Taking the Wheel  p.3
Taking care of yourself may involve looking for a new job, preparing for emergencies, keeping yourself fit, and putting safety first.

Preparing for the Long Haul  p.14
Preparing your family for challenging times means learning to be a smart shopper, lowering utility bills, watching what you spend on clothing and personal care, cutting back on entertainment costs, reducing miscellaneous expenses, learning to be fuel efficient, and reducing stress.

Are We There Yet?  p.23
Difficult times challenge us to look beyond ourselves.

Strength for the Journey  p.25
A wealth of resources is at your fingertips.
The saying “May you live in interesting times” has taken on new meaning for many of us. We do live in interesting times—interesting and challenging times that are requiring many of us to work harder, to forego luxuries we once took for granted, and, in some cases, to work extra jobs.

Some of us are rising to this challenge, mastering the skills needed to cope—maybe even thrive—during this economic crisis.

Many others, dealing with the initial shock of job loss and surviving on a reduced income, feel overwhelmed. They are grappling with the inevitable questions: How did this happen? How do we get through this? What is the next step? Some face the real possibility of foreclosure and bankruptcy.

For many of these people, hope may seem more elusive than ever. You may be one of them.

Whether you feel overwhelmed or just want to be better prepared for new challenges that may arise, “Thriving in Challenging Times: The Road Ahead,” was written for you. This publication provides a road map—a set of instructions for finding your way back to recovery or for enhancing your ability to weather challenges that may come.

You will learn practical things about shopping on a limited budget, managing and overcoming debt, and saving on energy costs.

The emphasis throughout is on the basics—caring for yourself, safeguarding your family, and facing up to the many challenges you may encounter along the way—the essential skills you will need to complete this journey and get on with your life.
Taking the Wheel

"While we may not be able to control all that happens to us, we can control what happens inside us."

Benjamin Franklin

One of the first challenges you face in an economic downturn is taking charge of yourself.

This economic crisis is a reminder that we often cannot control many of the external factors that directly affect our lives. But we can, to a degree, take charge of those internal factors that form the cornerstone of good mental and physical health.

On the following pages, we consider a few things we can do to get our personal lives in order as we face the challenges stemming from these difficult economic times.
Restarting After a Job Loss

Grief is a common reaction after losing a job. But experts stress that it is okay to grieve. Grieving is a natural part of adjusting to a job loss, especially when the loss is unexpected and beyond our control. Even so, identifying constructive ways to deal with your changed circumstances can help.

- **Keep a diary or journal** about how you feel, whether good or bad, for at least a month. Confronting and verbalizing your feelings may be the first steps toward emotional recovery.

- **Reflect on the successes** you had in your previous job, the good times you shared with your coworkers, and the characteristics you most liked about yourself.

- **Exercise regularly.** Vigorous, regular exercise helps reduce stress and lessens the effects of day-to-day frustration, irritation, and anxiety.

- **Develop a few daily routines** until you find your next job. These routines can help clear the mind and enhance your productivity and sense of usefulness.

Finding Your New Job

The good news is that even during acute economic downturns, good jobs not advertised in newspapers and on the Web are still available. The challenge is not only finding them but also competing effectively with others who are seeking employment. This requires a carefully mapped out game plan.

Spread the Word

The first step should be letting everyone know that you are seeking a new job. The larger the network, the more likely you will find work quickly. Spread the word where you worship and among your family members. The more people who know, the more people you can enlist to help you find work. Some may actually be searching for an employee. Knowing these people may also provide you with another distinct competitive advantage: many employers prefer to hire people they know personally or with whom they are familiar through friends and business associates.
Search for Openings
Knock on doors. Visit area businesses to inquire about vacancies. Start close to your home and expand your search to neighboring towns. Because of community costs, it may work better to take a comparatively low-paying job close to home instead of something that pays better in another locality. Think twice before turning down a part-time job. Many turn out to be full-time jobs when the employer is convinced of your worth.

Don’t discount the Internet. Most large companies and organizations post job vacancies on their Web sites. Specific job Web sites are also available. Exercise caution about the sites you use. Some sites may function solely to take your vital information and steal your identity.

Polish Your Resume
Update your resume. Put the most important information first. Draft a cover letter to complement your resume. This letter should explain how you can help your prospective employer succeed. Make sure you have the appropriate address on the letter to ensure that it gets to the right person, usually the individual charged with hiring. Check with the boss’s receptionist for accurate information. Receptionists often know a lot about their companies and are often willing to share useful information.

Get Letters of Recommendation
Ask a member of your clergy, trusted friends, and former employers to write recommendations for you. Also, when possible, ask for letters of recommendation from people already employed by businesses to which you are applying. This often provides you with an edge over other prospective employees.

Prepare for the Interview
If your cover letter and resume make a strong impression and you are called for an interview, set aside some time to review the information on your resume carefully. Never put anything on your resume that can’t be proved. Always strive to be honest with your interviewer, and immediately before or after the interview thank him or her for the opportunity. Remember that what you say and how you say it can make a strong impression on prospective employers.

