

# balance



## It Feels Good to Be Frugal

WHETHER BY NECESSITY OR CHOICE, MANY OF US ARE GETTING BY ON LESS—AND DISCOVERING THAT BEING MORE INTENTIONAL ABOUT SPENDING IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF SELF-CARE.

By Sharlene Breakey

**I WAS SCARED LAST MARCH**, when we were all forced to grind to a halt. My freelance income dried up, and my husband and I found ourselves carefully meal planning to make ends meet. But now that work has returned (a privilege I'm grateful for every day), I'm still meal planning down to the last cilantro leaf. Not because I have to, but because I like it. I like that my grocery bill is half what it used to be. I like that I rarely throw food away anymore. I like the nightly walks we take along the river, bundled up in our coats, more than the once-a-week dinners out we used to manage. And I like the little nest egg piling up as we put out less.

The pressure to embrace frugality has been building: It takes more than \$230,000 to raise one child to age 18 (not including college), while wages have remained largely stagnant—and disproportionately low for many millennials trying to adult while burdened with student debt. Add the painful reality that participating in our disposable economy results in filling landfills and oceans with yesterday's fast fashion and plastic toys, causing a global existential threat. And then, the pandemic. This moment may become a circuit breaker, says Annie Raser-Rowland, coauthor of *The Art of Frugal Hedonism: A Guide to Spending Less While Enjoying Everything More*. "A lot of people who didn't lose income spent less—and found they could get by with far less shopping."

**Because of our frugal ethos, I've connected with friends and neighbors. We lend things to each other, pass down toys, and work together.**

As long as we bring in enough to cover the bills, being frugal feels healthy, like we're taking care of ourselves. "Of course making money matters, but I'm suddenly seeing people realize they've been overvaluing possessions while undervaluing time with loved ones," says Paco de Leon, founder of the Hell Yeah Group, a financial firm in Los Angeles, and author and illustrator of the forthcoming book *Finance for the People*. "Or they realize they've been doing something unproductive just because it's delightful."

The question is: Will this attitude, this way of life, stick? Experts say it can—if we shift our mindset about spending, saving, and what really makes us feel good.

**TELL YOURSELF: Saving isn't self-denial—it's self-care.**

That's what Erica, a single mom and filmmaker in New York City, discovered when she lost all her clients one brutal day last March. "I had almost no savings and no income, bills coming in, and two kids relying on me," she says. "At first it was embarrassing, but I dove in, watching every expense, figuring out how to get a forbearance on my mortgage, finding food that would stretch the farthest."

Unlike many people's, Erica's income is flowing again—but she hasn't forgotten her ordeal, or how strong it made her feel. "I'm proud of how we took care of ourselves, and I feel so much more in control now that I understand my finances better," she says. "We will never return to our pre-Covid lifestyle of living paycheck to paycheck, taking Uber everywhere and ordering takeout whenever we wanted. I now have the skills to build a buffer that will make our future much easier and less stressful."

**TELL YOURSELF: Spendy doesn't equal special.**

When Kristen, a lawyer in Minneapolis with two small kids, found her usual dining spots closed, she and her family went exploring instead. "We walked around a beautiful grassy area near some of our favorite restaurants," she says. "We loved it so much, we returned for an amazing family picnic, playing soccer, taking pictures, eating ice cream, and throwing rocks in the nearby lake. In pre-Covid times, we'd have just eaten lunch inside the restaurant and left."

