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10 Good Things About Our Bad Economy



We'd be crazy to call this scary recession a good thing. The financial meltdown is hitting us hard, draining our wallets, our spirits, and our confidence. But there are actually some upsides to life in a down economy, experts say: powerful gifts, skills, and values that can become more potent when times get tough. When the climate eventually improves, you'll carry them with you to weather whatever the future holds.

1. Cheap thrills

For many of us, that new car or vacation we planned for this year just isn't in the cards. As disappointing as this fact is, it doesn't mean we're destined to feel down until our bank account balances rebound. The good news is, it's not actually the amount of money we spend that determines our level of happiness — it's *how* we spend it, according to a recent study by Ryan Howell, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at San Francisco State University. And spending it to create life experiences, he says, rather than to accumulate more stuff, is what makes us happiest of all, thanks to the unique, personal joy a new experience offers. "You may look at your new pair of jeans and wish they were better," says Howell. "But you don't look at your dinner out and compare it to someone else's dinner out." Even more encouraging is Howell's finding that a \$27 dinner brought the same amount of happiness as a \$400 weekend getaway. "Experiences like going to the movies or meeting a friend for tea give us a greater sense of energy," Howell says. "They make us feel

alive." So go ahead and binge on those moments money can't buy, like watching a sunset, laughing till you scream with an old friend, or singing in the car with your kids.

YOUR TAKE: "I now have to do without things — Internet, manicures — I once thought essential. Yet somehow I'm happier! Life is less complicated, more savory, with limits."

- Valerie Dowdle, 26 Chicago

2. Courage to change

If you've been pondering a career change or thinking about signing up for some classes, this could be the right time to go for it. In a recession, when wages and employment plummet, what economists call the "opportunity cost" of going back to school or switching fields — e.g., the income or job growth you might miss out on — decreases. In simpler terms, you literally have less money and fewer employment offers to lose.

"One of the things I see people doing when they have been laid off is reassessing their lives and priorities," says Stephanie S. Smith, Psy.D., a public education coordinator for the American Psychological Association and a psychologist in Erie, CO. "I have several people in my practice who are now thinking about completely changing careers, going back to school, or starting their own companies. Being laid off has opened new, more creative, and perhaps more rewarding doors for them." Smith's observations reflect a general trend: When the economy takes a dive, applications for graduate school go up; there's been a surge in enrollment at many community colleges too. And if you're fortunate enough to be able to go back to school, you may reap the

rewards sooner than you think: The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that 45 percent of job openings over the next 10 years will be for positions requiring training beyond high school — from construction supervisors and machinists to dental hygienists and paralegals. In 2006, workers with associate degrees earned almost 33 percent more than those with only high school diplomas, and those with bachelor's degrees earned 62 percent more.

3. Better overall health

In bad economic times, people lead healthier lives, says Christopher J. Ruhm, Ph.D., the Jefferson-Pilot Excellence Professor of Economics at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. Ruhm's research has found that we exercise more, drink less, smoke less, get sick less, and live longer during recessions. Why? For one thing, alcohol and cigarettes are expensive, especially when it's already a struggle to pay the bills. For another, if we're out of work, we also have more time to work out, and may be feeling less stress (at least the day-to-day job-related kind). And if we're still employed, we have incentive to take good care of ourselves so that we have the time and energy necessary to *stay* employed. Another cool stat: We drive less in recessions, which could mean we crash less too.

4. More time with loved ones

With all those extra hours many of us suddenly have on our hands, spending quality time with friends and relatives has never been easier. "The time between jobs can be a great opportunity to get to know our family members in a way that maybe we wouldn't when we were working a zillion hours a week," says Smith.

Even if your work hours haven't changed, chances are you're still getting in more family time simply by cutting back on the usual gamut of activities — yours and the kids'. Suddenly, it makes a whole lot of sense to stop paying for a babysitter and stay home watching videos as a family, for instance, or to invite the girls over for margaritas instead of splurging on them at a bar. In fact, your own body might be guiding you to nest right now: A UCLA study found that women react to stress by releasing brain chemicals that prompt them to nurture their children and their friendships and have a soothing, calming effect — which sounds like just what we need.

YOUR TAKE:

"My husband and son are looking for work. Since they have extra hours to fill, we've been sitting around retelling stories of fun vacations or family events. We've weathered storms before, so we know we'll survive this one."