During the Interview
Dress appropriately. Be direct and don’t respond to a question that you can’t answer correctly. Simply admit to the interviewer that you do not know the answer but that you will try to find it. If you consider yourself to be a quick learner, convey that fact. Many employers don’t mind providing minimal levels of training if they believe that their employee is a quick learner.
Preparing for Emergencies

Another critical step in getting ready for the long haul is setting up a rainy day fund—an emergency savings account of between $500 and $1,000 to cover unexpected challenges, such as repairing the brakes on your car, buying a new pair of shoes for one of your children, or traveling to care for a sick parent.

This rainy day fund not only allows you to cover these unexpected expenses but also gives you peace of mind that you can meet emergencies when they arise. In many cases, rainy day funds can mean the difference between staying afloat during hard economic times and sinking financially. The lack of rainy day funds often explains why so many people borrow money at high interest rates through payday loans and other traps.

Keep these emergency savings in a bank or credit union savings account, which offers easier access to your money than do certificates of deposit, savings bonds, or mutual funds. Keeping this money in a savings account rather than in a checking account also makes it much less likely that you will use them to pay for everyday, nonemergency-related expenses.

You will generally need a minimum of $100 to open a savings account and a $200 minimum balance to afford monthly fees. Some banks and credit unions may also waive these minimums if you have other accounts with them.

How do you find money to save? Start with loose change, which may enable you to save as much as $100 a year. Use this to open a savings account. If you receive a tax refund or earned income credit, use a portion of this money to begin a savings account or to increase the one you have. Tax credits average nearly $2,000 a year, which may be enough not only to establish an account but also to pay off some or all of your debts.

Building an emergency fund is often easier when you involve all of your family in the effort. Everyone can help reduce energy use, food and entertainment costs, and other kinds of expenses. Another way to build a rainy day account is to request your bank or credit union to transfer funds each month directly from your checking account to your savings account. What you don’t see, you don’t miss.

Look for even more ways to save. Check with your local Alabama Cooperative Extension System office for copies of HE-0757, “101 Ways to Save Food Dollars,” and HE-0493-I, “Money Management Calendar 2009.” These are also available on the Extension Web site at [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu). For more information about how to save and reduce debt, go to [www.americasaves.org](http://www.americasaves.org). America Saves is a national campaign involving more than 1,000 nonprofit, government, and corporate groups that encourage individuals and families to save and build personal wealth. ▲
Keeping Fit for the Journey

During these troubling economic times, good physical health is essential, especially for those with the most at stake: the unemployed and the medically uninsured. You can be the world’s best money manager, but if you are medically uninsured, all of the penny-pinching in the world may not be enough to prevent the financial meltdown that could follow a serious health crisis.

The first order of business: keep yourself nutritionally and physically fit—and safe.

Avoid Cheap, Processed Foods

Compared with other businesses, fast-food companies are often the exceptions during economic downturns, actually earning rather than losing profits.

Small wonder why: in hard times, many consumers reason that buying cheap, processed foods will help stretch food dollars. To be sure, processed foods, compared with healthy foods, are often cheaper. But in the end, this proves to be self-defeating. In a tragic sense, the old saying “you get what you pay for” especially applies in this case.

Why?

Because in addition to stretching our food dollars, these high-calorie, high-fat, high-sugar, nutrient-poor foods are stretching our waistlines and promoting obesity. This, in turn, increases the risk of developing chronic, life-threatening diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Simply put, the money you save by consuming these foods is offset by long-term damage to your health.
Eat More Fruits and Vegetables

The obvious alternatives to processed foods are fruits and vegetables, ideally those that contain the highest amounts of **potassium, vitamins A and C, and the host of phytochemicals** that enhance our immune functions.

While **fresh fruits and vegetables** are always the best choices, nutritionists say frozen fruits and vegetables are good choices too.

An excellent nutritional option is **green, leafy vegetables**. Instead of using nutritionally puny iceberg lettuce in salads, opt for greener salads with spinach and romaine lettuce. Other good vegetable selections include bell peppers—red, yellow, or green. All are readily available at supermarkets.

**Canned vegetables**, because of their high sodium content, are less desirable, although some of this sodium can be rinsed out before cooking.

When canned fruits are the only option, nutritionists advise using only products canned in **light syrup**. These can be rinsed, too, though nutritionists stress that, overall, they are not as good as **fresh or frozen fruit** products.

Other good food choices include **nuts and onions**. A word of caution: nuts are rich in healthy monounsaturated fats but are high in calories.

Lean Traveling: Reduce Fats

High-fat, high-cholesterol diets lead to health problems. Look for healthy alternatives.

Alabama Extension offers a wealth of publications on fat and cholesterol. HE-0435, “Fats and Cholesterol,” answers questions about fat and discusses the differences between saturated and unsaturated fat. A list of fat and cholesterol levels of many common foods is included.

