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Tough times mean time together for some families

By MEGAN K. SCOTT, Associated Press Writer

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After almost 16 years of marriage, Unita Walburn and her husband had drifted apart. The stress of raising two special needs children had taken its toll and the couple was saddled with medical debt.

But rising food, gas and medical costs forced them to adopt a more frugal life — they cut cable, grew their own produce and spent more nights at home. As a result, the Walburns are slowly finding each other again.

"You're not sitting in a room staring at a screen with 150 channels to watch," said Walburn, 40, a stay-at-home mother of three in Spotsylvania, Va. Instead the family plays Scrabble and bakes. "When you simplify, it gives you an opportunity to do more things together."

There's no question that tough economic times are stressful: layoffs, foreclosures, declining portfolios. Even having to give up luxuries like gym memberships or dining out can be upsetting, and financial stress can put a strain on any relationship.

But for some families, cutting back means spending more time at home, giving them an opportunity to reconnect.

Stephanie Smith, a psychologist in Erie, Colo., said a lot of her patients who cut their entertainment budgets have been pleasantly surprised by the joys of staying at home. Something as simple as meal planning, grocery shopping and cooking and eating together can bring families closer, she said.

"If you go to a movie with your family, that's family time and that can be very fun, but you're not interacting with each other," she said. "If you are at home, playing Monopoly or Checkers, you are face to face, talking, interacting."

Audra Krell, 39, a mother of three in Scottsdale, Ariz., said her family is spending more quality time together because they're driving around less and not going their separate ways as often to save on gas.

The family used to eat out three to six times a week. Now Tuesday night is panini night — her 16-year-old makes custom paninis and her two youngest sons make dessert. And the family is taking "staycations" instead of their usual four to six big vacations a year.

"Over three-day weekends and holidays, we sleep in, cook breakfast together and see movies together," said Krell, a freelance writer whose work has been slow. Her husband is CFO for

iMemories, a startup company that has not seen the growth they expected. "We are even closer than when we used to frequently vacation together."

Spending time together is one of the benefits of not having the money to go out.

It's something therapists recommend even when there isn't financial stress, said Katherine Muller, clinical psychologist at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. She suggests things like cooking, going to the park or taking walks.

Although more time at home gives families a chance to reconnect, economic hardship can also tear them apart. It's too early to tell how the economy is affecting divorce rates, but divorce lawyers surveyed by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers said by an almost two-to-one margin that they see less divorce during economic downturns.

Whether a relationship thrives or fails under economic duress depends on its strength before financial turmoil, the magnitude of the stress and whether the two people can adjust, said Stephanie Coontz, director of research and public education for the Council on Contemporary Families and a professor at Evergreen State college in Olympia, Wash.

Duration also has something to do with it, said Allison Pugh, a University of Virginia sociologist. The longer economic pain lasts, the less it will feel like a "fun camping vacation," she said.

For families in conflict over money, Muller suggests starting by finding an activity that's inherently pleasant — perhaps watching a funny movie or playing a board game — where the focus is on that activity rather than direct interaction.

"Don't assume bonding will happen automatically," said Coontz. "Families really need to make an effort to appreciate the good things that are going on in their lives."

Some couples and families are doing that — and learning more about each other in the process.

Danny Godfrey, 23, a marketing coordinator in Pittsburgh, said he has fallen for his live-in girlfriend in a new way since trading nights out for nights in. They make meals together, have water fights with the kitchen sprayer and dance around the house.

"We actually talk instead of just experiencing stuff together," he said.

Krell said in a way, she is grateful for the tough times: "There isn't much to cling to in these uncertain times, but I will always know that due to the poor economy, my family became closer."

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