the online software), please contact the national helpline:

- 1-855-My-Tx-Help or 1-855-698-9435
- Hours of Operation: Monday – Saturday, 7:00AM – 8:00PM MST
- Email support: info@myfreetaxes.com

Visit utahtaxhelp.org for more information on these great programs.

---

5 Steps to Spring Clean Your Finances

Get started on your spring cleaning—no elbow grease required! Try these 5 steps to spring clean your finances from USU Extension Family Finance Pro Amanda Christensen.

Quick Financial Tip // Preparing to Spend your Tax Return

QUICK TIP:

PREPARING TO SPEND YOUR TAX RETURN

LIVE WELL UTAH

Are you one of the lucky Americans who gets a tax return? Check out this quick financial tip from USU Extension Family Finance Pro Amanda Christensen and learn how to use that extra money wisely.