HE-0595, “Eating for Your Health,” offers simple, healthy suggestions for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks.
Lean Traveling: Eat Your Veggies

I know I should be eating more fruits and vegetables—**but how?**

Do whatever you can to make eating fruits and vegetables convenient. Surround yourself with these nutritious foods in the forms you like most—maybe a favorite apple variety, a carrot salad, or pizza topping. Think about adding fruits and vegetables when you plan snacks, meals, and desserts.

As you replace less healthy foods with fruits and vegetables, you may find that when you are hungry, you are more likely to choose a juicy apple over a high-calorie cookie.

Nutritionists continue to identify a growing number of other foods known to optimize health and reduce the risk of chronic, often life-threatening diseases. Nutritionist and author Jonny Bowden suggests these eleven foods rich in healthy benefits and readily available at most grocery stores:

- **Frozen blueberries**, loaded with antioxidants and believed to enhance memory
- **Canned pumpkin**, rich in fiber and immune-boosting vitamin A
- **Beets**, a rich source of folate and a presumed cancer fighter
- **Pomegranate juice**, also potentially effective in controlling blood pressure and loaded in antioxidants
- **Dried plums**—prunes by any other name and another treasure trove of antioxidants
- **Pumpkin seeds**, loaded with magnesium and presumed to safeguard against early death
- **Swiss chard**, a green, leafy vegetable chock-full of eye-protecting carotenoids
- **Sardines**, rich in omega-3s, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, and several other minerals
- **Cabbage**, abundant in sulforaphane, believed to enhance cancer-fighting enzymes
- **Cinnamon**, possibly effective in controlling blood pressure
- **Turmeric**, which Bowden describes as the superstar of spices and that contains anti-inflammatory and cancer-fighting properties

**Other good nutritional bets** are the cabbage family of vegetables—kales, broccoli, cauliflower, and brussels sprouts—and wheat germ, which is found in whole wheat products and is also readily available in a concentrate that can be added to cereals, casseroles, and other foods.

A few traditionally **Southern foods** worth considering are sweetpotatoes, watermelon, and collard greens. If prepared healthily, these foods can be excellent additions to a nutritious diet.
Look for Other Healthy Choices

Shop for immune-boosting foods rich in zinc and vitamin B6 typically found in lean meats. Good choices include skinless chicken and lean cuts of beef and pork. And, by all means, drink your milk and consume other low-fat dairy products. All of these are loaded with calcium and vitamin D, another immune-boosting vitamin.

As a general rule, the more you vary your diet, the more likely you will get the nutrients you need as well as many phytochemicals. And an added benefit: eating a wider variety of healthy foods also tends to crowd out less healthy foods.

Thriftiness Still Counts

Eating healthy foods doesn’t mean you can’t be thrifty. Buy as much in bulk as you can afford while keeping careful track of discounts and other incentives. For example, buy kale when kale is on sale.

Prices of many fruits and vegetables will vary depending on when these foods are in season.

Invest in Walking Shoes

One of the most memorable TV commercials in advertising history featured an auto mechanic grimly advising a customer to buy an oil filter to avoid spending huge bucks later to replace a burned-out engine. “You can pay me now or pay me later” became one of the most memorable advertising slogans of the decade.

So it is with our health: all of us can take relatively inexpensive steps now to safeguard our health or pay thousands, if not tens of thousands, of dollars on medical bills years from now. These inexpensive steps should include investing in a good pair of walking shoes.

Walking is one of the most effective measures you can take to prevent chronic disease. Physically active people have the lowest incidence of several chronic diseases—heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and even some types of cancer.

Other problems, such as infections, can be prevented with frequent exercise, including walking. Research demonstrates that walking and other forms of exercise boost the immune system.

Over time, your walking program could be expanded into a full-fledged jogging program, which would burn more calories and exercise the heart.

Other exercise options include working out with stationary bicycles and elliptical trainers or using a fitness DVD or video game that requires exercise. A morning calisthenics program with push-ups, abdominal crunches, jumping jacks, and knee bends may be effective for some. If you are new to regular exercise, check with your physician before you start your workout.
Imagine that you’ve had your hours reduced at work and that you’ve decided to take a second job to make ends meet. What’s wrong with this picture? Nothing, providing that you are getting enough sleep. But during these challenging times, a growing number of people are working harder and skimping on sleep. And, in the long run, sleep deprivation can take a toll on your health.

For starters, the lack of enough sleep causes a loss in reaction time and puts you at a higher physical risk—a catastrophe in the making, especially if you are medically uninsured. You are also increasing your chances of developing several chronic diseases.

In the last few decades, researchers have gained insights into what constitutes effective sleep patterns. Follow these rules of thumb:

- **Choose regular sleep over catnapping.**
  Research has consistently shown that the benefits of regular sleep trump catnapping. Go to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time every morning. Most adults need 6 to 10 hours of sleep a night (8 is average).

- **Avoid late-night caffeine and alcohol.**
  Avoid caffeinated drinks, such as tea or coffee, in the hours before bedtime. The old bromides about nightcaps are entirely that—bromides, tired notions with little basis in fact. Yes, nightcaps make you drowsy, but they also disrupt sleep patterns.