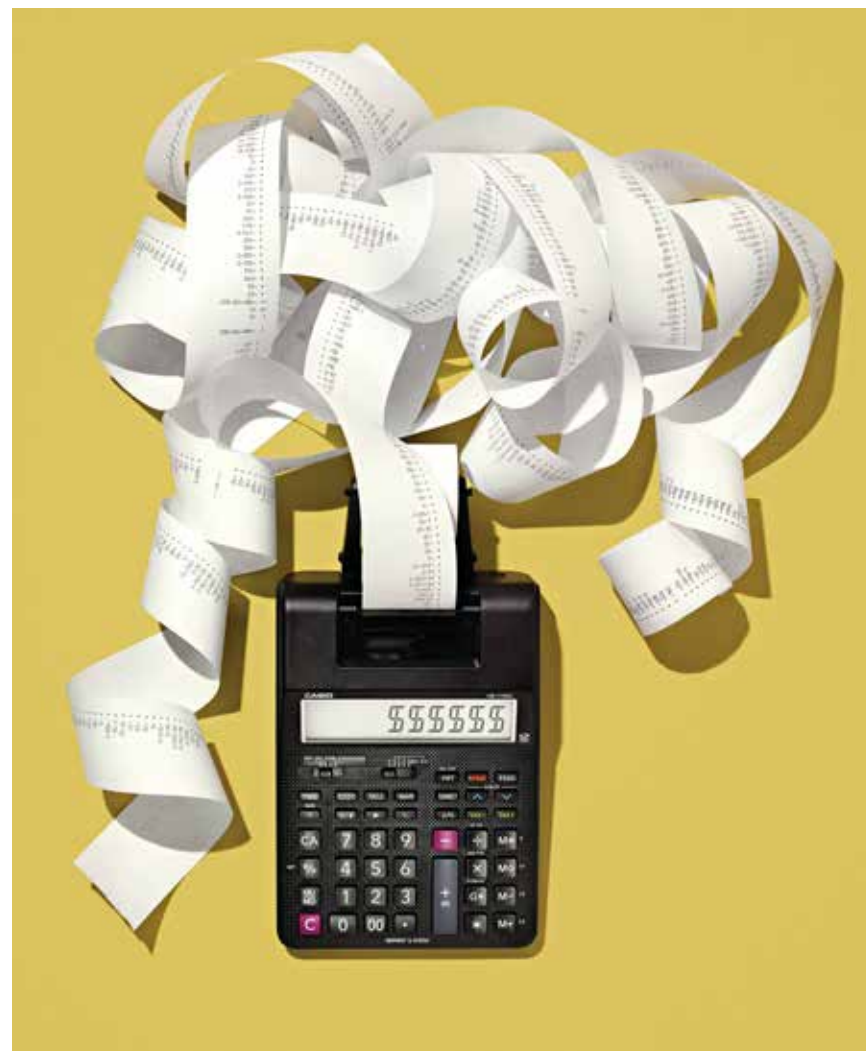
Like Kristen, my husband and I always took for granted that you pay for experiences, particularly special ones—family outings, date nights,

birthdays. But we recently discovered that dining out doesn't compare to our at-home Taco Night, when we gather in the kitchen to make our own salsa and guacamole. The new tradition includes candles and a playlist curated by one of the kids. It's how we celebrated my college-age son's birthday last spring, because we had to. This spring, it will be the first thing we do to celebrate his return, because we can't wait to. The cash we'll save by staying in is a bonus, rather than the point.

**TELL YOURSELF:**  
Thoughtful spending connects you to your community.

Anna, who works in real estate for a large tech company outside San Francisco, used to buy almost everything her family needed from Amazon. "I'm short on time, it's easy, and it's cheaper," she rationalized. Then, during lockdown, while looking for crafts to keep her girls busy, she realized how much she missed the local stores down the block, and it hit her: Many of those shops might not survive. "It sunk in that I wanted those places around," Anna says. "So I found their websites and ordered from them, and I started shopping locally and from small-business websites as much as I could. Things might have cost slightly more, but it was a richer, more satisfying experience."

Dan Grady, PhD, a clinical psychologist in New York City, finds this topic coming up a lot in his conversations with patients. "The pandemic made it clear for the first time just how interconnected we are to that coffee shop or little card store we stop by."



It's one thing Elizabeth Willard Thames, creator of the financial independence and simple living blog *Frugalwoods*, loves most about the life she's built on a Vermont farm: "Because of our frugal ethos, I've made real connections with friends and neighbors. We lend things to each other, pass down toys and clothes, and work together when the community needs something. In the process of reusing and sharing, we reduce the amount of waste in landfills."

**TELL YOURSELF:**  
Spending feels fun—but the bills box you in.

As an attorney making six figures, Christine felt she could buy whatever caught her eye at Anthropologie. "It feels so good in the moment," she says. "I'd tell myself, 'I work so hard. I deserve this!'" When she left her job to become a full-time writer, Christine realized she'd been working so hard in order to pay for the car, the house, the *stuff*—and she never had time to do what really mattered to her. She began researching minimalism,

founded the blog *The Afrominimalist*, and moved from a big house to a small condo. "Now I am free—to create children's books, to help build a policy institute for antiracism, to be a mom," Christine says. (To learn more of her story, and to see her home, turn to page 84.)

**TELL YOURSELF:**  
Being cheap makes life rich.

I heard that maxim so often, it could be the official Pandemic 2020 anthem. Amanda in Fort Worth, Texas, whose family went down to one income just

before the pandemic hit, says that instead of automatically heading to a pricey bar, she'll continue sipping date-night cocktails with her feet in the kiddie pool as her 4-year-old splashes around. Sheryl, a designer in Buenos Aires, formerly lived on take-out and never used her freezer for anything but gel packs. Now she loves making large pots of lentil stew, and she stocks the freezer with zip-top bags filled with it. "There is nothing more satisfying than knowing there's always something for dinner," she says.

And Allison, a photographer in New York City, says the near-daily bike rides she and her husband take serve as couples therapy and exercise in one.

As for me, I'm going to keep cooking meals with my kids—and writing down all the other things that made us feel good while spending less. I don't want those ideas to slip away. As Annie Raser-Rowland puts it, "Whatever we do, I hope we don't lose the progress we've made toward understanding what being truly rich feels like."