- Barbara Stanley, 54 Blairsville, GA

"My husband and I downsized from two cars to one, so he rides his bike to work and I walk. Now, instead of exercising at night, we have extra time to cook together and take longer walks with our dog."

- Katie Stafford, 27 Lancaster, PA

5. Smarter eating habits

If you've cut back your grocery-store budget and put the brakes on dining out (and who hasn't?), chances are you're eating better too. Truth is, some of the most nutrient-packed foods you'll find at the supermarket are also the cheapest, says Adam Drewnowski, Ph.D., the director of nutrition sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. To get the biggest bang for your buck when it comes to your health and your wallet, he says, "you can't beat beans, eggs, milk, beef, potatoes, carrots, bananas, apples, rice, and pasta."

Bonus: Going grocery shopping instead of hitting the drive-through means you'll be cooking and eating at home more — yet another way you'll be getting in that family time we mentioned. And research shows that sharing sit-down meals with your kids helps them develop healthy diets and meal patterns, get better grades, and stay away from drugs and alcohol down the road.

6. Increased creativity

Splurging on a brand-new spring wardrobe seems not only inappropriate, but also just plain impossible. So it's time to conduct a scavenger hunt in your own closet. Your mission: to dust off yesterday's goodies and wear them proudly in new and creative ways. Dress up an old sweater, say, with a brooch, or dress down a sleeveless sheath by layering a long-sleeved tee underneath. Other ways to be creatively thrifty include planting your own herb or vegetable garden, swapping books and DVDs with friends, getting to know your local consignment shop, and throwing pot-luck parties.

Beyond being a fun alternative to spending, getting creative gives you a chance to take charge of your life (a nice feeling in this uncertain climate) and to put your personal stamp on your lifestyle choices in a way that

buying a trendy new cardigan or catering a dinner party just doesn't. And isn't tuning into your own unique tastes — and expressing them — a richer experience than always chasing after what the Joneses have?

YOUR TAKE: "I go as far as scavenging through my daughters' closets. I've also had a few of my old skirts shortened — seems that during difficult economic times, hemlines go back up!"

- Paula Slotkin, 54 Lexington, MA

7. Better body image

When our wallets feel empty, the full-figured woman comes back into fashion, according to Stephen Bayley, author of [Woman as Design](#), due out in September. "It's not that the shape of women is changing, it's just that our preferences are," he says. In times of plenty, some argue, there's a contrarian desire to have a sleek and strictly controlled physique; as resources become scarce, people's tastes run to bodies with comforting curves. So the endless quest for tighter abs is one thing you *don't* need to worry about right now. Instead of obsessing over having the perfect body — whatever that means from year to year — you can simply focus on the timeless goal of staying healthy.

8. Greater confidence

Have you held on to your job while watching your partner lose his? That's a normal scenario these days. Turns out, a whopping 82 percent of the people who've been laid off since the start of the recession have been men. That's because women tend to work in sectors of the economy — health care and education — that are less vulnerable to economic fluctuations. True, being the sole breadwinner may not be exactly what you planned right now, but doesn't it feel good to know that you have the opportunity to continue bringing in income and can help support your family when the going gets rough?

9. Greener living

When gas prices skyrocketed last year, some drivers started riding bicycles around town instead. (You may have been one of them.) Adopting healthy habits like biking and walking not only saves you tons of money in gasoline and reduces air pollution, but it also spares wear and tear on your car (and on you: Studies show that walking just 30 minutes a day can reduce your risk for cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and depression).


Other simple tweaks in your routine — like using public transportation, turning your heat down, unplugging idle appliances, using energy-efficient lightbulbs, and conserving water — will also preserve your cash and the planet at the same time.

10. A sense of community

When our economy does turn around, we'll all breathe an enormous sigh of relief. In the meantime, there's a great sense of comfort for each of us in knowing that we're not alone in our suffering. "Losing your job is one of the most traumatic things a family can go through," Howell says. "But when people are together — when they're not the only one going through it — it's not as bad." That feeling of solidarity helps us pull through layoffs, dwindling bank-account balances, and home foreclosures; it simply gives more us shoulders to lean on. And in a best-case scenario, it can translate into action. Smith suggests banding together with friends, family, and neighbors to share food, child-care responsibilities, carpool rides, and other valuable resources that grow so hard to come by when money's tight.

"History has shown us that traumatic national events can certainly bring us a sense of unity," Smith says. "We can't control the economy in general, but we can control how we spend our time and money and who we spend it with."

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