- **Avoid exercising in the evening.**
  While exercise is good for you, it can undermine your sleep if postponed until late in the day.
Safety
Is Important Too

Staying safe involves more than just following a handful of tips. Much like staying nutritionally and physically fit, staying safe requires a change of mindset. Experts advise that the first step should be to create an awareness of safety—a safety mindset that helps you avoid accidents.

Safe driving should be at the top of the list. Yes, it sounds trite, but automotive-related accidents remain the biggest cause of accidents, far above other factors. The usual cautions apply: fasten your seatbelt and be aware of speed limits. But this mindset should encompass something more—a keen awareness of the potential threats looming down the road, coupled with an ability to react quickly.

The home environment and the workplace are other areas of concern. As a general rule, workplace injuries are not as financially threatening because workers compensation typically applies.

On the other hand, the home presents huge potential for financially devastating accidents—everything from fires, falls, and poisonings to firearm-related accidents. Your chances of getting hurt at home are much higher than they are at work or at school.

Take special care to remove paper from around stoves and electrical outlets and appliances such as space heaters—common causes of home fires. Install smoke and carbon monoxide detectors in your home.

Parents of toddlers should be especially mindful of placing household cleaning products, insecticides, and even houseplants out of reach of curious hands. More than a million children age five and under are poisoned each year.

Falls are also safety risks—Ask yourself two questions before taking objects off shelves and replacing light bulbs: Are you standing on a firm foundation? Do you have someone to spot you while you’re standing on an elevated surface? Falls kill more people than any other type of accident except car crashes. Falls are especially dangerous for older adults who often have weakened bones.
The Short Route to Fun: Family Staycations

Even if you are facing economic challenges, don’t cancel the family vacation. Consider staycations—fun time close to home and less expensive than full-blown vacations.

The Advantages

The best opportunities are sometimes right under your nose, only a few miles from home.

• Staycations can fit almost any budget. With careful budgeting comes imagination—making sure to include enough quality family time.

Rules for the Road

• Brainstorm: Carefully consider as a family what you want to accomplish with your staycation. Staycations can promote family sharing and bonding, while allowing time for resting and unwinding. To jumpstart your ideas, consider a few probable dates and pencil them in on your calendar.

• Balance your budget with your desires by determining how far you can travel. Consider local sites that your family has never or rarely visited together.

• Consider all of your staycation options: local museums, amusement parks, sporting events, zoos, traditional parks, and natural attractions.

Radical Staycationing: Staying at Home

• Sometimes the best staycations are as close as your den or family playroom. Radical staycationing may include cookouts, game nights, family competitions, and movie nights. This type of staycationing requires being creative and thinking outside the box.
You may be road ready, but is your family?

You may consider yourself well equipped to deal with the challenges of these difficult times. But is your family prepared for the long haul? Even though you think that you are well prepared to pick up the pieces following a job loss or some other financial setback, your family may not be. A critical first step should involve assessing the various ways you can help your family through these challenging times.
Frugality 101

If you and your family are dealing with reduced income, your first steps should involve carefully assessing how you spend your money and identifying ways to save more of it.

Some spending is necessary and unavoidable—rent or mortgage payments, insurance premiums, car payments, and installment debt. Other spending is flexible—food, utilities, clothing, household expenses, and entertainment, all of which can be reduced.

Make Healthy Snacks at Home

Reducing the amount of snack food consumed throughout the day is another effective way to reduce food costs. From a nutrition standpoint, these savings could be even more effective if we limit our choices to healthy foods, such as whole grain breads and cereals, fruits and vegetables, dairy products, and protein foods.

Look for Food Savings

Shop Wisely

- Make a grocery list of meals that can be prepared from scratch using low-cost protein foods, such as dried beans, eggs, peanut butter, turkey, and chicken. And plan several meatless meals throughout the week.

- Never discount the value of newspapers, sale inserts, and magazines as coupon sources for items you buy often. Search closely for buy-one-get-one-free items frequently offered by supermarkets.

- Make and laminate favorite recipe cards that list the required grocery items. While you are shopping, carry these cards and an erasable marker to identify the items you need. This will help you keep track of everything required for the entire week, sparing additional visits to the grocery store.

- Buy store or generic brands when possible, and compare the unit prices among these various products. Look for items that can be used in many ways and in many recipes. These might include ground beef (preferably low-fat) and ground turkey.

- Make large recipes for items such as spaghetti sauces and soups. Label and freeze uneaten portions to use later.

- Don’t take your children grocery shopping. If you can’t avoid taking them along, shop only during those times of day when they are less likely to crave snack foods.
Many Internet sites claim that consumers can cut their food costs by buying one or more sides of beef. This, however, is not always cost effective. In many cases, consumers risk literally biting off more than they can chew. For example, a side of beef typically provides about 350 pounds of meat—thirty steaks, as many as eight roasts, and the rest ground beef. This amount of ground beef alone, which could exceed 100 pounds, may be too much for a single family to consume. And storing all of this meat will require a freezer, and buying one may not be cost effective.

A better option may be buying meat in bulk. For example, purchasing fresh ground beef in 5- or 10-pound packages or family packs of steaks and chops often found in grocery stores.

Another option is to buy larger cuts, such as a whole beef strip loin, beef rib eye roll, or pork loin, and ask the butcher to cut it into smaller items. Most discount wholesale clubs already carry these whole cuts, and most grocers will sell them on request. Divide boneless cuts at home according to your preferences. Remove them from their grocery store packaging and rewrap in freezer bags, freezer paper, or foil before freezing. Use a vacuum sealer to remove air that causes freezer burn.

Roasts are an excellent, cost-effective meat choice, but few consumers today know how to prepare them properly. Look on the meat packaging for cooking instructions. Many grocery store meat sections also offer useful recipes. Other good recipe sources are cattle and pork producer associations and local Extension offices and Web site. Learn how to cook these kinds of meats before you buy them.

Busy families should also consider buying convenience items from the meat counter. These include packaged roast beef or beef tips that typically come with a few sides. Broadly speaking, these tend to be cheaper and healthier choices than fast food.
Off the Beaten Path: Growing Your Own Food

These challenging economic times are sparking an interest in lifestyle practices that many of our parents and grandparents took for granted. People are asking if they can save money by growing food in their backyards.

The short answer: it depends. All sorts of upfront costs are associated with gardening, including buying seed, fertilizer, and, in some cases, pesticides and fungicides. In a manner of speaking, time is of the essence. It is possible to reap modest cost savings by raising your own produce, providing that you and other family members are willing to invest the time required to grow and cultivate your backyard garden.

In addition to time considerations, careful planning is critical. Before committing yourself and your family to raising a garden, consider three questions:

• What vegetables do you want to grow?
• How much space will be required?
• Do I have adequate space available?

Every home garden has an optimal size. First draw your garden on paper to help avoid mistakes such as planting tall crops that deprive smaller crops of critical sunlight. Novice gardeners should start small: planting too much and being unable to care for all of it often lead to discouraging results.

**A good rule of thumb** is to lay out the garden in 3- to 4-foot-wide beds with paths between them. This layout is less intimidating than the more traditional rectangles with 60-foot long rows. Once the garden space has been identified, get a soil test before planting begins, so you can apply lime if needed. Remember that lime, which raises soil pH, requires time to work.

Sunlight and adequate water are also critical for success. If possible, plant gardens in areas that receive full sun with little shading from nearby buildings or trees. Gardens also need to be located close to water sources. For many home gardeners, drip irrigation is an inexpensive approach that saves water and money and reduces foliar problems. Your site should also drain well and be as level as possible.

**Before** fully committing to a garden, learn as much as you can about planting the right varieties, another important factor for success.

Research-based information about many aspects of home gardening is available on the Alabama Cooperative Extension System’s Web site at [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu).
Reduce Utility Cost

To save on utility costs, set your thermostat five degrees lower in cool weather and five degrees higher in warm weather.

In cool weather, open blinds or curtains during the day to let in the sun’s warmth. Close them at night to retain the heat. In warm weather, close the blinds and curtains facing the sun to block heat.

Either drop your cell phone plans entirely or reduce their cost by buying a basic or a pay-as-you-go plan. Use cell phones only when necessary. Use minutes retained toward the end of a billing cycle to place long-distance calls you have been putting off.

Consider Clothing, Cosmetics, and Other Fashion-Related Expenses

Ask yourself: is much of what I spend on clothing, personal care, and household items really necessary?

Carefully compare product price with quality before you buy. Also check discount stores, mail-order catalog sales, secondhand outlets, flea markets, and garage sales. If clothing is needed only for a one-time occasion, consider borrowing or swapping with friends or family.

Cut Back on Entertainment Costs

Cancel your cable or satellite service and replace it with family time. Many family activities are not only highly interactive and fun but are also inexpensive: biking, hiking, camping in the backyard, visiting museums, attending community events, playing cards and games, performing family plays and singings, and having potluck dinners for family and friends, with everyone sharing the food costs.

Raising Your Own Chickens? Think First

These difficult economic times have also led many people to consider adopting a page out of their parents’ and grandparents’ playbook by raising chickens to save money on egg costs. Unfortunately, backyard poultry typically is not cost effective, largely because of the upfront costs associated with it.

Even assuming a few things—a completed coop electrically wired to provide laying hens with the prescribed 16 hours of light each day—you still have to account for feed costs, which are often the biggest obstacle to raising backyard chickens.

As of this writing, a 20-bird flock will typically consume in 10 days a 40-pound bag of feed, which can cost more than $7. Add to that $2 for cracked corn and $2.50 for bedding straw. With 20 chickens, a homegrown producer, under ideal circumstances, will harvest about 120 eggs in ten days. Selling these eggs for a dollar a dozen at the local farmers market nets a monthly profit of only $4.50. This profit doesn’t account for electricity costs for the coop, upkeep on anything that breaks, and any disease treatment that may be required for the birds.
Reduce Miscellaneous Expenses

- Keep reading, but buy fewer books and subscribe to fewer magazines. Instead, go to your local public library for books, magazines, and DVDs.

- Consider replacing alcohol and soda beverages with tap water, which is considerably less expensive. Give up your cigarette habit for the sake of your pocketbook as well as your health.

Equally important, if you are spinning your wheels in debt, get out of the mud as soon as possible. Families who revolve credit card balances pay an average of $1,500 a year in interest rates and fees alone. If they saved that amount with a 5 percent yield each year, they would have $200,000 in 40 years. Taking on too much debt also lowers your credit score, which results in your having to pay even more on consumer and mortgage loans. Low credit scores are also why so many Americans find it hard to rent an apartment, secure utility services, and even find a job. This large consumer debt keeps many Americans from saving or building wealth.

Just how serious is your debt situation? Ask yourself these questions:

1. Can you afford to make only the minimum payments on your credit cards?
2. Do you worry about having enough money to make monthly car payments?
3. Do you borrow money to pay off old debts?
4. Have you used a home equity loan to refinance credit card debts, only to run up new revolving balances on your cards?

If your answer to any of these questions is yes, then you probably need to get your debts under control. The good news is that with discipline, patience, and, in some cases, outside help, you can reduce debt and even begin saving.

What’s the first step to getting yourself out of debt? Stop borrowing, especially if you’re spending more than you’re earning. A good place to start is cutting up your credit cards or at least using them only when necessary.

While you are making a budget, figure out the most you can afford to pay each month to reduce your debts, then pay this amount without fail. If you have debts on more than one credit card, pay off the debt with the highest interest rate first and work your way down to the card with the lowest rate, or pay off the smallest loan first and work your way up to the largest loan.

Be done with debt once and for all: when these debts are paid, do not give in to the temptation to overspend again. Use the money you spent on credit cards to start a savings account.

Many communities have agencies that can help you manage your debts. Among these is the nonprofit Consumer Credit Counseling Services. Counselors work with you privately to help you develop a budget, identify your options, and work with creditors to repay your debts. Call (800) 388-2227 to locate an office near you.
Fuel Efficiency Saves Money: Before Heading Out

In an era of spiking gas prices, you can find ways to increase the fuel efficiency of your vehicle.

The Energy Division of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs offers these suggestions:

- **Choose the right octane for your vehicle.** Look for this information in your vehicle owner’s manual. Only 6 percent of U.S. cars need premium gasoline.

- **Avoid topping off your gas tank.** Fuel needs room to expand and topping off the tank may cause excess gas to evaporate instead of being used by your engine.

- **Shop around for the best gas prices.** Visit gasprices.mapquest.com for more details.

- **Avoid idling to warm up your vehicle, even in cold weather.** Modern engines require only 30 seconds of idling before driving on winter days.

- **Keep tires inflated at the right level.** Properly inflated tires provide less road resistance and can improve fuel efficiency by 3 to 5 percent. It can also increase the life of your tires. Appropriate inflation levels should be listed in your owner’s manual or on the jamb of the driver’s side door.

- **Remove bicycle or luggage racks when not needed, and do not display flags from your car or windows.** Avoid packing items on top of the car. These can create wind resistance and decrease fuel efficiency.

- **Try using the family vehicle with the best gas mileage for daily commuting.**

- **Monitor your tires regularly for signs of tread wear, and rotate them at least every 6,000 miles.** Regular monitoring, rotating, and alignments can help reduce your fuel bill by 3 percent and extend the life of your tires.

- **Get regular engine tune-ups and car maintenance checks** to avoid fuel economy problems stemming from worn spark plugs, dragging brakes, low transmission fluid, or transmission problems. Taking these steps can increase your fuel economy by 4 percent.

- **Improve your gas mileage by 1 to 2 percent by getting regular oil changes.** Clean oil reduces friction in the engine, allowing the different parts to move freely. Old, dirty oil operates a lot like liquid sandpaper in your engine.

- **Clean or replace the air filter regularly.** Clogged filters force engines to work harder to bring in air. Replacing clogged air filters can improve gas mileage by as much as 10 percent and can also protect your engine.

- **Lighten your load.** An extra 100 pounds in the trunk reduces a typical car’s fuel economy by 1 to 2 percent.
Fuel Efficiency Saves Money: While on the Road

Drive within posted speed limits. Driving at high speeds, especially for long distances, uses more gasoline. Each 5 miles per hour you drive over 60 mph reduces fuel efficiency by about 10 percent.

Use cruise control if you aren’t driving on hilly terrain. This will help maintain a constant speed. In most cases, you can produce savings of up to 14 percent.

Avoid aggressive driving. Speeding, rapid acceleration, and hard braking waste gas and can lower your highway gas mileage 33 percent and city mileage 5 percent.

Anticipate traffic situations to minimize excessive and unnecessary acceleration and deceleration.

Don’t ride your brakes. Lightly pressing the brakes while driving wastes energy by creating friction in the brakes.

Turn off the air-conditioner. Using the air-conditioner increases fuel costs from 13 percent to 21 percent. If it is cool enough, use the flow-through ventilation instead of rolling down the windows or using the air-conditioner.

Use overdrive gears when on the highway. Overdrive decreases the car’s engine speed, reducing fuel consumption and engine wear.

Combine errands to avoid making several short trips. Short trips of 5 miles or less can decrease fuel efficiency.

Use the landscape to your advantage. Let your car accelerate down the hill, so its inertia will help it climb up the next hill. Let the speed decrease slightly while you are going uphill.

Avoid unnecessary idling. Plan your trips to avoid congested, high-traffic areas and stop-and-go driving. If you are stopped in traffic for more than 2 minutes, turn off your vehicle. Avoiding excessive idling can save up to 19 percent.

Carpool, vanpool, walk, or ride a bike when possible.

For more information on energy efficiency, visit www.adeca.alabama.gov/energy/
Don’t Fight in the Back Seat!

Stress associated with job loss and the many other challenges stemming from this economic downturn can spill over into family relationships. Family members, particularly parents, must face up to the challenge of resolving this stress.

The American Psychological Association reported in 2007 that money and work are the top sources of stress for almost 75 percent of Americans.

Children are a special challenge. They often sense their parents’ behaviors and may act out in frustration in one of several ways: mimicking their parents’ stress, reacting to the stress in their own unique ways, or simply withdrawing from their parents.

Resolve these stresses and the situations they can cause as peacefully as possible.

For parents, the first step should involve communicating openly with and actively listening to their children—something that requires practice. Experts offer the following advice:

- **Treat your children and other family members with respect** as you resolve conflict. Be honest with yourself as well as others. You may deserve at least part of the blame for this conflict. Demonstrate your willingness to change.

- **Face up to your problems.** Don’t hesitate to discuss the conflict with other family members. Stay calm and offer constructive solutions.

- **Focus clearly on the problems,** especially the behaviors and other factors associated with them. Don’t play the blame game. Deal with the challenge as a problem rather than as a battle that involves settling scores and assigning blame. Help every family member understand the feelings of others while the solutions are being worked out.

- **Express things in “I” messages,** which can help you gain a better understanding of how you feel. An example: “I feel frustration when there is not enough money to pay bills.”

- **Communicate with a clear understanding of goals.** Help each family member, especially the children, see the problem clearly. Restate as clearly as possible everything that was discussed.

- **Identify one or more workable solutions,** carefully weighing the consequences of each. Don’t be judgmental of others’ ideas. Base solutions on your personal and your family’s values.

- **Build consensus** around solutions. Adopt only those solutions that are acceptable to all family members.

- **Reevaluate.** Periodically reconvene the family to determine if the solutions are still working or if new solutions are needed.

Collateral Damage: Stress Affects Children Too

Economic hardship often produces a vicious cycle. In too many cases, as marriages suffer from added financial stress, so does the quality of parenting. Children often react to these parenting lapses with increased irritability, trouble in school, and even delinquency. Experts say that parents and other caregivers, despite their challenges, should strive to lead by positive example and not to expose their children to this stress.
Are We There Yet? Crises often bring out the best in us.

Many older Americans actually remember the Great Depression and World War II with a measure of fondness—times in history when everyone pulled together.

Crises can also provide an opportunity for personal growth. Some people find a newfound passion to serve others through outreach efforts such as local food banks and other forms of charitable giving. Others become more civically active, serving on local boards or helping organize and participate in public events. And as many learn, becoming involved with others who are often less fortunate helps us put our own problems into perspective.
One approach that is catching on rapidly throughout the country is community-supported agriculture. CSA offers members, whether urban or rural residents, the opportunity to own a share of a farm’s harvest in exchange for an investment in the farm at the beginning of the season.

This approach is often a win/win situation for farmers and shareholders alike—the growers because it assures a stable market for their products, the shareholders because they’re guaranteed top-quality produce.

In some cases, shareholders and their families are sometimes asked to lend the farmers a helping hand with chores, such as cultivating and harvesting. Many of these shareholders have found this to be a great way to connect with farm life and also to connect with other people who share a similar interest and a passion for farm-fresh produce.

Thriving in Challenging Times

Statewide Effort

This publication is part of a statewide Extension education effort known as “Thriving in Challenging Times.” The project was launched in November 2008 to provide people with much of the practical knowledge they need to weather these tough times.

Extension educators representing many disciplines and located throughout the state are involved with this effort. They offer practical knowledge and assistance in an array of topics including shopping on a limited budget, managing and overcoming debt, and reducing energy costs.

The Extension Web site, www.aces.edu, also features a Thriving in Challenging Times Weblog, which provides up-to-date information about many of these topics.

For more information about this effort, visit your local Extension office or our Web site.
Additional Strength for the Journey

Extension Has Resources
Your local Extension office has many printed materials that can help you get back on the road to recovery and become more self-sufficient. Most of these materials are also available on our Web site at www.aces.edu.

Raising Your Own Food and Adopting Cost-Effective Landscaping Practices
“Alabama Gardener’s Calendar” (ANR-0047)
“Backyard Tomato Production” (ANR-0302)
“Drought-Tolerant Landscapes for Alabama” (ANR-1336)
“Home Gardening: Growing Onions” (ANR-1085)
“Home Gardening: Rabbiteye Blueberries” (ANR-1078)
“Home Soil Testing: Taking a Sample” (ANR-0006-A)
“Planting Guide for Home Gardening in Alabama” (ANR-0063)
“The Alabama Vegetable Gardener” (ANR-0479)
“Vegetable Seasons in Alabama” (ANR-1165)

Food Preservation
“Drying Fruits at Home” (HE-0360)
“Frozen Food Storage and Care of Your Freezer” (EFNEP-0191)
“Getting Ready to Freeze Vegetables” (HE-0206-A)
Home Food Preservation (HE-0001)
“How to Dry Apples, Peaches, or Pears” (HE-0204-B)
“Katie Comes Calling: Containers for Freezing” (EFNEP-0138)
“Katie Comes Calling: Get Ready to Can Vegetables” (EFNEP-0139)
“Wise Methods of Canning Vegetables” (EFNEP-0190)

Food Cost Savings
“3 Recipes for 1 Chicken” (HE-0118)
“101+ Ways to Save Food Dollars” (HE-0757)
“Be a Good Shopper: Save Money When You Shop” (HE-0158)
“Food News: Eat More With Less” (HE-0740)
“Weekly Menu Ideas for the Family” (HE-0528)
“Weekly Menu Suggestions for One or Two” (HE-0529)

Money Management
“101 Ways to Save Money” (HE-0562)
“Bankruptcy Not the Best Solution” (HE-0723)
“Daily Money Management Guide for Caregivers” (UNP-0053)
“Debt Consolidation” (UNP-0076)
“Energy Star Appliances” (HE-0851)
“If You Can’t Pay Your Bills” (UNP-0075)
“Leaks in Spending” (HE-0225)
“Money Management Calendar 2009” (HE-0493-I)
“Money Management Makes Cents” (HE-0368)
“Pocket Money Tracker” (UNP-0034)
“Rip-Offs and Fraud Cost Money” (UNP-0041)
“You Can Be Debt Free” (HE-0716)

Reaching for More
Reaching out for help could determine whether you and your family emerge from this crisis with your emotional and physical health intact.

Supportive people associated with one or more of the organizations listed below may help you work through many, if not most, of the problems associated with this crisis and similar challenges.

Most of these services are free, supported through tax dollars and other forms of community support.

Finding Work
You local career center can provide the following services:

- Skills assessment and career development planning at no charge
- Free access to the Internet, resume writing programs, telephones, and fax machines for job hunting
- Lists of local, regional, state, and national job openings listed by Job Central National Labor Exchange

To locate the nearest center, call (877) US2-JOBS or visit http://www.servicelocator.org/.
Credit Counseling

The nonprofit Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Alabama, Inc., can help you and your family in a variety of ways, including budgeting, managing debt, and avoiding foreclosure and bankruptcy. CCCSA works closely with both the federal and state levels of government and is a Department of Housing and Urban Development Certified Housing Counseling Agency.

Call the CCCSA’s toll-free number or visit its Web site:

budgethelp.com/main/main.html

2-1-1 Connects Alabama

Dialing 2-1-1 with any landline telephone puts you in touch with 2-1-1 Connects Alabama, a statewide network of regional call centers whose mission is to provide easy access to health and human services available throughout the state. Call specialists will assess your needs, help with problem solving, and refer you to community-based organizations, government programs, support groups, and other local resources that can help.

Visit the Web site at 211connectsAlabama.com.

Local Religious Facilities, Clerical Organizations, and Food Pantries

Many of these institutions provide temporary assistance with food, clothing, and household items. Contact your local United Way office for additional information.

Alabama Small Business Development Consortium

The Alabama Small Business Development Consortium, located on university campuses throughout the state, can provide counseling assistance for starting a small business or operating your current business. Visit their Web site, www.asbdc.org/, for more information.

Alabama Sustainable Agricultural Network

The Alabama Sustainable Agricultural Network is a statewide network that provides information about local farms and healthy and sustainable foods. ASAN also provides assistance to growers who want to expand their farming and ranching operations.

For more information, visit their Web site at www.asanonline.org/resources.html or call (256) 751-3925.

Safer Environments

For a list of things you can do to create safe environments, visit the U.S. National Library of Medicine at www.nlm.nih.gov/, the National Institutes of Health at www.nih.gov/, or the Healthy Homes Partnership, which features a publication titled “Help Yourself to a Healthy Home.” This publication is now available in English, Spanish, Bosnian, Vietnamese, and Hmong, both online and in print. Visit the Web site at www.healthyhomespartnership.net/. Versions in other languages will be available soon.
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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county’s name to find the number.

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